

Borders, Informal Cross-Border Economies and Regional Integration in Africa

An Introduction

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As multi-faceted institutions,¹ borders have a bearing on continental integration in Africa. This is because they have an influence on who and what moves from one country to another.² In this sense, any discussion of continental integration in Africa brings borders to the centre stage, because, while integration assumes the free flow of the factors of production, including people, borders sift and select who or what has the freedom of passage or not. This selectivity of African borders is antithetical to the goals and aspirations of the 1991 Abuja Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (hereafter, the Abuja Treaty).³ The same is true for Agenda 2063,⁴ the African Union's (AU) strategic framework designed to socio-economically transform Africa over the next half century. Automatic beneficiaries of the selective impact of borders are the so-called state actors and formal institutions and enterprises, which assume legal personhood; while their counterparts, the informal actors including informal cross-border traders, must always negotiate the border.⁵ This brings to the fore the nature, logic and operationalisation of regional and continental integration in Africa. In this context, we are led to ask whether the informal actors and people at the grassroots, such as cross-border traders, are an objective reality at African borders, as well as to reflect on their role and actual or potential efficacy in the continental integration project. First, however, there is a need to define and clarify the concepts that drive the papers in this special issue of *Africa Insight*. These concepts are borders, the informal economy and informal activities, and regional integration. Borders are not just lines at the margins of nation-states,⁶ but also social and political institutions.⁷ This means that, beyond playing the ordinary role of managing migration and immigration, borders perform social and political functions that may not always

be located at the physical border.⁸ The articles in this special issue tease out various and nuanced understandings of the term 'border' in relation to Africa and the journey towards regional integration. Samuel Ojo Oloruntoba, for instance, perceives the border as an arbitrary and artificial site of economic flows, which is essentially political, social, spatial and economic in construction. Flows are indeed evident at the border, as it marks the limits of national territory and controls the movement of people and flow of goods. For Inocent Moyo, the border is multifaceted, consisting of many and dynamic practices. Christopher Nshimbi picks up on this dynamic feature of the border, and adds to it the interrelations of inclusion and exclusion or inside/outside relations. This brings the conception full circle – from the border being a site of economic or human flow, to its marking of the limits of national territory. By logical extension, we then come back to borders not only being a site of flow, representing openness, but also a site of *control* of flow or movement, representing closure.

Informal cross-border activities, which involve the movement of people across African borders for the purpose of buying and selling different types of goods,⁹ engaging in formal work or informally as undocumented labour migrants, and various other socio-cultural activities,¹⁰ are part of the informal economy that Christopher Nshimbi, in this special issue of *Africa Insight*, defines as informality in its entirety. This includes legally unregulated and unprotected enterprises and employment relationships, as well as all forms of informal employment in informal or unregistered small enterprises within and outside the agricultural sector, in private households, and sometimes in formal organisations as well. In providing their services, informal cross-border actors or those engaged in informal cross-border activities, end up in the informal sector, as their services escape the radar or fall outside of the state's gaze.¹¹ For example, domestic workers or home-based workers are generally invisible economic actors, not only to state agencies but also to the ordinary person.

In his contribution to this special issue of *Africa Insight*, Samuel Ojo Oloruntoba broadly conceives regional integration as the cooperation among sovereign states, which leads to removal of restrictions to facilitate mobility. This necessarily invokes the border, as it involves interaction between two or more sovereign entities or territories across the physical line that demarcates their respective territories. In turn, the interaction is dynamic and includes a variety of socio-economic, political and cultural exchanges which, Nshimbi in this issue suggests, involve capital, labour, goods, services and other spheres of life such as politics, culture and security. However, Nshimbi is quick to point out that regional integration in Africa is lopsided because it seems to focus on economic exchanges and neglects other spheres of life. This somewhat resonates with Moyo's argument that the progression of regional integration as posited in theory makes the assumption that only formal, and not informal, actors cross the lines of demarcation that separate nation states. Of course, these formal actors include the business and other entities mentioned earlier that assume legal personhood and qualify to engage in cross-border activities across established regional bodies.

Against this background, this special issue of *Africa Insight* brings together articles (some of which are empirically grounded and others theoretical) in an attempt to proffer alternative insights into debates on continental and regional integration in Africa. It explores the under-researched link between regional integration and African borders and borderlands, along with the informal socio-economic activities that occur in those spaces. It uncovers the empirical realities at grassroots in

borderlands, and the ways in which these realities are impacted by and impact policies formulated at the macro level, and the corresponding (re)positioning of African countries towards integration. The core issues that bring the papers into conversation with each other in this special issue relate to contested definitions and (mis)understandings of African borders on the one hand, and informality on the other.

In addition, the question of whether borders and the informal economy are romanticised notions in the existing, rather sparse literature on these subjects, or whether they are realities that have significant empirical import and impact – bearing consequences on not only the micro spaces where they are manifested but also on state-led initiatives to establish amalgamated socio-economic spaces out of Africa's disparate countries – is addressed. The implications of informal cross-border activities on regional integration and the extent to which the socio-economic realities of informal cross-border actors at African borders and borderlands suggest *de facto* processes of regional integration, and the ways in which these might provide a template for organisation towards *de jure* activities and policies for regional integration, is also a major theme in the collection of articles that make up this issue.

Reading through this special issue of *Africa Insight* it becomes clear that the respective contributors share common positions on several issues. Firstly, the articles are unanimous that on average, the African border is a beehive of socio-economic activities. These take the form of cross-border flows, and the flows neither exclusively involve formal actors nor are they restricted to formal activities only. In fact, a significant amount is informal. This brings into question the popular claim that Africa does not trade with itself, or that it has low levels of intra-continental trade. It does not, however, dispel the fact that trade and integration in Africa are fraught with challenges. Rather, the contributors provoke debate and thought in a direction different from the commonly-held narrative that African integration has failed, to reconsider and ask new questions on what is actually going on in Africa's integration project, or what actually happens at the grassroots at Africa's borders and borderlands.

In other words, do theories and narratives of Africa's political economy conveniently overlook or dismiss critical realities that are pertinent to an objective understanding of those African realities? Secondly, regarding informal economic activities in Africa and across the continent's nation-state borders, informality has been increasing. This fact defies some development theories posited by economists in the past, as Nshimbi points out in his article. The increase in informality, as Olorunfoba and Nshimbi argue in their respective articles, is partly due to externally driven policies and programmes imposed on African countries. For one, the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the late 1980s and early 1990s effectively pushed people out of formal employment. Thirdly, there is also a strong gender element implicit in the debates raised in the articles in this special issue. Particularly, the reality that women dominate the informal economy is acknowledged. Some noteworthy questions that arise in relation to this include: could this fact explain the general attitude towards and relegation of the informal sector to the subaltern in both policy circles and the academic literature? To what extent are these two spheres patriarchal and seeking to maintain such structure and status quo, and therefore not allowing for transformation that ushers into key socio-economic activities for people of different genders? Such questions need further research, as they are beyond the scope of this issue. Fourthly, all authors seem to take issue with the

Eurocentric approach to integration and the interpretation and understanding of African borders. Not only that, they also seem to have reservations regarding the state-centric nature of regional integration in Africa. Furthermore, the contributors to this issue seem to agree that the border in Africa is a construction that is externally imposed on the African society. This is conveyed through adjectives employed in some of the articles such as 'arbitrary' and 'artificial', and points back to the 1884 conference in Berlin. And the purpose of those external influences, as Oloruntoba posits in his article, was to 'serve imperial interests', and to 'control' and 'exploit'. The consequences of these borders have been the dividing or separating of previously united peoples and communities. And lastly, as an externally imposed construction, all the contributors seem to agree that borders in Africa have had a dividing and disruptive effect on African society and mobility.

Moreover, as one attempts to establish a link between borders, informality and regional integration, it would seem that Africa is, in one way or another, on the receiving end of each of these constructions. Regional integration has itself been said to be not only copied from but indeed quite mechanically modelled after the European project¹². In view of this and the prevailing realities on the ground regarding Africa's borders and borderlands, it would still make sense to enquire whether borders really are impediments to or facilitators of regional integration in Africa, especially if informality is taken into consideration.

Borders: obstacles to or conduits for inclusive regional integration in Africa?

The article by Moyo in this issue, 'Theorising borders in Africa: What are the implications for African integration?', provides a compelling argument, supported by empirical material, that shows how the cross-border informal economy is alive and operates despite the stringent border controls at Africa's borders.¹³ This is the basis on which he argues for a re-theorisation and/or recalibration of the whole concept and logic of regional integration in Africa; because as it currently stands it misses the sense and meaning of true integration. This is, further, because there is a serious mismatch between what integration should achieve and what it obtains on the ground. Moyo argues that if the dreams and hopes of Agenda 2063, which should rest on an integrated Africa, are to be realised, there is urgent need to rethink and revisit the conceptualisation of regional integration in the first instance. This would ensure that integration is informed by African aspirations, experiences, expectations and realities.

A fundamental argument that Moyo puts forward in his contribution to this issue of *Africa Insight* is that African integration revolves around borders: to reduce their impact. This is because it seems as if the border in Africa exists to restrict the movement of informal and non-state actors. This is implied in theorisations about integration. However, Moyo argues that even if non-state actors such as informal cross-border traders are excluded from integration policy and process, their actions actually integrate African regional economic communities from below. In this regard, he also makes the point that the extensive operations of informal cross-border traders in Africa is a uniquely African border feature, which adds to Africa's unique borders and the continent's unique cross-border characteristics and interactions. However, the present emphasis on borders and the

unbending predisposition of the state to enforce them is a reflection of the colonialism of mind in respect of African borders, he argues. Therefore, as a solution, he calls for the decolonisation of the colonial symbol that the African borders represent at present.

Informality, regional integration and inclusive development

'Inclusive' is the underlying adjective that cuts across all contributions in this special issue. Are regional and continental integration and associated processes in Africa inclusive? By implication, the fact that actors in the informal economy and irregular migrants in Africa generally seem to be left out of or pushed to the margins of formal national, regional and continental integration considerations and deliberations speaks to the deficit in the kind of development sought by the framers of Africa's development. Thus, Moyo for instance, argues that the emphasis on formal actors in regional integration misses the point. In his own words, 'integration falls, on the score of inclusive integration and understanding of African borders'. Moyo is however also quick to categorically emphasise that the informal economy and borders in Africa are not to be dismissed or romanticised.

These realities have significant impact and import for all, including state initiatives aimed at regional integration and the activities of informal actors. On this basis and other factors that are detailed in his article, he argues that the socio-economic realities of informal actors at borders in Africa suggest a *de facto* regional integration. Moyo therefore, recommends the inclusion of informal cross-border traders in regional integration. This is also based on the argument he makes in his article: that African borders are multifaceted and dynamic and cannot be fully captured by the statist or Eurocentric policies which favour formal actors and, to borrow from Nshimbi's article in this issue, criminalise informal actors.

On this point, Lanre Ikuteyijo's article in this issue, which discusses migration, asserts that there *are* actually some countries in Africa that create an enabling environment for the violation of the continent's irregular migrants' rights. Ikuteyijo therefore recommends that AU member states should ensure that the rights of irregular migrants form the core of their policies and development processes.

In this issue, Oloruntoba's article, 'Regional integration and development in Africa: Rethinking borders and Informality', reiterates the point that development is possible in Africa through regional integration. This is because integration takes advantage of economies of scale, for example, and this could also bring benefits to small and landlocked countries. He points out, however, that this changes as one goes from the theoretical and policy level to the ground, because the realities on the ground tell a different story. On the ground, the border presents an obstacle to regional integration, especially in view of the commitment exhibited by African countries to stick to borders. Still, Oloruntoba argues that the vibrancy and efficacy of cross-border informal economies across Africa provide newer perspectives on the integration of the continent. He urges that it is high time these alternative forms of interaction were considered, outside the so-called conventional or dominant theories of integration. The dominant theories of integration are inadequate to explain the African realities, which are characterised by informality.

To amplify this argument, Nshimbi in his paper titled, 'Issues in African informality: What is the relevance for regional or continental integration?', delves deeper into the issues, dynamics and characteristics of African informality and its cross-border dimensions. Drawing on literature and documentary evidence on informality, borders and regional integration in Africa, Nshimbi highlights the under-researched issue, which is also neglected in policy circles, that these informal actors are relevant to the African integration project. Their relevance lies in what they actually achieve on the ground for themselves and the local, national and regional economies in which they operate. This links up with and strengthens the argument presented by Moyo in his theorisation of borders in Africa.

The papers in this issue illuminate the idea that regional integration as it is currently implemented misses a vital element that could enhance comprehensive African integration – namely the cross-border informal economy in Africa. Further, Nshimbi posits that the informal economy and informal activities constitute a critical practical means of integrating Africa from the edges or margins of territories of nation states and the bottom up. Not only does the informal economy contribute to employment creation and production, it is also a permanent African reality that dates back to the Iron Age and sustains livelihoods. But, he argues, nation-state borders in Africa pose as regulators of movement and thus present severe restrictions, especially on the movement of undocumented labour migrants and informal cross-border traders. Because of this, among other reasons elaborated in his paper, these grassroots actors work and live in precarious conditions where their social security is not guaranteed. In reality, women constitute the larger portion of the populations exposed to such conditions, as they dominate the informal economy. Nshimbi proposes that with supportive policies the informal cross-border actors could become useful partners of the state and African integration. For example, they could contribute to efforts to deepen integration by participating in measures designed to reduce non-tariff barriers (NTB) to trade.

In view of the foregoing, there is a need to broaden the analytical and interventional possibilities of a mobility research agenda. Border studies need to address mobility and cross-border trade issues in ways that help give meaning to the invisible aspects of border spaces. Going by the respective assertions made by Moyo, Nshimbi and Ikotuyije in this special issue, that the political boundary in Africa is a European construct, one then sees that current patterns of cross-border mobility management on the continent are reproducing spaces that are characterised by exclusion, rather than by mobility and inclusion. However, informal cross-border trade *is* empowering to the traders despite the perception that borders are spaces of perpetual tension and conflict between the traders and state officials.

Informal and irregular mobility and the prospects of pro-socio-economic development regional integration in Africa

Antony Ong'ayo, in his contribution to this issue titled, 'Displacement and cross-border mobility in the Great Lakes region: Re-thinking underlying factors and implications for regional management of migration', asserts like the other contributors that borders in Africa, or specifically the countries of the Great Lakes region, are imaginary to the local communities. These 'artificial'

borders, according to Ong'ayo, undermine the state's ability to govern and manage public goods in an inclusive manner. He problematises the role of the Westphalian state model in human displacement and mobility in the countries of the Great Lakes region. Accordingly, the literal application of this nation-state system in Africa has generated disruptions and altered the ways in which African societies manage their socio-economic, cultural and political realities.

In this way, Ong'ayo links the internal displacements and involuntary cross-border mobility that characterise the Great Lakes countries with the transposition of the Westphalian state model in Africa. He argues that a limited understanding of the implications of the blending and contradictions of the nation-state system transposed on Africa obscures African historical and contemporary realities. This, in turn, contributes to limitations on the part of African institutions and the policy prescriptions drawn therein; to deal with migratory dynamics and their political and socio-economic consequences from a regional perspective. In seeking solutions, whatever measures are taken must consider African realities, namely socio-economic disparities in the Great Lakes region, how to address the perceived challenges of hosting refugees, and the participation of the people who are dislocated in local economies of host countries.

Adebusuyi Adeniran and Lanre Ikuteyijo, respectively, consolidate the arguments made in this special issue of *Africa Insight* by providing sobering discussions that bring gender and human rights into the interface between borders, informality and integration in West Africa and Africa in general. In his article titled, 'Migration, integration and inter-community development in West Africa', Adeniran asserts that the free movement of people in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is projected to be a sustainable way of spreading development initiatives to the local communities of the region. However, countries in the region place emphasis or focus on their respective national interests, which hinder migration and socio-economic development. There is also the legacy of colonialism, intrinsic political instability and policy inconsistency within the respective member states of ECOWAS, which hinders integration.

In view of these realities, Adeniran suggests that the practice of 'transnational subsistence dualism' presents leverage for the regional integration project. This represents an informal contribution to regional integration because regionalism has proved elusive when pursued through formal approaches. To show the effects of transnational subsistence dualism, he engages in a study of Ejiibo-Yoruba migrant women in the Nigeria-Ivory Coast migratory corridor. This, according to Adeniran, provides a good environment for understanding emerging regional mobility. Though he does not explicitly mention it, Adeniran's article importantly highlights the central but informal role that gender plays in strongly linking communities across nation-state borders and, thus, enhancing regional integration.

In this issue, Ikuteyijo's article, 'Beyond the borders: Issues and perspectives on irregular migration and enforcement of human rights in Africa', underscores the very important but neglected issue of the human rights of irregular migrants in Africa. The value of Ikuteyijo's article to existing literature and to policy-makers cannot be overstated. This is especially true in view of reports about what happens to African youths attempting to migrate to Europe in Libya, and the unsatisfactory way in which African leaders respond to this¹⁴. Besides examining violations of the human rights of irregular migrants, Ikuteyijo gives policy prescriptions to ensure that those rights are protected.

He emphasises the fact that it is the state's responsibility to protect against the violation of irregular migrants' rights. This emphasis comes against the reality that some Africa countries actually create enabling environments for such violations to occur. One way in which they do this is through the enactment of restrictive laws that criminalise irregular migration. Ikuteyijo therefore advises that the rights of migrants should be at the centre of considerations in policy and the development of processes that seek to control both regular and irregular migration.

In the final analysis, the papers in this special issue provide a strong case for the advancement of new and alternative perspectives, framings, understandings and practices on African borders and the informal socio-economic activities in adjoining borderlands of African countries, conceptualising a form of regional integration that will benefit all who are called Africans or inhabit the continent. In summary, this special issue of *Africa Insight* offers perspectives from African scholars and researchers covering Eastern and Southern Africa, the Great Lakes region and West Africa on debates about informality, borders and regional integration in Africa. This is welcome as a contribution to African studies that analyse socio-economic, cultural and political developments on the African continent from the lens of borders and regional integration. It also contributes to border studies by attempting to capture and consolidate the characteristics of borders from cases drawn from across Africa.

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