

REGIONALISM AND AFRICA'S FUTURE: THE IMPERATIVE OF UNITY

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ABSTRACT

Africa has no choice but to integrate into the global economic and financial systems to grow sustainably and reduce extreme poverty. The challenges faced by a continent with numerous tiny national markets and landlocked states are seen as rational reasons for regional integration. As a result, African countries have signed numerous regional integration agreements, many overlapping significantly with their members. However, African regionalism has not made significant progress, and African disunity is one of its greatest challenges. Since the inception of Pan-Africanism, much has been said about African unity. Various scholars explain that Pan-Africanism is a movement, an ideology, and a geopolitical project that liberates and unites African people and the African diaspora worldwide. Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere are two of the most famous ideologues of African unity. They shared the desire and ideal that the strength of Africa would come from a 'United States of Africa'. At the Ghana Conference in 1960, Nkrumah said that Africa could and must be united, but it was not easy, and came up against numerous obstacles. Therefore, all the concerned bodies on the continent need to sit down and plan for the future, knowing that the only way out of the crisis lies in realizing true African unity. This paper examined the impact of African unity on the effectiveness of regionalism and a better future for the continent.

Keywords: Regionalism, Regional Integration, African Unity, Africa

1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Gobena (2016), regionalism refers to the efforts of a group of countries to improve their economic, political, social, or cultural relations. These measures can take many forms, including regional cooperation, market integration, development integration, and regional integration. SADC (The Southern African Development Community), EAC (the East African Community), COMESA (the Common Market for WESTERN Africa), ECCAS (the Economic Community of Central African States), CEMAC (the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa), AMU (the Arab Maghreb Union), IGAD (the Intergovernmental Authority on Development) and the Community of Sahelian and Saharan States (CEN-SAD) are the eight regional economic communities that form the basis of African regionalism. African leaders have long viewed regionalism as a viable plan to hold the continent together politically and economically. Market integration has been included in the strategies of all organizations to integrate regional economies in Africa to promote intra-regional trade and strengthen the continent's economic stability. African regionalism has taken various forms to adapt to changing national, regional, and global realities.

Regional economic integration has many advantages. The most important is a significant trade liberalization within the region concerned, with a broader range of partners and thus less dependence (Mold & Chowdhury, 2021). Conversely, they foster incredible rivalry within the integrated regional group (Gobena, 2016). Naturally, countries facing more competition are more inclined to review their production capacities and comparative advantages. This leads countries to increase their productivity by shortening production time and improving the quality of labor and human capital. In addition, decreased production costs often lead countries to lower their selling prices as costs decrease throughout the production chain. All these factors lead to an intense search for innovation in production, which leads to development; so without unity, which can only be found in integration, Africa has no future.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodology used in this paper comprises several necessary steps. First, a comprehensive literature review covers academic journals, reports, and scholarly sources on African regionalism. This review helps to identify the key issues, challenges, and opportunities related to regional integration efforts on the continent. In the second step, the secondary sources are content analyzed to identify common trends, different perspectives, and relevant case studies on successful and unsuccessful regional initiatives in Africa. The data will then be categorized using thematic coding according to key themes such as political will, economic cooperation, social cohesion, and institutional capacity. By applying these qualitative research methods based on secondary sources, a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the necessity of regionalism for Africa's future can be developed.

3.0 DEFINING REGIONALISM

Regions are often defined as groups of countries located in the same geographical area; however, it is sometimes unclear where one region ends and the next begins. Furthermore, most researchers agree that a region means more than mere proximity, although the additional criteria that should be used have proved controversial. One of the best-known studies is Russett (1967), cited in Mansfield & Solingen (2010), who defines a region on the basis of geographical proximity, social and cultural homogeneity, shared political attitudes and political institutions, and economic interdependence. Deutsch et al. (1957) consider a high degree of interdependence across several dimensions — including financial transactions, communication, and political values—to be decisive in determining whether a group of countries constitutes a region. Thompson (1973) argues that a region comprised geographically close states interact intensively with each other and share common perceptions of various phenomena.

Despite the widespread interest in regionalism, there is no consensus on its definition. Katzenstein (2006, p. 1) defines regionalism as institutionalized practices and regionalization as "a process involving actors." Fawcett (2004, p. 433) defines regionalism as a policy or project. While Munakata (2006) acknowledges that regionalism includes government-established organizations that support regional economic integration, he also highlights the members' varied levels of participation. Free trade areas are considered a solid form of regionalism. At the same time, regional consultative bodies that do not make legally binding agreements— - even if they promote economic integration— - are a looser form.

Regionalism is essential to understanding politics in Africa and, to some extent, even to the everyday lives of many people on the continent (Soederbaum, & Stapel, 2022). Nevertheless, regionalism in Africa is often defined too narrowly. The African Union and a few other well-known regional organizations (ROs), like ECOWAS, are the main subjects of current research, and many academics consider these ROs to be fragile, undeveloped, or even "failures."

Regionalism encompasses the efforts of a group of nations to improve their economic, political, social, or cultural interaction (Margaret, 2002). These efforts can take various forms, including regional cooperation, market integration, development integration, and regional integration. African leaders have long viewed regionalism as a viable strategy to unite the continent politically and economically. While regionalism in Africa has taken various forms to accommodate the changing national, regional, and international environment, all organizations aiming to integrate regional economies in Africa have adopted market integration to increase intra-regional trade. Market integration is the linear progression of degrees of integration that begins with a free trade area (or, in some cases, a preferential trade area) and ends with full economic integration. The model for such integration is the European Union (EU).

To summarize, the term regionalism refers to the concept of cooperation and integration between countries or areas within a specific geographic region. It involves the creation of agreements, institutions, and mechanisms that promote cooperation, economic integration, and political cooperation between neighboring countries. Regionalism aims to address common challenges, promote common interests, and improve stability and development within a particular region. This can include initiatives such as trade agreements, security partnerships, cultural exchanges, and joint infrastructure projects between the countries involved.

4.0 ADVANTAGES OF REGIONALISM TO AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

The integration of Africa today is a matter of choice. Against the international backdrop of changing political and economic priorities, Africa must chart a new course for its industrialization and economic development, harnessing the dynamics of regional integration.

For Africa, a vast continent of more than 1.2 billion people, integration holds significant potential to promote robust and equitable economic growth through markets, reduce conflict, and improve trade liberalization, according to the African Union Commission (2015) (Ogunyemi, 2017). So far, the regional economic communities have made slow but steady progress in integrating Africa, particularly in the areas of infrastructure (SADC, EAC), trade liberalization and facilitation (West African Economic and Monetary Union, COMESA), freedom of movement (ECOWAS), and peace and security (ECOWAS and SADC), Freund, C., & Rocha, N. (2010). Kwame Nkrumah once said: "Without true African unity, our continent will continue to be at the mercy of imperialist domination and exploitation. The priority of economic integration must be balanced by social, cultural, and political integration to accelerate regionalism. Policy instruments, especially for the overlapping REC member countries, need to be harmonized.

The following are some of the benefits of regional integration for African prosperity:

Development of cooperation: successful regional integration leads to more collaboration between countries. They are made to help each other in various social, economic, and political

areas. In the past, diplomatic and friendly relations between countries were often based on the development of trade relations. In times of financial instability, the cooperation mechanisms established in African monetary unions or economic communities have led to a certain resilience at the macroeconomic level, African Export-Import Bank (2018). The guarantees and confidence of regional central banks have enabled the least developed countries to remain resilient.

Market expansion: Within the same regional grouping, gaining access to a larger market is attractive to private investors and countries in the same region. As a result, trade within the region and beyond increases. This significant increase in private investment leads to technology transfers and the transfer of expertise from foreign companies to national companies. It is, therefore, not only a question of countries attracting as much funding as possible but also of using the experience of other countries to benefit from their resources.

Risk reduction: Belonging to a regional group also enables risk distribution. African countries' lack of connectivity to global financial markets had minimal impact during the 2008 financial crisis, African Export-Import Bank (2018). Several other factors can influence the resilience of their economies. On the one hand, countries that are part of a monetary union, such as the members of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) or the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), benefit from their fixed exchange rate and the safe convertibility of their currencies, which allows for little currency speculation. On the other hand, the new dynamics of South-South partnerships complement the North-South alliance models Freund, C., & Rocha, N. (2010). These new trade alliances between emerging economies, which avoid the traditional recourse to Western donors, have proved beneficial as they have allowed a multiplication of partners.

Increased regional stability: Developing close communication channels and cooperation between countries in the same regional space allows for better management of territories and borders. African countries protect themselves from external threats by securing their boundaries and neighbors' borders. Increased insecurity in neighboring areas can often destabilize entire regions. Greater regional integration, therefore, promotes regional stability.

Negotiating power: Negotiations between the larger industrial nations of Europe, Asia, and North America invariably place the balkanized governments of Africa at a disadvantage. This is particularly true regarding attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). For a time, there will always be opportunities for Africa to benefit from FDI. But with Africa currently divided into several states, the terms of any negotiations with the more powerful industrialized countries will never be favorable to Africa. In the long run, however, Africa can only lose; once united, it will be in the best position to determine the terms of the deal between itself and any potential foreign investor.

Economic growth and development: Regional integration promotes trade liberalization, policy harmonization, and the creation of larger markets. Increased trade volumes, economies of scale, and increased competitiveness result from this facilitating the free flow of capital, products, and services between member states. This also attracts foreign direct investment and promotes the development of regional industries and value chains, fostering economic growth and development across the continent.

Improved political cooperation: Regional integration promotes political cooperation and dialog between member countries. It provides a platform for tackling common challenges such as peace and security, cross-border crime, and political instability. By working together, countries can strengthen their collective voice and influence in international forums, enabling them to address global issues better and advocate for their common interests.

Infrastructure development: Regional integration often involves the development of cross-border infrastructure, such as transportation networks, energy grids, and telecommunications systems. Better infrastructure networking facilitates trade, investment, and regional cooperation. It contributes to inclusive growth and the decrease of regional inequalities by lowering transportation costs, enhancing connectivity between nations, and encouraging the development of neglected areas.

Improved regional resilience and self-sufficiency: By pooling resources and working together in various sectors, such as agriculture, healthcare, and technology, regional integration can increase Africa's resilience to external shocks and crises. It enables countries to tackle common challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and natural disasters together. In addition, regional integration can promote trade and investment within the region, which reduces dependence on external markets and strengthens self-sufficiency within the region.

To conclude, regional integration in Africa has the potential to promote economic growth, political cooperation, social cohesion, infrastructure development, and regional resilience. When nations cooperate to handle shared difficulties and seize opportunities for the benefit of the continent as a whole, these advantages help to advance the main objective of African unification.

5.0 REGIONALISM IN AFRICA

Similar to the global context, there is no single definition of regionalism; its meaning and significance for the theory and practice of global political economy are presented in different ways in the literature (Fawcett, 2004). Interaction at the regional level can be seen as a common concept of regionalism in the thinking and literature of various scholars.

Regionalism refers to a strategy of cooperation and policy coordination between states and non-state actors within a particular region. It encompasses measures a group of countries takes to improve their social, political, economic, or cultural interaction. It supports integration plans derived from the association documents of the member states. These initiatives can take different forms, such as regional cooperation, market integration, development integration, and regional integration. In its simplest form, regionalism is the desire and commitment of states with a strong sense of common goals, values, orientations, and expectations to live and work together in both domestic and foreign policy to support greater economic and political union and a strengthened security community (Akpuru-Aja, 2001).

Furthermore, regionalism is critical to democratization and state-building as it can reduce coercive behavior by major powers, increase transparency, hold governments and international organizations more directly accountable, and mitigate the adverse effects of globalization (Nwangwu, Enyiazu & Nwangwu, 2017).

The post-war period marked a significant turning point in the development and spread of regionalism. Depending on the interests and priorities of the members in each region, it can serve as an independence or decolonization movement, as a tool to represent the interests of less developed countries in various international decisions, to take measures to prevent them from being hindered by globalization and to compete with developed countries, to advance foreign relations, etc.

As for regionalism in Africa, it is an integral part of the continent's development plan and is primarily seen as a necessity rather than a preference. This concerted effort has significantly influenced the foreign policy of African states (Nieuwkerk, 2001). The Eurocentric model has had a significant impact on regionalism in Africa. However, the success story of economic integration and growth in Europe differs from that of Africa. Political and economic integration is undoubtedly a concept that was introduced earlier in Africa. In Africa, regionalism has developed in two overlapping waves.

The first wave is related to the pan-Africanist agenda and decolonization. The first attempt at regional cooperation between independent African states occurred immediately after colonialism. Pan-Africanism forms the ideological basis for the liberation struggle and the unification of the colonially plundered continent (Nkrumah, 1963). The former East African Community (EAC) is an example of how the newly independent African states attempted to expand the regional structures already created by the colonial powers and to develop new ones. The African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa were the main driving forces behind these processes. During this period, a variety of plans for regional economic cooperation were drawn up in Africa, but most of them remained only paper values (Morten, 2001)

The second wave of African regionalism began in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The main driving force was regionalism, which was supposed to act as a potential counterforce to economic globalization. In other words, the phenomenon of globalization that has engulfed the whole world is the main reason for the renewed interest in regional arrangements, especially after the end of the Cold War. Therefore, regionalism was recognized as one of the politically rational responses to globalization, supported by the notion that Africa would be even more marginalized if regionalism was not created. This phase was necessary to add a layer of governance to the global political economy that could protect participating states from the worst economic storms.

Similarly, the African Development Bank asserts that in response to these trends, Africa must transform its weak production and disorganized market through economic integration with a revitalized sense of purpose and direction. The alternative would be for the continent to risk losing ground in the global economy (African Development Bank, 1993)

As a result, Africa experienced some aspects of regional economic integration due to the new attention given to regional plans in other parts such as the EU, NAFTA, and ASEAN. The idea of an impending Fortress Europe with high tariffs against African goods was sparked by the plans for the Single European Act in Africa, as was made between 1986 and 1994.

As a result, the member states of the OAU met in Abuja in 1991, where the Abuja Treaty was signed. Among other things, the agreement sets out a timetable for creating the Pan-African

Economic Community by 2025. It also underlines the importance of sub-regional initiatives as instruments for implementing the treaty objectives at sub-regional and continental levels.

The Abuja Treaty (1991) envisaged that the regional communities would cover Northern, Western, Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa but did not explicitly state who would be members of these regional economic communities. As a result, AMU, ECOWAS, ECCAS, COMESA, and SADC were granted REC status. The Abuja Treaty provides many steps that should eventually lead to a continental economic and monetary union. The RECs must be strengthened and consolidated (Dinka & Kennes, 2007). In addition to the five RECs associated with the Abuja Treaty, three more RECs, the EAC, IGAD, and CENSAD, were recently officially recognized by the AU. Thus, eight RECs are currently recognized in Africa, and many more sub-regional arrangements await recognition by the African Union.

In other words, the sub-regional organizations are supposed to be catalysts for continental integration. It is argued that regional markets must be created to ensure African economic security and long-term development. The traditional view of economic integration supports this development and advocates that no African country is economically large enough to build a modern economy. The traditional economic view sees the small size of most domestic markets and the low volume of officially recorded trade as the most glaring signs of Africa's economic weakness. It has been argued that while Africa as a continent has resources, too many independent states need more willingness to cooperate (Akpuru-Aja, 2002).

6.0 CHALLENGES IN THE PURSUITS OF AFRICA'S REGIONALISM

Africa has witnessed various efforts at regionalism at continental and regional levels. While regionalism is as old as the Organization of African Unity, now renamed the African Union, recent summits have reaffirmed Africa's commitment to promoting intra-African trade and regionalism. A regionalism arrangement is a preferential (usually reciprocal) agreement between countries that removes barriers to economic and non-economic transactions. It is the association of different economies of states to promote and facilitate the free movement of goods and services within those countries. Regionalism agreements aim to reduce or eliminate barriers between their members (Hailu M., 2014). Despite all efforts, the continent's economy needs to grow closer together as a market. The aspirations for political unity are still far from becoming a reality due to the many challenges facing African countries.

6.1 The Fragmentation of Continent's Economies

The continent's economy must be more strongly divided into small and underdeveloped countries. Sub-Saharan Africa has a population of around 819 million people. However, its economic activity is comparatively small and fragmented into 47 countries, most of which are among the least developed countries (McCarty, 2011). For example, twenty sub-Saharan African countries had a GDP of less than US\$5 billion in 2008, with no less than seven countries having a GDP of less than US\$1 billion, indicating that they were truly small economies. Twelve of these countries had a population of less than two million people (WTO, 2011). The landlocked nature of countries in the SSA region, as well as the fact that many of their economies are small, has a detrimental effect on trade between them and the outside world. As McCarty notes, these small and underdeveloped economies need help to cross the

threshold to sustainable, diversified development through strategies focusing on domestic and foreign markets, leading to the continent's marginalization.

6.2 Challenge of Addressing the Gap between Agreements and its Implementation

The discrepancy between the agreements concluded and their implementation represents one of the most significant challenges for African regionalism. The lack of an institutional architecture of regional economic communities with the capacity, authority and resources to enforce resolutions and monitor program implementation, as well as the assumption of implausible and unattainable implementation deadlines, has meant that the implementation of treaties, protocols and resolutions has been less than ideal (Olarreaga & Rocha, 2003). African regional arrangements differ from their European counterparts because they are not based on an approach that focuses on whether countries comply with the treaty point by point. Regionalization develops both out of the formal institutions and independently of them. This means that the non-implementation of treaties is an aspect of the flexible nature of regionalism on the continent.

6.3 The Overlapping and Conflicting Regionalism Arrangements

Many African countries belong to more than one regional economic community. Of the fifty-four African states, twenty-seven belong to two regional blocs, eighteen to three and one to four. This facilitates implementation but also puts a strain on the limited administrative resources of the member countries. The multiple memberships reflect the desire of countries to choose different options offered by competing regional trade arrangements. Since the different regional arrangements pursue objectives other than trade that differ from one regional economic community to another and are attractive to some but not all countries concerned, countries tend to join all or more than one. However, this tendency of countries to join more than one regional economic community poses a challenge for member countries to fulfill their obligations under the different treaties and jeopardizes integration in the region. The multiplicity of memberships places an additional burden on members' financial obligations and political decisions. A country belonging to two or more RECS has to fulfill several financial obligations, which raises the problem that some states do not contribute to the proper functioning of the regional institution. These nations must simultaneously manage multiple meetings, political decisions, political harmonization, timetables, political complementarities and agreements between regional partners on commodities and production elements. The COMESA and EAC rules of origin are similar and are based on the value-added rule of 35% for the local content or customs, insurance, and freight (CIF) (COMESA Protocol on Rules of Origin). The main difference is that COMESA provides an exemption for "goods of particular importance," which only requires a minimum of 25% of the ex-works cost of the imported materials.

The EAC, on the other hand, has no such exemption. However, the SADC rules of origin are very different from the COMESA rules of origin, as they are product-specific and tailored to the specific production process of the industry. The question, therefore, arises as to which rule of origin is applied by a country that is a member of the SADC and the EAC or COMESA. Consequently, these countries must reconsider their membership seriously, as having two different standard external tariffs is impossible. In addition, there is the possibility of "partially conflicting membership commitments, different policies, and internal liberalization objectives,

conflicting external liberalization objectives, different timetables and phase-in periods, the different scope of application, and different and conflicting rules and administrative procedures", which will ultimately hinder the regionalization process.

6.4 Inadequate Infrastructure

Another major obstacle to regionalization efforts in Africa is the lack of suitable infrastructure. The business community cites infrastructure problems related to roads, railroads, ports, air transportation, energy, telecommunications and other systems as one of the biggest obstacles to economic integration and progress in Africa (Abuka, 2005). The need for roads connecting African countries poses a challenge to promoting cross-border trade. According to the ECA report, the length of paved roads in Africa, in terms of the total road network, is about five times less than in high-income OECD countries (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). Another challenge is transportation. The continent's transport sector is characterized by fragmentation, insufficient capacity, and poor performance, as the road and rail networks are sparsely developed, and many seaports and airports require renovation and expansion. Energy infrastructure is also a key element of integration. The need for adequate energy infrastructure is characteristic of many African countries. The continent's authorities are aware that without a sufficient energy supply, Africa will not be able to trade effectively between its member countries or develop sustainable industries, which will impact the ability to improve the living conditions of its people.

6.5 Lack of General Participation in the Regionalism Process

Another challenge is that African integration efforts have been mainly state-centered and limited to a small group of political leaders and technocrats (Udombana, 2013). The general public needs to be more involved in the discussion on integration initiatives. Non-state actors, who play a crucial role in Africa's political economy, should be given more attention to the integration issue. At national level, there is hardly any debate or involvement in decisions taken at continental or regional level. The lack of dissemination of decisions and protocols on regional integration issues to private stakeholders and the general public has hindered the continent's integration process. This has also contributed to the limited incorporation of regional integration agreements and regional and continental-level decisions into national development plans and strategies. Implementation of the decisions at the national level remains limited, and several countries have yet to integrate the decisions fully into their national development strategies. Against this background, the importance of involving all stakeholders is repeatedly emphasized at AU summits.

6.6 Lack of Political Will

African governments' lack of political will affects regional integration and unity in several ways. First, regional initiatives and agreements cannot be effectively implemented or enforced without solid commitment and support from political leadership, leading to delays, inefficiencies, and ultimately failure of integration efforts. Secondly, political will is essential to overcome national interests and prioritize collective goals for the entire region's benefit. Governments prioritizing short-term gains or focusing on domestic issues rather than regional cooperation hinder progress toward deeper integration and unity. Furthermore, the lack of political action leads to a lack of trust and collaboration between member states, as countries

may be reluctant to fully engage in joint initiatives if they perceive a lack of commitment from their counterpart. This leads to conflicts, disagreements, and deadlocked negotiations that hinder the development of a coherent regional framework.

Thus, political will is critical to advancing regional integration and unity in Africa. It provides leadership, vision, and determination to overcome challenges, build consensus, and advance common objectives. Without a strong political commitment from governments, the potential benefits of regional cooperation could remain untapped, hamper the continent's ability to overcome common challenges and seize opportunities for sustainable development and growth.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

Despite the many internal and external obstacles, it is our voluntary task to realize the unity of Africa. As Africans, we must be determined to realize African unity because we know we will not get anywhere the usual way our forefathers repeatedly told us. If we are united, we will be strong, and we will be able to grow together. But if we are not united, we will live in poverty, hunger, disease, conflict, armed civil wars, and other problems. Worse still, we will continue to be a pawn for external enemies. These obstacles are not insurmountable. If we take conflict as an example, we Africans can use indigenous conflict resolution methods like Gacaca in Rwanda. Therefore, we must develop our common identities and values indigenous to Africa instead of relying on Western philosophies. Above all, we must decolonize or change our thinking and believe in our resources and efforts. In short, we must stop saying "I" am Kenyan, Tanzanian, Ethiopian, Nigerian, Hutu, or Tutsi. Instead, we need to start working for African unity and identity.

So, African unity is crucial for the future of Africa if we look at it as a whole; this means that we need to consider a dynamic international system and the internal realities within the African state in a real sense rather than flirting with wishful thinking that unity will be achieved through a 'divine order,' as Nyerere clearly stated. Therefore, Africa needs a holistic unity program to reduce the persistent dependency that exists directly and indirectly today.

Regionalism holds immense potential for shaping Africa's future by promoting unity, cooperation, and development. By harnessing common interests and addressing common challenges through regional initiatives, African nations can unlock new opportunities for growth, stability, and prosperity. As the continent continues to navigate complex global dynamics and pursue sustainable development goals, embracing regionalism offers a strategic pathway to realizing a more integrated, interconnected, and resilient Africa.

Africa's future is inextricably linked to regional integration and unity. Without a coherent and coordinated approach to tackling common challenges and seizing shared opportunities, the continent will struggle to realize its sustainable development and growth potential. Regional integration can improve trade, infrastructure development, and investment opportunities, leading to economic prosperity and a higher standard of living for all Africans. The unity of African states can also strengthen political stability, security, and diplomatic influence on the world stage. Furthermore, regional integration and unity are essential for tackling cross-border issues such as climate change, migration, and pandemics, which require joint action and cross-

border cooperation. By working towards common goals, African countries can amplify their voice, increase their negotiating power, and foster a sense of solidarity and mutual support.

Finally, Africa's future success and prosperity will depend on its ability to prioritize regional integration and unity. By fostering political will, commitment, and cooperation between governments and stakeholders, the continent can overcome historical divisions, build a stronger foundation for growth and development, and shape a more prosperous and peaceful future for all Africans.

7.2 The way forward

Regional integration should be promoted to achieve unity in the continent so that it can have a bright future. In this regard, Africa is making little progress, so more should be done. I therefore recommend the following points;

- ❖ Financial independence and institutional change are both issues of institutional reform. The AU needs to make structural changes to meet its objectives. As the AU works closely with the regional economic communities based in the sub-regions, these revisions focus on the delimitation of missions. The AU should focus on global issues such as terrorism, migration, environmental issues, and the economic integration of Africa; that is one of the levers we can work on to make the AU's activities more visible as these global concerns reach beyond the sub-regional level. To address this, governments should consider innovative funding methods. Some countries already have experience engaging the private sector, but creative public-private partnerships could attract more private money and expertise. Pension funds and the insurance market, among other options, are viable funding sources for low-risk initiatives.
- ❖ Slow production, which hinders regional integration on the continent, should be the primary target. It would be beneficial to strategically improve countries' production, distribution, and marketing capacities to complement each other and strengthen regional production and trade networks. Improved cross-border cooperation between public and private actors has the best chance of success. Some countries have yet to enter the regional value and commodity chains, while others must establish a solid foundation to maintain their position.
- ❖ In practice, much more needs to be done to explore opportunities to develop creative regional value chains in many sectors. In addition, many bottlenecks could be eliminated by introducing improved technologies, higher-quality inputs, and modernized marketing strategies. Exports and production are expected to increase after the implementation of free trade agreement (AfCFTA) in the continent. However, for growth to be more than a fad, decisions in the manufacturing sector must be smart, forward-looking and future-oriented. They must also make use of the latest techniques and technologies.
- ❖ Global value chains only work with human resources/ people. The continent should exploit its labor goldmine by identifying gaps and developing cross-border skills upgrading programs. Countries and regions will benefit more or less from regional and global value chains, depending on how skilled their workforce is in terms of the technology and production capacities of the present and future. Global production is expected to become increasingly fragmented and complex, making it all the more

critical that policymakers drive the development of human labor skills that can be adapted to the demands of a changing labour market.

- ❖ Regional economic and social integration will benefit significantly if the infrastructure needs in Africa are met. With a functioning infrastructure, raw materials can reach companies, production can take place, goods can reach consumers, and national and international trade and financial activities can develop. Functioning logistics and transportation networks are necessary to decouple production from national borders. Inadequate infrastructure is a significant obstacle to foreign direct investment, which shifts to locations with cost advantages. To summarise, inadequate infrastructure augurs a bleak future in social and economic terms.
- ❖ The productive and infrastructural facets of regional integration are closely linked. One is reinforced by the other. The trade aspect of regional integration would greatly benefit from corrective measures to address these two issues. The African free trade agreement (AfCFTA), once it is fully established, will be the major trading block in the world.. If corrective measures are taken, it has the untapped potential to grow the continent and help millions of people out of poverty.
- ❖ Concerning the free movement of people, we, therefore, advise a more incredible opening up of visa regulations with the aim of visa-free travel for all Africans and the use of the African passport, as laid down in the African Union Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons (Kigali). The introduction of e-visas and visas on arrival for Africans has contributed significantly to the improvement in the 2019 edition of the Africa Visa Openness Index, according to which 87% of African countries either improved or maintained their 2018 index score. Regional cooperation on free movement between regional economic communities will significantly boost the continent's integration. However, regional economic communities in Africa have more power. After reviewing their applications, they can form regional blocks without visa requirements or grant applicants multi-year visas. Greater regional cooperation on free movement between regional economic groups will significantly enhance the continent's integration.
- ❖ Finally, the authorities and policymakers must take steps to attract substantial investment to the continent's regions. To protect the financial stability of their region, they should coordinate their action plans and take disciplinary measures where necessary. Exogenous shocks such as natural disasters and capital outflows should be controlled to reduce economic volatility.

To summarize, finding a path to unity through regionalism is crucial for Africa's future. The benefits of regional integration, including economic growth, enhanced political cooperation, strengthened social cohesion, infrastructure development, and regional resilience, are apparent. However, realizing these benefits requires sustained commitment from African countries, regional organizations, and other stakeholders. This requires addressing challenges such as political will, institutional capacity, coordination, and inclusiveness. Going forward, it is critical to prioritize the implementation of regional integration initiatives, promote effective governance structures, invest in crucial infrastructure projects, support inclusive and participatory decision-making processes, and strengthen partnerships within and beyond the continent. By using regionalism as a catalyst for unity, Africa can unleash its enormous potential, address common challenges, and build a prosperous and inclusive future for its people.

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