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Impact of economic integration in Africa on regional politics: Analysis of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Abstract. The study aimed to assess the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area on the economic, social and political development of the participating countries in the context of global integration. The study analysed the structural features of the African Continental Free Trade Area, including the creation of a single market, tariff reduction, harmonisation of regulatory standards, political coordination and development of intergovernmental mechanisms. According to data for 2024, domestic trade in Africa grew by 51%, exports from 100 to 170 billion USD, investments from 20 to 48 billion USD, employment grew from 5% to 11%, the share of domestic trade from 15% to 32%, and investment in infrastructure from 10% to 21%. The poverty rate decreased from 40% to 28%. Governments in some countries, including Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, have expanded investments in infrastructure, social services, digitalisation, agriculture and education. The African Continental Free Trade Area has also prioritised regional integration, in particular through coordination with the Economic Community of West African States, the Southern African Development Community, and the East African Community, supporting inter-bloc cooperation, lowering trade barriers and synergies in regulatory regimes. At the same time, challenges ranging from political instability to uneven development of institutions were identified. The African Continental Free Trade Area stimulates the unification of legislation, the development of small and medium-sized businesses, institutional growth, and the harmonisation of legal systems, including the simplification of business registration procedures and the introduction of e-government. The findings highlighted that the African Continental Free Trade Area not only promotes economic growth, but also has the potential to enhance social stability, gender equality, export diversification and political integration. At the same time, the implementation of the agreement remains uneven, and its effectiveness depends on the harmonisation of regulations, the functioning of digital platforms and the development of sectoral initiatives

Keywords: political stability; competitiveness; entrepreneurship; infrastructure projects; social stability

Introduction

Economic integration in Africa, through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), is becoming an increasingly relevant topic in the context of globalisation and the development of regional economic ties. This integration is key for overcoming economic imbalances between countries, which helps to increase trade and attract investment, as well as create new jobs. As Africa faces a multitude of challenges, such as poverty, conflict, instability and climate change, economic integration can be a way to ensure sustainable development and improve living standards. The issue of economic integration in Africa requires an in-depth study, as many aspects of this process have not yet been fully explored. M. Varlamova (2024) highlighted the positive impact of free trade on the growth of the economies of the participating countries, as well as on improving living standards. The study emphasised that intensification of trade relations can lead to the creation of new jobs and increased welfare. Notably, the study emphasised that to maximise the benefits of free trade, countries should take steps to reduce trade barriers and improve the investment climate. This includes not only reducing duties but also simplifying customs clearance procedures and improving logistics. A study by V. Dzhuman & N. Shynkaruk (2023) emphasised the need to create infrastructure to support integration processes, stressing that without proper infrastructure, countries would not be able to fully benefit from integration. The study also emphasised the importance of coordination between the public and private sectors, noting that joint investments in infrastructure can significantly increase the efficiency of integration projects. This may include the construction of roads, bridges, airports and other facilities that facilitate

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the movement of goods and services. A study by K.H. Rybak (2024) indicated that social media can strengthen ties between cooperating countries and is substantial in shaping public opinion about integration processes. The author's analysis demonstrated that foreign investment can be a driving force for infrastructure development, while also pointing to the risks associated with dependence on external financial flows. In addition, K.H. Rybak emphasised that social cohesion is a substantial factor for successful integration, as public support can influence political decisions. This creates opportunities for social programmes that raise awareness of the benefits of integration.

The study by M.V. Savchenko & D.O. Oryshko (2024) addressed the challenges related to legal norms and regulations that could hinder integration processes. The study addressed the impact of economic integration on social justice, emphasising that successful integration initiatives can significantly improve living conditions, but also lead to increased social inequality if social welfare aspects are not addressed. This underlined the need to create mechanisms that would protect vulnerable groups during economic reforms. The study by I.I. Bibla (2021) addressed cultural aspects and their impact on the perception of integration initiatives among the population. The study noted that successful integration requires considering cultural characteristics and traditions, as this can significantly affect the level of public support. The author also examines how global economic changes affect the domestic economies of countries participating in integration processes, noting that adaptation to global economic trends is a substantial condition for successful integration. Cultural awareness can contribute to the formation of common values, which would strengthen regional identity. A study by B.O. Maidanyuk (2021) highlighted the environmental aspects of economic integration, noting that the development of regional initiatives should incorporate potential environmental impacts. The study emphasised that sustainable development can only be achieved if environmental standards are integrated into economic strategies. This may include the introduction of environmentally friendly technologies and the conservation of natural resources. In addition, the role of civil society in integration processes was considered, where active participation of citizens in policy-making is viewed as critical to the success of integration projects. V.A. Fabianskyi (2023) added a new dimension to the topic by analysing the economic impact of integration on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The study noted that integration initiatives could create new opportunities for SMEs, which could access new markets and resources. The study aimed to analyse the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area on the economic growth of the participating countries in the context of global economic integration. The objectives of the study were to analyse the main economic benefits arising from integration within the AfCFTA; to study the impact of integration processes on social justice in the participating countries; and to assess the role of foreign investment in supporting economic integration.

Materials and methods

The main objects of the study were the AfCFTA member states: Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana. Nigeria has the highest gross domestic product (GDP) in Africa, being most influential in the region (IMF Data Mapper…, n.d.). South Africa is known for its developed infrastructure, Kenya is a key trading partner in East Africa, and Ghana represents stable democracy and economic growth in West Africa. International sources such as academic articles, analytical reports and official documents were used to collect data. The selection of sources was based on several criteria: relevance and reliability of information, the amount of data on integration processes (economic, social and political factors), and representativeness for the AfCFTA member states, which ensured a diversity of views and data. The main sources of information were: M.A Kemboi & M.O. Oleche (2020), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2020), Africa regional integration index platform (n.d.), World Bank (2023), Standards Organisation of Nigeria (n.d.), African Development Bank (2024), International Monetary Fund (2023), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2024), European Parliament (2024), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS regional economic outlook, 2024), AUC & OECD (2024), IMF Data Mapper (n.d.). A systematic approach was used for a comprehensive analysis of integration processes. It addressed the interrelationships between economic, social and political factors that influence integration, in particular in the context of the AfCFTA. The comparative-analytical method was used to compare data from different AfCFTA countries, such as Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa. This identified common trends and differences in the level of integration and economic development.

The case method was used to study in detail examples of countries that are actively implementing integration policies. This analysed the real impact of integration processes on socio-economic conditions, identified problems and challenges faced by the countries, and proposed specific solutions to overcome them. Content analysis was used to systematise a large amount of information from various reports and studies on economic integration. This method identified key themes, issues and trends, such as the impact of the AfCFTA on poverty and employment, as well as on the development of social infrastructure. The geo-economic approach was used to analyse the links between economic integration and political change. This addressed how economic factors can influence political stability in member states such as Kenya, as well as how cooperation between states can reduce conflict in the region. The forecasting method was used to assess possible scenarios for the development of integration processes based on the data obtained. This formulated recommendations for the further development of integration in the region, considering both positive and negative aspects of integration processes. Interpretation of the results was based on qualitative analysis, which identified the links between economic integration and political changes in the participating countries. The focus was on analysing the impact of integration processes on socio-economic conditions, political stability and the level of development of the countries. This formulated reasonable conclusions and recommendations for the further development of integration in the region.

Results

The AfCFTA is one of the most ambitious initiatives of the African Union, which officially entered into force on 1 January 2021 after being signed in March 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda, and ratified by at least 22 member states. As of the end of 2024, 54 out of 55 African Union countries had already acceded to the AfCFTA, and 48 had completed ratification procedures (Assessing five years of…, 2025). The agreement was intended to create a single market for goods, services, capital and labour, covering more than 1.3 billion people and a total GDP of more than 3.4 trillion USD (Africa regional integration index platform, n.d.). The basic concept of the AfCFTA envisages the gradual elimination of up to 90% of tariffs on goods between the participating countries, harmonisation of technical regulations and product safety standards, simplification of customs procedures, creation of common rules of origin, and development of mechanisms for resolving trade disputes. The agreement covers provisions on digital trade, industrial development, competition policy and protection of intellectual property rights. One of the key innovations is the launch of the African Trade Observatory, an electronic trade tracking system that can be used for monitoring the flow of goods in real time (European Parliament, 2024). The institutional structure of the AfCFTA includes the following bodies:

1. The AfCFTA Conference of Heads of State and Government is the highest body that determines the general direction of the agreement.
2. The Council of Trade Ministers conducts operational decision-making on implementation.
3. Committees on Customs Policy, Tariffs, Rules of Origin, Trade in Services, Competition and Digital Trade.
4. The AfCFTA Secretariat, an executive body based in Accra (Ghana), coordinates the implementation of the agreement.

At the same time, the implementation of AfCFTA is accompanied by several significant challenges, both economic and political. One of the main barriers is the low level of infrastructure integration: according to estimates by the African Development Bank (2024), more than 170 billion USD is needed annually to finance the continent's infrastructure needs. The lack of quality transport corridors, port facilities and energy infrastructure hinder the full functioning of intra-continental trade. Another challenge is the lack of harmonisation of regulatory regimes, especially in the areas of customs administration, certification and taxation. Many African countries are simultaneously members of several regional economic communities, such as ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), SADC (Southern African Development Community) and EAC (East African Community), which creates challenges for policy coordination in the context of the AfCFTA. This cross-membership duplicates regulations, causes conflicts in jurisdictions, and complicates the implementation of common trade rules. This requires synchronisation of regulatory regimes, harmonisation of standards, and strengthening of institutional cooperation between countries and between regional blocs themselves (AUC & OECD, 2024). Harmonisation of political and legal systems is essential for the implementation of the AfCFTA. Participating countries must adapt their laws to the standards of the agreement, but face challenges such as corruption and uneven development of legal systems. This includes updating customs and investment legislation, harmonising technical standards, reviewing certification procedures, consumer protection mechanisms, and simplifying business registration (Leshoele, 2020). Unification of regulatory regimes requires lengthy intergovernmental consultations, the establishment of coordinating bodies at the national level, and support from international partners. Despite these challenges, the potential of the AfCFTA remains high. The World Bank (2023) estimates that the full implementation of the agreement could increase intra-African trade by more than 80% by 2035 and lift 30 million people out of poverty. To achieve this, not only are economic reforms necessary, but also the political will to create a coherent regulatory environment, strengthen national institutions and effectively manage trade processes.

A comparison of the AfCFTA and EU integration processes reveals significant differences: The EU has a developed infrastructure, while Africa faces challenges in this area. Political will is stronger in the EU, which creates the conditions for implementing common policies. Economic integration in Africa is also a substantial aspect for the development of the regional economy, as it helps to reduce trade barriers and improve market access. For example, within the EAC, countries reduced customs duties, which led to a 40% increase in intra-regional trade from 2010 to 2024 (African Development Bank, 2024), especially in agriculture and industry. According to the Africa regional integration index platform (n.d.), intra-regional trade in the region accounted for 32% of total trade in 2024, and border crossing costs decreased by 11% on average, indicating progress in simplifying procedures. This was achieved by reducing duties, introducing e-declarations, and improving coordination at border crossings, which in turn reduced the cost of goods for consumers (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative economic indicators before and after the implementation of the AfCFTA

Metric	Value before AfCFTA (2018)	Actual value in 2024
Domestic trade volume (%)	15	32
Investment level (billion USD/year)	20	48
Poverty rate (%)	40	28
Employment rate increase (%)	5	11
Exports (USD billion)	100	170
Share of infrastructure investment (%)	10	21

Source: IMF Data Mapper (n.d.), African Development Bank (2024)

Table 1 shows the actual changes in key macroeconomic indicators as a result of the implementation of the AfCFTA. The noticeable increase in trade and investment is evidence of the real impact of the agreement. Although the decline in poverty and unemployment is gradual, positive dynamics can be observed in all key areas. The significant growth in exports and infrastructure spending reflects a strategic shift towards the domestic market and regional cooperation. The AfCFTA is a substantial step towards the integration of African economies, but its full implementation requires: (1) the creation of a regulatory framework (2018-2020), (2) ratification and formal accession (2020-2022), (3) the launch of certification mechanisms, digital platforms and customs harmonisation (2023-2024), (4) the extension of coverage to services, competition, intellectual property and e-commerce (2024-2025). Each country moves through these stages at a different pace depending on its level of preparedness and political stability.

As of the end of 2024, 48 out of 54 African Union countries have completed the ratification of the AfCFTA. This includes all the major economies of the continent, such as South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, as well as countries that actively support integration, such as Rwanda and Ghana. During 2021-2024, a significant number of countries continued to ratify the agreement, but some countries are facing domestic political or institutional challenges that are delaying the process. In several countries (Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Madagascar, Liberia), the implementation of the agreement has stopped due to internal instability or institutional weakness (Africa regional integration index platform, n.d.). The implementation of the agreement is uneven: for example, Ghana, Rwanda and Kenya have actively adapted national legislation, established national committees and implemented digital tools for product certification (European Parliament, 2024). Eritrea remains the only African Union country that has not yet acceded to the AfCFTA. As of mid-2025. The AfCFTA has entered the active implementation phase: more than 30 countries have already implemented basic certification and customs integration mechanisms. Several countries are in the process of adapting legislation, and some are waiting for domestic political stabilisation to continue implementation (Maliszewska *et al.*, 2020). Several countries, including Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, are actively adapting national regulations to the AfCFTA requirements by updating standards, creating digital certification platforms, and modernising customs infrastructure. For example, Kenya has integrated the Kenya TradeNet System electronic platform with the AfCFTA mechanisms and adopted amendments to the Standards Act (Kenya Trade Network Agency, 2024); Nigeria has developed national standards for agriculture in line with the agreement (Standards Organisation of Nigeria, n.d.); Uganda is reviewing its trade legislation to align it with the AfCFTA (Tröster & Janechová, 2021). Table 2 summarises the main parameters of the participation status of these countries, including formal accession to the agreement, the chronology of ratification, and the status of implementation.

Table 2. Status of AfCFTA member states

Country	Accession status	Signature/ratification	Year of accession	Implementation status	Changes in customs rates
Nigeria	Signed	Ratified	2019	Active phase of implementation	Reduction by 90%
South Africa	Signed	Ratified	2019	Active phase of implementation	Reduction by 85%
Kenya	Signed	Ratified	2018	Extension of the agreement	Reduction by 80%
Ghana	Signed	Ratified	2018	Customs infrastructure is in place	Reduction by 75%

Source: African Development Bank (2024), Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2024), National Bureau of Statistics (n.d.b)

The countries represented have significant economic weight and are key in shaping regional trade relations within the AfCFTA. The AfCFTA is gradually transforming the role of regional economic associations from autonomous integration blocs to elements of a pan-African economic architecture (Onuwa & Adedire, 2024). Coordination between the AfCFTA and ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC requires harmonisation of rules, avoidance of duplication and the formation of common transport, tax and customs strategies. This implies complementarity of institutional design rather than competition. The AfCFTA also stimulates competition: for example, Kenyan textile producers are actively entering South African markets, forcing SADC to deepen integration to protect local producers. At the same time, new opportunities for cooperation between the blocs are being created. In 2024, Ghana and South Africa signed a memorandum on agro-industrial cooperation to jointly invest in fertilisers and agricultural machinery (African Export-Import Bank, 2024). The African Continental Free Trade Area has a differentiated impact on sectoral development in the participating countries. The most notable effects are observed in agriculture, industry, and transport and logistics infrastructure, which are the main drivers of the economy in individual countries (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2024). By introducing common rules of origin, the government has also simplified certification for domestic producers. This improved government support programmes for small farms, including through the Agri-Youth initiative, which has reached more than 30,000 young farmers. Investments in irrigation systems in the north of the country increased yields by 12% and grain imports decreased by 10% in 2023-2024, strengthening food security (Bampoe, 2024). In East Africa, the completion of the modernisation phase of the Mombasa-Nairobi railway has already reduced logistics costs by 180 USD per tonne of goods (Chinese-built modern…, 2023). The AfCFTA promotes not only economic but also social integration. In Nigeria, the Agri-Youth initiative has helped to attract young people to the agricultural sector, which has had a positive effect on rural employment. In South Africa, the reduction in unemployment from 34% to 30% in 2023-2024 is attributed to the development of infrastructure and industry (Ghana 2024 trade report, 2024). The youth vocational training programme implemented by the German Society for International Cooperation in cooperation with the African Union reduced unemployment in the regions of training and increased the income of participants by 25% over the course of a year (Promoting occupational prospects…, 2023). Thus, the reduction of customs barriers, investments in infrastructure, and sectoral support programmes under the AfCFTA directly affect economic growth, productivity, and the formation of new local markets in African countries.

Within the AfCFTA, regional associations such as ECOWAS and SADC are central in coordinating policies, regulations and transport. The ECOWAS zone (Nigeria, Ghana) is actively pursuing customs harmonisation: Nigeria reduced duties on agricultural products, which increased imports from Ghana by 17% in 2023-2024 (African Development Bank, 2024). This also contributed to a 22% increase in SME registrations in border regions (Africa regional integration index platform, n.d.). In the SADC, where South Africa leads the way, the AfCFTA is boosting exports of manufactured goods. In 2024, South Africa increased supplies of technical equipment to Mozambique, Botswana, and Malawi by 19%. Infrastructure projects (Durban port, North-South corridor) have reduced logistics costs (European Parliament, 2024). Competition with Kenya is driving infrastructure development: Konza Technopolis (n.d.) strengthens Kenya's position as the digital hub of East Africa. In the interregional dimension, energy and transport links are gaining importance. The Power Africa West-South Link project, which provides for the transmission of electricity from South Africa to West Africa, aims to reduce the cost of energy supply by 15% by the end of 2025 (African Development Bank, 2024). The Abuja-Accra Road transport corridor under the PIDA programme will reduce transport costs by 25%, which will directly affect trade flows in ECOWAS. The reduction in customs rates increase Nigerian exports to Ghana by 17% in 2024 (African Development Bank, 2024). At the same time, Ghana, as a leading cocoa exporter, has increased the supply of processed products to the markets of Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire (Gyan & Bajan, 2023). This has intensified intra-regional exchange and contributed to the formation of a single market in line with the principles of the AfCFTA. Funding for initiatives such as the West Africa Infrastructure Development Programme enhances trade efficiency by reducing logistics costs (African Union Development Agency, 2023). Overall, tariff reductions, shared infrastructure, and cross-bloc coordination in energy and industry form the basis for a single economic space. Competition stimulates modernisation if it takes place in a complementary manner. At the same time, the realisation of the full integration potential faces several barriers: uneven levels of institutional development in member states, overlapping regulatory frameworks between the AfCFTA and regional groupings, as well as logistical and infrastructure constraints remain significant challenges (Tröster & Janechová, 2021). Without overcoming these obstacles, the effective functioning of the single economic space will be difficult, even with political support from states.

Competition between regional leaders Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana is intensifying amid trade liberalisation under the AfCFTA. Countries are competing for the role of logistics and investment hubs by improving business conditions, developing infrastructure and supporting key sectors. In Kenya, the Konza Technopolis project is being implemented with investments of over 1.2 billion USD, positioning the country as the digital hub of East Africa. In South Africa, the modernisation of the ports of Durban, Cape Town and Mombasa has reduced container handling time from 7 to 3 days and cut transport costs by 11% (2023-2024) (United Nations, 2024). This strengthens South Africa's logistics role in the SADC region. Both countries are actively implementing policies to develop value-added exports. According to M.A. Kemboi & M.O. Oleche (2020), South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana remain attractive to foreign direct investment (FDI) due to their stable environment and development of priority sectors. At the same time, Nigeria, despite having the largest GDP on the continent, faces barriers to attracting investment due to political volatility, delays in customs reforms, and unstable energy supply. This complicates integration into the AfCFTA supply chains and reduces competitiveness in the regional market. Notably, competition between countries can be both constructive and destructive. On the one hand, it stimulates infrastructure modernisation, regulatory reform, and increased transparency. On the other hand, it can slow down integration if countries resort to covert protectionism or artificially delay the implementation of common standards. The lack of supranational trade dispute settlement mechanisms in the AfCFTA increases the risk of conflicts, which is especially relevant for countries with overlapping interests, such as Kenya and South Africa or Nigeria and Ghana. After the signing of the trade agreement between Kenya and Uganda in 2020, bilateral trade increased by 25% in 2021 (EAC trade and…, 2023; Agricultural sector GDP…, 2023), which boosted agricultural exports and employment. An analysis of GDP growth rates in countries has shown that countries with active participation in integration processes, such as Ghana, have higher growth rates than countries that are not actively integrating. This growth is not only due to participation in the AfCFTA, but also to factors such as structural economic reforms, agricultural exports, and investments in education and infrastructure (Onono *et al.*, 2024).

A comparison of investment indicators, such as FDI volumes, shows that countries with stable political environments and clear economic policies, such as Kenya, attract more investment than less stable countries. Other substantial factors in the investment climate are the existence of transparent business rules, protection of investors' rights and the availability of infrastructure projects that create the preconditions for productivity growth (Table 3).

Table 3. Macroeconomic changes in the AfCFTA countries (2024)

Metric	Average level among AfCFTA countries
Share of domestic trade	27%
Average GDP growth rate	4.5%
Average FDI volume (million USD)	1,090

Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2020), African Development Bank (2024)

Table 3 shows the positive dynamics of economic processes within the AfCFTA. Growth in domestic trade, steady GDP growth, and an increase in foreign direct investment indicate a gradual strengthening of integration ties between the countries. The AfCFTA creates the preconditions for the formation of a single economic space, helping to reduce barriers and intensify interstate cooperation. At the same time, the dynamics remain uneven, due to differences in political stability, the level of reforms and infrastructure development in different countries (Raga, 2023). The implementation mechanisms of the agreement include the establishment of national AfCFTA committees, adaptation of the customs code, an electronic platform for product certification, and the introduction of rules of origin. The main coordinator is the AfCFTA Secretariat, located in Accra (Ghana), which ensures transparency, technical support and monitoring of the agreement's implementation. The AfCFTA caused social and political changes in the participating countries: improved living conditions and reduced social inequality. The reduction of trade barriers has facilitated access to goods and services, stimulated investment in healthcare, education, and the digitalisation of administrative services. According to the African Development Bank (2024), the average household income increased by 15%, and access to basic social services improved for 20% of the population, mostly in rural areas. At the level of legal systems, the AfCFTA encourages the harmonisation of the regulatory framework. Ghana is implementing the National AfCFTA Strategy, which includes vetting legislative initiatives, simplifying business registration, updating the customs code, and removing barriers to cross-border business (Kouty, 2021). Restrictions on foreign land ownership and delays in reviewing licences pose challenges (ECOWAS regional economic outlook, 2024; Ministry of Finance, Ghana, 2024). In Nigeria, legislative adaptation includes simplification of investment procedures, customs reform, and new certification rules. In 2023, the Defence trade controls were adopted, which harmonise customs classification with the AfCFTA and provide for preferential treatment for goods from member countries. A barrier assessment mechanism coordinated by the Ministry of Industry and Trade has been established. Kenya has introduced the eCitizen electronic business registration system, which has reduced the time to start a business to 2-3 days. Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa have introduced One Stop Shop services that provide access to administrative services through a single digital channel. In South Africa, these services are integrated into the e-government system, which promotes transparency and reduces corruption risks (Business registration service (BRS), n.d.). In addition, economic integration within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) stimulates the development of small and medium-sized enterprises through innovation and the effective use of marketing analytics. This strengthens their role in regional economic growth and policymaking for integration and harmonisation of economic processes in Africa (Osei *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, according to the International Monetary Fund (2023), political polarisation in South Africa is weakening control mechanisms, creating risks for the implementation of the AfCFTA. South Africa's participation in the free trade area promotes regional coordination within the SADC and the development of product standards. The reduction of customs barriers has contributed to the development of key industries. At the same time, the absence of common rules of origin and different declaration systems complicates trade. For example, exporters from Ghana face differences in the interpretation of rules in Nigeria, which leads to delays. The AfCFTA provides for a dispute settlement system of consultations, panels, and appeals, but most conflicts are resolved bilaterally, which requires strengthening of the supranational level. Harmonisation of customs policies, introduction of electronic systems, and development of regional infrastructure (logistics corridors, border management) contribute to trade and reduce conflict. Social integration under the AfCFTA is being implemented through state and interstate initiatives aimed to improve access to education, healthcare and vocational training. This promotes inclusive growth and reduces interregional social disparities. According to the World Bank's analytical forecast, the full implementation of the AfCFTA by 2035 will increase the continental GDP by 7%, create more than 18 million new jobs, and lift 30 million Africans out of extreme poverty. Most of the new jobs will be created in such sectors as trade, logistics, agro-processing and services. Youth unemployment is expected to decline by at least 2% in countries with active integration (World Bank, 2023). GDP growth will provide additional budgetary resources for investments in the social sector: healthcare, education, and digital infrastructure.

A substantial aspect of the AfCFTA is its contribution to the harmonisation of the political and legal systems of the participating countries. Integration requires the harmonisation of norms and standards, which improves governance and increases transparency. The signatory countries are obliged to adapt their national laws to the provisions of the AfCFTA, which includes standards in trade, investment and consumer protection (National Bureau of Statistics, n.d.a). Kenya has implemented a "One Stop Shop" system for entrepreneurs, which has simplified access to administrative services and contributed to the growth of new businesses (Business registration service (BRS), n.d.). A comparison of the AfCFTA and the EU shows different approaches to integration: The EU has a developed supranational system with binding decisions of the Court of Justice, while the AfCFTA is based on intergovernmental mechanisms, which reduces the effectiveness of dispute resolution. The AfCFTA could adapt the EU's experience, in particular the CAP, through the creation of regional agricultural funds. There are already initiatives in Africa, such as the eVoucher programme in Ghana, which provides farmers with digital vouchers, increasing yields by 19% in 2023. The African Development Bank's Feed Africa programme covers 20 countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, and Malawi, and aims to transform the agricultural sector (African Development Bank, 2024). The results of the study show that the AfCFTA has a positive impact on the economic, social and political indicators of the participating countries. According to the updated African economic outlook (2024), the implementation of the AfCFTA has already led to a 51% increase in domestic trade in 2024, and the GDP of the participating countries grew by 1.7% on average, in particular in Kenya and Nigeria by 2.4% and 2.2%, respectively. More than 1.35 million jobs were created, mainly in logistics, agriculture and light industry. Countries actively participating in the AfCFTA, such as Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria, have been demonstrating stable GDP growth and declining unemployment. However, the full realisation of the AfCFTA's potential requires strengthening supranational coordination, simplifying customs administration and removing inter-country barriers.

Discussions

The results of the study show the positive impact of the AfCFTA on the participating countries in the economic, social and political spheres. According to data from the African Development Bank (2024), in 2024, domestic trade in Africa grew by 51%, exports from 100 to 170 billion USD, investments from 20 to 48 billion USD, poverty levels decreased from 40% to 28%, and employment increased from 5% to 11%, which indicates the effectiveness of the integration process. At the same time, the need for social justice, coordination of infrastructure policy and support for vulnerable groups remains a challenge. The humanitarian potential of the agreement is also significant: improving access to services, supporting education, youth and women. A study by M.T. Pasara (2020) indicates that economic stability is a prerequisite for reducing social tensions in high-risk regions. This correlates with the findings of higher household incomes and lower unemployment as a result of the AfCFTA, especially in Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa, where the number of people employed in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors has increased. In particular, South Africa's Agri-Youth initiative has supported more than 30,000 young farmers, and the introduction of irrigation systems in the north has increased yields by 12% (Bampoe, 2024). These findings are complemented by additional analysis by M.T. Pasara, correlating economic growth to increased social stability. This study confirms that reducing regional barriers and increasing investment in social infrastructure contribute to more stable development, particularly in the border regions of West and Southern Africa.

In addition to security aspects, a range of researchers have also considered the impact of the AfCFTA on economic growth. For example, L. Abrego *et al.* (2020) noted that the potential of intra-African trade could increase the continent's GDP by 7% in the medium term. This is consistent with the results obtained regarding investment growth to 48 billion USD, export growth to 170 billion USD, and the creation of over 1.35 million new jobs. In contrast to more general estimates by L. Abrego *et al.*, this study provides detailed comparative statistics for Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa. However, in contrast to the study, this demonstrates a broader economic and social impact: GDP growth, reduced unemployment, improved infrastructure and access to social services. For example, according to the results, investment growth to 60 billion USD per year and a doubling of exports create new business opportunities. This correlates with the findings of S. Wapmuk & M.J. Ali (2022), noting that economic ties contribute to collective security. However, in contrast to the study, the present research also addressed the sectoral structure of the economy, in particular, the positive effect of lowering duties on agricultural products, creating logistics corridors, and industrial modernisation programmes. This improves the accuracy of the assessment of local growth mechanisms within the AfCFTA. Compared to a study by W. Olayiwola (2020) on the Sahel region, the present research also addressed the effectiveness of employment and small business support programmes (e.g., in Ghana and Nigeria) that reduce poverty and increase social mobility. C.H. Vhumbunu (2020) emphasised that reducing economic inequality is substantial in preventing social tensions. In the social sphere, the study findings indicate a significant improvement in inclusion: increased access to education, youth programmes, women's entrepreneurship, and access to digital services. For example, in contrast to a study by W. Olayiwola (2020) on the risks of social exclusion, this study examines the effects of SME support programmes in rural Ghana, youth employment programmes in Kenya, and digital inclusion initiatives in South Africa. R.Y. Simo (2020) and A. Geda & A. Yimer (2022) emphasised the importance of intergovernmental coordination. This was confirmed by the results of the study: the AfCFTA promotes greater cooperation between the ECOWAS and SADC regional blocs, through joint infrastructure projects (e.g., the North-South Corridor) and customs policy harmonisation initiatives. In East Africa, the modernisation of the Mombasa-Nairobi railway has reduced logistics costs by 180 USD per tonne (Chinese-built modern..., 2023), which directly affected the efficiency of regional trade. As M. Kouty (2021) noted, supporting youth is a key prerequisite for long-term economic development. This study also finds that the AfCFTA has spurred the expansion of youth employment programmes, especially in rural areas of Kenya and Ghana, where there has been an increase in new SMEs and local entrepreneurship initiatives. I. Ekeagwu *et al.* (2022) highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to development that encompasses economic, social and political components. In this context, the study results confirm the interconnection between economic integration, social justice and political stability. This means that achieving sustainable development within the AfCFTA is only possible if economic performance, equality of opportunity, and good governance are simultaneously improved. In contrast to studies, the present research provided quantitative evidence for this approach, such as projected employment growth of 10% and a 20% reduction in poverty.

The views of F. Larguet & N. Bouakkaz (2023), emphasising the role of infrastructure in reducing social conflicts, are noteworthy. This study expands on this thesis with specific examples of projects in Nigeria, Kenya, and East Africa. The study also emphasises the importance of infrastructure development for economic growth and stability in the region. In contrast to a study by N.J. Udombana (2020), which warns against excessive policy harmonisation, this study emphasises the need to adapt AfCFTA standards to regional realities, through examples of legislative changes in Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. P. Mathibe (2021) and B. Odetayo & M. Walsh (2021) also emphasised that integration processes can have a positive impact on security, as they help build trust between participating countries. P. Mathibe further noted that economic interdependence can reduce the probability of conflict, as countries that share common interests are less likely to be hostile. This underlines the importance of integration for regional stability. The study by P. Apiko *et al.* (2020) emphasised the need to implement more effective development policies that consider the specifics of each country. P. Apiko *et al.* also argued that unified approaches may not always be effective, as each country has unique challenges and opportunities. This is consistent with present findings, which also emphasise the importance of adapting policies to local conditions. In the institutional dimension, the study demonstrates how common trade governance mechanisms, adaptation of regulatory standards, electronic certification, and platforms such as eCitizen or TradeNet reduce transaction costs. Contrary to some critics of the complexity of regional administration, this study provides examples of effective national solutions. Thus, compared to other studies, the presented results provide a broader picture of the benefits of the AfCFTA, covering economic, legal, institutional, social and security aspects. This addressed the AfCFTA as a multi-level instrument for socio-economic growth, institutional consolidation and regional stability, based on specific quantitative achievements in 2024.

Conclusions

A study of the impact of the AfCFTA on the economic, social and political performance of the participating countries has revealed significant results that confirm the importance of integration processes for the development of the region. One of the key conclusions is that economic integration can significantly reduce trade barriers, creating new opportunities for investment and the development of internal trade. For example, in the East African Common Market, trade grew by 40% between 2010 and 2024, highlighting the positive impact of integration on economic growth and improved living standards. The analysis showed that the AfCFTA stimulates the development of key sectors of agriculture, industry, logistics and social services not only quantitatively but also structurally: through digitalisation, localisation of production, export diversification and reduced dependence on foreign markets. According to updated data for 2024, domestic trade grew to 32% (compared to 15% in 2018), investments reached 48 billion USD (20 billion USD in 2018), exports grew to 170 billion USD, and the poverty rate fell from 40% to 28%. More than 1.35 million new jobs have been created, especially in logistics, agriculture and light industry. The AfCFTA also harmonised the regulatory environment and improved the institutional capacity of countries. Many participating countries are implementing digital platforms for customs clearance and electronic business registration systems, which simplify market access. For instance, the eCitizen portal in Kenya has reduced the time to start a business to 2-3 days, while the One Stop Shop in Ghana and Nigeria provide convenience for entrepreneurs. In addition, in 2023-2024, South Africa and Nigeria modernised their customs infrastructure, reducing the time for container clearance from 7 to 3 days. Such mechanisms increase transparency, reduce corruption, and help attract investment.

The role of the AfCFTA in strengthening regional integration deserves special attention. The promotion of synergies between ECOWAS and SADC, inter-bloc projects (such as the Power Africa West-South Link), and the reduction of tariffs by 75-90% in key countries create the basis for the formation of a single economic space. At the same time, structural competition between regional blocs requires coordination and synchronisation of policies. According to the study, positive changes have also been observed in the social sphere: improved access to healthcare, increased school enrolment, and higher household incomes. For example, in Kenya, the state budget for healthcare has increased by 25% in two years, and in Nigeria, programmes to support women entrepreneurs have helped to increase their economic participation. In Tanzania, the unemployment rate decreased from 10.5% to 7.9%, and in South Africa from 33.9% to 30.1%. On average, employment in the AfCFTA countries grew by 11%, particularly in the agricultural and logistics sectors. At the same time, there are serious challenges: political instability, corruption, different levels of institutional readiness, and dual membership in several agreements, which complicates regulatory harmonisation. The issue of establishing a supranational dispute resolution mechanism remains relevant, as the AfCFTA relies on intergovernmental panels without supranational powers, which limits the effectiveness of conflict response. For further research, it is recommended to focus on the specific mechanisms for implementing the AfCFTA, considering the diversity of conditions in the participating countries. Promising areas include studying the impact of integration on social justice, gender equality, youth participation, and the development of adaptive policies at the community level. The role of infrastructure projects (railways, energy, agro-industrial clusters) as catalysts for development should be explored. It is also necessary to implement systems for monitoring integration processes, strengthen cooperation with the EU, and adapt the TEN-T and CAP experience to African realities. A substantial area is also the impact of digital platforms (such as TradeNet, eVoucher) on the efficiency of SMEs' access to markets, which has already demonstrated positive effects in Kenya and Ghana.

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