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African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the Challenges of Protectionist Policies on Regional Integration: Insights from Nigeria and South Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges posed by the protectionist economic policies of African states to the successful implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which is designed to advance the economic integration of the region. Using the cases of the two largest economies in the region, that is, Nigeria and South Africa, the article investigates protectionist policies and practices and their effects on intra-African economic relations and integration. Based on regional integration and rational choice theories, this study reveals the importance of these countries to

the success of the AfCFTA Agreement, the nature and rationales for their protectionist policies, and the negative implications. On different occasions, the regional giants have restricted the inflow of people, goods, and services from fellow African countries to protect their national economic, strategic, and political interests, contrary to the spirit of AfCFTA. Data for this study are derived from secondary sources and analysed qualitatively. African leaders are encouraged to balance their national and regional interests, minimise protectionist policies for short-term gains, and prioritise regional economic integration (AfCFTA) in the overall interests of the continent.

Keywords: Africa, Nigeria, South Africa, Free trade area, Protectionist economic policies, Regional economic integration

Introduction

Aspirations for regional integration in Africa could be traced to anti-colonial movements, which called for the unification of efforts to free the continent from European colonial masters in the early 20th century (Aniche, 2020; Gottschalk, 2022). These aspirations informed the decision of African states to establish the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 to foster unity among member states and give them a common platform to promote their general interests (Odijie, 2019; Wapmuk, 2021). In furtherance of the objective of regional integration, the OAU in 1980 came up with the ‘Lagos Plan of Action’, to promote trade between member states. Subsequently, the OAU created the African Economic Community (AEC), which sought to develop free trade areas on the continent. The OAU’s successor, the African Union (AU), which was established in 2002, has also focused on achieving regional integration, and this informed its decision to create the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Odijie, 2019; Oyeranmi, 2014; Vhumbunu, 2019).

The growing body of literature on AfCFTA, since the agreement went into force on 30 May 2019, tends to focus more on its prospects than challenges (Ismail, 2019; Odijie, 2019; Onwuka & Udegbonam, 2019). These studies also approached the subject from a general perspective based on the fortunes of past African regional economic initiatives and the experiences of other regional organisations across the world. This article takes a departure from such a general perspective to examine some national policies and practices of two African giants, Nigeria and South Africa, with regards to intra-African trade and their implications in the spirit of the AfCFTA Agreement. It avers that the

economic policies of these countries, and by extension, many other African countries, are protectionist in nature and are inimical to the implementation of AfCFTA.

The article is divided into six sections, with the introductory section laying the foundation on which the other sections are predicated. The second section interrogates the main concept of the study, protectionist economic policies, and the third section gives the theoretical premises guiding its arguments. The fourth section provides insights into the aspirations and prospects of the AfCFTA. The fifth section assesses Nigeria and South Africa's importance to Africa's integration and the challenges their economic policies pose to regional economic integration. The fifth section further shows the implication of such protectionist policies for the AfCFTA, while the sixth section gives the conclusion and suggestions to ensure the workability of the agreement.

Protectionist economic policies: conceptual and contextual explanations

Protectionism is an economic strategy that is designed to defend or insulate the local industry against international competition (Durusoy et al., 2015). However, the growing forces of globalisation, with the attendant integration of national economies into the global structure, have led to increasing calls for the removal of trade barriers between and among states (Durusoy et al., 2015; Fouda, 2012; Nwangwu et al., 2019). Accordingly, contentions between the growing need for free trade between and among nations and protectionist economic policies have defined international economic relations for centuries (Durusoy et al., 2015; Ekanem, 2021; Fouda, 2012).

Despite the averred advantages of free trade to all economies in the long run, many states continue to pursue protectionist economic policies, regulating the free flow of people, goods, and services across national boundaries, to avert or overcome economic crises (Baccini & Kim, 2002; Durusoy et al., 2015; Noland, 2020; Nwangwu et al., 2019). Trade deficits or imbalances can also discourage imports of certain goods and services to protect infant industries until they gain the capacity to compete favourably in the global market (Edward, 2009; Levy-Orlik, 2009). Other reasons for adopting protectionist economic policies include the need to gain comparative advantages in trade relations, regulate exports and imports as punitive and retaliatory measures against targeted states,

guarantee national security, and maintain popularity with citizens, especially during periods of elections (Baccini & Kim, 2002; Durusoy et al., 2015; Viju & Kerr, 2012).

Theoretical premises: regional integration vs. rational choice

This study adopts regional integration and rational choice theories. Regional integration theory revolves around the development of a sense of community in a given territory as a necessity for the achievement of socio-economic and political objectives (Durusoy et al., 2015; Laursen, 2008; Nwangwu et al., 2019; Schimmelfennig, 2018). Accordingly, it is assumed that regional integration leads to solidarity, peace, security, and rapid development. Given the forces of globalisation and the gains associated with regionalism, there is practically no state in the world that does not belong to a regional organisation (Durusoy et al., 2015; Nwangwu et al., 2019).

The rational choice theory argues that policies are made after careful consideration of the costs and benefits of all choices available to decision makers. The best choice option to ensure sustainable development of the state rationally becomes acceptable policy (Harris, 2007; Ogu, 2013). A major criticism of the theory is its assumption that all decision-makers are rational and that all policies are arrived at rationally. However, the theory provides a veritable framework for understanding the reasons for policies made by states (Harris, 2007; Ogu, 2013).

These two theories help us to explain why nations form and join regional organisations and why they act contrary to the principles of such organisations. Regional integration theory underscores the importance of AfCFTA to ensure economic prosperity for the African continent. Yet, rationale choice theory helps us to explain the protectionist economic policies of African states contrary to the letters and spirit of the AfCFTA that they are signatories to. In this case, the perceived benefits to individual states are the motivating factor (Igwe et al., 2021).

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

The idea to establish an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was conceived by African leaders at the 18th Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in January 2012. Amid these, 54 out of the 55 AU member states have ratified the AfCFTA

Agreement with Eritrea, the only state that yet to append its signature. Notably, AfCFTA is the first initiative to create the same free trade area for all African states (Fusacchia et al., 2022; Ismail, 2019; Odijie, 2019; Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021; Onwuka & Udegbunam, 2019; Parshotam, 2018).

AfCFTA seeks to integrate the economies of all African countries to fulfil the mandate of the AU's Agenda 2063, a strategic developmental blueprint to guarantee sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development in African states. AfCFTA seeks to achieve this objective by ensuring that all African states adopt a uniform approach to policy formulations and implementations on salient fiscal and social issues. It also seeks to establish a liberalised market on the continent through the gradual elimination of national barriers to the free flow of goods and services on the continent. It further aims at harmonising the economic policies of member states, especially in terms of investment and customs. In essence, AfCFTA aims at deepening the economic integration of African states (Ismail, 2019; Odijie, 2019; Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021; Onwuka & Udegbunam, 2019; Parshotam, 2018; Agunyai & Amusan, 2023).

Eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa provide the springboard for the achievement of AfCFTA's objective. These are the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Community of Central African Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CENSAD), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African Southern African Development States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Parshotam, 2018). The expectations of the crafters of the AfCFTA Agreement are that it will promote unity among countries and provide a veritable platform for the sustainable development of the continent.

Prominent among the emerging challenges to the successful implementation of AfCFTA are poor infrastructure development in member states, diverse customs and immigration procedures, poor transportation facilities, underdevelopment of the manufacturing sector on the continent, and antagonistic national policies towards regional integration (Aniche, 2020; Fusacchia et al., 2022; Parshotam, 2018). The general consensus, arising out of insights from scholarly expositions on

these challenges, is that the greatest threat to AfCFTA is the protectionist economic policies of member states, as the Agreement did not give them the latitude to protect infant industries and ensure internal security (Fusacchia et al., 2022; Langalanga, 2019; Parshotam, 2018).

Protectionist Policies: A Study of Nigeria and South Africa

Nigeria and South Africa could be described as two countries central to and crucial to the successful implementation of AfCFTA. They are the largest economies on the continent, with Nigeria claiming the top spot, followed closely by South Africa (Bonga, 2021; Langalanga, 2019; Ogunnubi & Oyewole, 2020). Nigeria serves as the headquarters of ECOWAS, the REC for AfCFTA in West Africa, and the recognised leader in the sub-region given its human and economic wealth. South Africa is the linchpin for the SADC, one of the eight RECs on which the success of AfCFTA is predicated. It is the leading industrial hub on the continent, and a leading player in it is the AU and associated establishments, such as AfCFTA (Bonga, 2021; Woolfrey et al., 2019).

Nigeria

Nigeria, given its status as the most populous African country and her acknowledged immense mineral wealth, styles itself as the ‘Big Brother’ of other African countries (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021). The quest to be identified as the African champion finds centrality in its foreign policy thrusts. With its avowed Afrocentrism, successive administrations in the country have shown great commitments to the promotion of Africa’s, especially in the areas of decolonisation, racial indiscrimination, and peacekeeping (Ogunnubi & Oyewole, 2020; Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021). The country also played leading roles in the establishment of the OAU, its transformation to the AU, and was at the forefront of various regional agreements to further the economic fortunes of Africa, including the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and AfCFTA (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021; Woolfrey et al., 2019). However, it is disconcerting that despite these commitments and investments in African development, Nigeria’s protectionist policies serve as a hindrance to regional economic integration. Nigeria always seeks to promote national economic interests through high tariffs and by banning the importation of diverse goods, which its government sees as threats to

local manufacturing. Nigeria has also consistently ranked low in the World Bank's yearly assessments of the ease of trading across national borders, with delays, policy summersaults, endemic bureaucratic corruption, especially with regards to customs, and high costs of making exportations and importations as the main culprits (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021; Mba, 2020; Woolfrey et al., 2019). Successive Nigerian governments have also employed border closure policies to frustrate regional integration agreements (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021; Woolfrey et al., 2019).

Nigeria, as the powerhouse in West Africa, was the brainchild and signatory to ECOWAS' Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment, adopted in May 1979, and provides citizens of the sub-region with the right to unhindered movement across national borders, reside and establish business in any country of their choice in the sub-region (Idris, 2022; Leshoele, 2020). Following the 1970s' oil boom, Nigeria's economy received a huge boost and attracted a flock of immigrants from other West African countries. However, the institutionalisation of corruption, profligacy, and mismanagement of the economy by successive administrations led to a downturn in the national economy in the early 1980s (Aremu, 2013; Gary-Toungara, 2015). To pass the buck, the Nigerian government accused West African immigrants of working against the economic prosperity of the country (Aremu, 2013; Gary-Toungara, 2015). Subsequently, in January 1983, the Shehu Shagari administration forcefully ejected the immigrants in contravention of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment (Aremu, 2013; Gary-Toungara, 2015; Mustapha, 2021; Oni & Okunade, 2018).

Given its penchant to support bids for regional integration, Nigeria was one of the champions of AfCFTA in its formative stages. In what could best be described as a volte-face, the Nigerian President, Muhamodu Buhari, refused to officially endorse the AfCFTA agreement when 44 other African states did so in March 2018. Citing the need to consult further on the effects of the Agreement on national interests, the president had to wait until July 2019 to sign (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021; Woolfrey et al., 2019). In August 2019, barely a month later, the government went ahead to close Nigeria's land borders, an action inimical to the aspirations of the AfCFTA Agreement and relevant ECOWAS protocol. In addition, Nigeria has banned or raised tariffs on the importation of over 200 goods from African countries, which creates

trade tensions on the continent with negative implications for AfCFTA and food security (Agunyai & Amusan, 2023; Ekanem, 2021; Mustapha, 2021; Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021).

The decision to close Nigeria's land borders was ascribed to the need to curb the high rate of insecurity resulting from the smuggling of illicit drugs and weapons into the country (Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021). However, the greatest reason for the closure of the borders could be attributed to the need to protect the country's manufacturing and agro-industries. It is much cheaper to buy goods that come in legally or illegally through the borders than to patronise Nigerian producers. Because local producers cannot compete favourably with these goods in terms of price, the economy becomes worse for it. In this regard, agro-products, especially rice and poultry, were the most affected. It thus became imperative for the Nigerian government to close the borders as a form of protectionist economic policy in order to prevent the agro-industry in the country from imminent collapse (Egbas, 2019; Enehikhuere, 2019).

South Africa

Since South Africa dropped its policy of racial inequality and fully embraced democratic principles in April 1994, it has sought recognition as a leading power on the continent. Its unceasing bid to become the continent's permanent representative on the Security Council of the United Nations, its position as the only African country in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), and its hosting of the 2010 World Cup, a feat that had not been accomplished by any other African country, further legitimised its claims to the continent's top spot (Adenuga et al., 2019; Aluko et al., 2018; Ogunnubi and Oyewole, 2020). It was the largest economy in Africa until its displacement by Nigeria in 2013. The country remains the continent's most industrialised and diversified economy, the largest manufacturer and second largest economy, and a leading player in the AU and African engagements with the world (Amusan and Oyewole, 2017; Woolfrey et al., 2019; Ogunnubi and Oyewole, 2020). South Africa has been one of the leading champions of pan-Africanism, as evident in its roles in the formation of the AU, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the pan-African Parliament, and the establishment of AfCFTA. While it was unable to endorse the AfCFTA Agreement in March 2018 due to

technicalities on its internal mechanisms for the ratification of trade relations with other nations, South Africa eventually did so four months later, on 1 July, 2018, a full year before Nigeria appended its signature to the agreement (Woolfrey et al., 2019).

Despite the above, the incoherency, inconsistency, and inadequacy of South Africa's immigration policy have been the major subject of concern in its commitments to regional integration, and in this case, economic union and integration such as SADC and AfCFTA. Initially, the post-apartheid regime sought to open its border for outward and inward African migration, trade, investment, and the transfer of technical know-how or collaboration, with varying degrees of success. However, the immigration policy soon became selective, as it encouraged only skilled Africans to migrate to the country while debarring unskilled migrants. In addition, the policy has become increasingly inconsistent following the inadequacy of the government in curbing illegal immigrants, smuggling, drug trafficking, abuses, and other criminal activities, which many citizens often associate with foreigners. The growing rate of human poverty, inequality, and unemployment, as well as decreasing state capacity to deliver public goods, have further steered domestic resentment and oppositions against immigration. These have created inconsistencies in the immigration, economic, and regional policies of South Africa, which tend to be increasingly hostile to African immigrants. Hence, these have stifled regional aspirations for the free flow of people and goods across national borders (Langalanga, 2019).

Despite its perceived 'big brother' status in Southern Africa, the nature of South African borders and its immigration policies constitute roadblocks to the smooth implementation of the objectives of the SADC, AU, and AfCFTA. South Africa shares land borders with countries including Botswana, Eswatini (Swaziland), Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. These borders were shaped under apartheid rule and were basically designed to keep South African citizens within the country and to prevent other nationals and goods from other African countries from crossing into the country. Close to three decades after the end of apartheid, little has changed about the way the borders are configured, creating bottlenecks in the movements of people, goods, and services across the borders (Stern & Ramkolowan, 2021; Woolfrey et al., 2019).

The nature of the South African economy has also fuelled domestic resentment and opposition to the unhindered movement of goods and

services across its borders, with negative implications for the smooth implementation of AfCFTA. South Africa's economy is the most unequal in the world and characterised by high levels of poverty with close to 40% of the citizens unemployed (Langalanga, 2019; Pasara & Dunga, 2022; Woolfrey et al., 2019). This reality has fuelled domestic opposition to migrants from other African states who are seen as competitors for the available jobs in the country. Most African migrants make South Africa their main destinations (Langalanga, 2019; SibandaSr, 2021; Stuurman, 2020). As many of the migrants tend to be more skilled than the local labour force and are ready to collect lesser wages and salaries, growing resentments by South Africans, especially its large unskilled and unemployed labour force, have led to xenophobic attacks on other nationals and their businesses, with negative national implications (Amusan and Mchunu, 2017; Bonga, 2021; Oyewole, 2023; Stuurman, 2020; Woolfrey et al., 2019).

South Africa is a leading sponsor of SADC and bears the largest financial burden of oiling its operations. The country is also a major funder of the AU and associated regional bodies. However, there are resentments over the lopsidedness of trade balances between South Africa and other member states of SADC. While it floods the regional markets with its goods, it employs tariff and subsidy regimes to protect selected industries, including textiles and automobiles, from competition from other countries (Stuurman, 2020; Woolfrey et al., 2019). South Africa thus enjoys comparative advantages in its trade relations with many other African countries.

Implications of protectionist economic policies on AfCFTA

Protectionist economic policies are perhaps the greatest threat to aspirations for regional integration. Regional economic initiatives in Africa prior to AfCFTA did not achieve notable successes as a result of protectionist national economic policy. As evident with Nigeria in ECOWAS and South Africa in SADC, protectionism undermines and defeats the central objectives of initiatives for regional economic integration. Despite the potential of the ECOWAS Protocol on Free Movement of People, Goods, and Services to accelerate economic growth and development in the sub-region, the protectionist policies of West African States have become a major challenge to the aspirations (Aniche, 2022; Igwe et al., 2021; Nwangwu et al., 2019).

Protectionism has the potential to attract reciprocation and retaliation from affected states, with negative implications for all concerned states and the regional economic initiative. For example, Nigeria's decision to close its land borders negatively affected the economies of its neighbours (Ekanem, 2021; Ogunnubi & Awosusi, 2021). In retaliation, the governments of these countries also targeted the businesses of Nigerians in their domains (Mustapha, 2021). For instance, the Ghanaian government reportedly clamped down on Nigerian traders operating in Ghana and also deported many of them (Aniche, 2022; Awosusi & Fatoyinbo, 2019). In many countries in the sub-region, there were open calls and efforts to boycott Nigerian products, their local production, importation, marketing, sales, and consumption. In return, these created negative implications for Nigeria's economy and, by extension, the regional economy and associated initiatives.

South Africa's protectionist policies on trade and immigration and associated xenophobia attacks have equally attracted negative implications for its economies as well as regional economy and aspirations, including the promotion of AfCFTA. For instance, South African food and agricultural exports have also become victims of protectionism in some Southern African countries. As recently as August 2022, Botswana and Namibia banned the importation of farm products from South Africa. Again, in response to the deportation of Nigerians from South Africa over controversies over the Yellow Fever vaccine in 2012, the Nigerian government responded by deporting some South Africans, before the two countries resolved the diplomatic face-off (Vanguard, 2012). Similarly, xenophobic attacks against other African nationals in South Africa have attracted retaliation against South African investments and in some cases citizens of other countries in the region (Amusan and Mchunu, 2017; Ogunnubi and Amusan, 2018). In 2019, for instance, xenophobic attacks against Nigerians and their investments in South Africa attracted retaliation attacks against South African businesses in Nigeria, such as MTN and Shoprite supermarkets (Ogunnubi & Amusan, 2018; Ogunnubi & Oyewole, 2020). These are against the core interests and purpose of regional unity and economic integration desired by the AU and AfCFTA.

Finally, protectionist policies against fellow African countries run contrary to the foreign policy goals of these countries, which are often designed to promote regional peace, development, and integration. The fact that Nigeria, South Africa, and other countries in the region conduct

a larger percentage of their trade relations with Europe, the USA, and China is a pointer to the fact that the implementation of the AfCFTA may not be as easy as envisaged (Vhumbunu, 2019).

Conclusion

AfCFTA seeks to economically integrate the continent to promote the unity of African states and fast-track their economic development. While 54 out of the 55 members of the AU have indicated commitments to the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement by officially endorsing it, their continued pursuit of protectionist policies shows that they are working against its objectives. From the experiences of Nigeria and South Africa, this study revealed that protectionist national policies have had negative implications for AfCFTA. It further reveals that African governments employ these protectionist policies as strategic and economic tools for regional domination and for their leaders to score cheap political points. However, there is an overriding need for African leaders to balance national and regional interests, minimise protectionist policies, and pursue integrative economic collaboration and collective prospects in the spirit of the AfCFTA Agreement.

To escape the pitfalls and negative fortunes of earlier regional economic integration schemes on the continent, this study advocates regular and periodic reviews of the implementation of AfCFTA across countries and RECs. Continuous education to enlighten leaders and even all Africans to the immense cost and benefits of AfCFTA for regional stability and prosperity should be prioritised. Measures should also be developed to reward members for strict adherence to timelines in the implementation of AfCFTA objectives and, at the same time, encourage defaulting members to act in accordance with the expectations of the agreement they officially endorsed. Furthermore, African leaders are to be encouraged to institutionalise true democracy in their countries, as there are proven links between democracy, regional integration, and economic development (Kuhnhardt, 2008). True democracy would help to dispel the tendency for leaders to employ protectionist economic policies for selfish political gains. It would create a class of African leaders who are genuinely committed to regional economic integration policies as the needed instrument for promoting the welfare of their citizens.

The AU also needs to study regional economic integration schemes on other continents, especially the European Union, to successfully implement the objectives of AfCFTA. To this end, collaborations should be sought with other regional associations to provide leverage for AfCFTA in the global community.

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