Identities, Interests, Regional Integration, and Economic Development: The Case of the African Continental Free Trade Area

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DECLARATION

I, Sizwe Sidaza, declare that:

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to:

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ABSTRACT

The framing, adoption, and implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement signify post-colonial Africa's cherished commitment to advancing regional economic integration and development to build the Africa envisioned by successive generations of pan-Africanists. The Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area aims to create the world's largest free trade area, supercharge economic growth, foster structural economic transformation, and promote continental economic integration by creating a liberalised market for goods and services, boosting investment opportunities, and paving the way for a future continental customs union. The analysis of the AfCFTA vision has been deficient in examining the role of converging and diverging identities and interests in enabling or constraining the emergence and development of the AfCFTA. This study aimed to explore how the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area can be understood, interrogate the major players and evaluate their interests in its creation, and examine how the interests and identities of different players shape its development. The study used three theories: Nyerere's theory of integration, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism—a theoretical synthesis that embraces diverse perspectives and compensates for the limitations of each. A qualitative approach was adopted, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Expert and chain sampling were employed to identify information-rich participants with strong knowledge of the AfCFTA. Thirty-five participants were interviewed, including independent analysts and officials from the African Union's AfCFTA Secretariat, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and the South African Institute of International Affairs. A thematic analysis tool was used to analyse the data and identify meaningful trends and patterns. The study found that the promotion of economic diversification, industrialisation, endogenous development, innovation and competitiveness, and the dismantling of colonial economic legacies underpin the establishment of the AfCFTA. It found that several players—including states, intergovernmental organisations, technical institutions, the private sector, the largest economies, and external players—each with different interests, have contributed to the creation and operation of the AfCFTA. It found that several ideational and ascriptive identities—including anticolonial, pan-African, African norms-related, hybrid liberal-protectionist, nationalistic, regional (geo-cultural), cultural, and extra-continental actor identities—shape the development and implementation of the AfCFTA. The study also found that the AU and the RECs have no structured framework for managing identity-related

dynamics. Thus, it made several policy and future research recommendations to address the issues identified in the findings and ensure the long-term viability of the AfCFTA, including the need for the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities to develop a structured, institutionalised framework to cultivate a shared pan-African and free-market identity across the continent and, simultaneously, move toward independent, state-led financing to shield African agency from external dependency.

Keywords: *Identities, Interests, Regional Integration, Economic Development, Trade, Trade Liberalisation, Pan-Africanism, and AfCFTA*.

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACM: African Common Market

AEC: African Economic Community

AfCFTA: African Continental Free Trade Area

AfDB: African Development Bank

Afreximbank: African Export-Import Bank

AMU: Arab Maghreb Union

ARII: African Regional Integration Index

AU: African Union

AUC: African Union Commission

AUDA-NEPAD: African Union Development Agency- New Partnership for Africa's Development

BIAT: Boosting Intra-African Trade

CA: Constitutive Act of the African Union

CEMAC: Central African Economic and Monetary Community

CEN-SAD: Community of Sahel-Saharan States

CFTA: Continental Free Trade Area

COMESA: Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

CU: Customs Union

EAC: East African Community

EC: European Community

ECA: Economic Commission for Africa

ECCAS: Economic Community of Central African States

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

EU: European Union

FAL: Final Act of Lagos

FDI: Foreign Direct Investment

FTA: Free Trade Area

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development

LPA: Lagos Plan of Action

MIP: Minimum Integration Programme

MNCs: Multinational Corporations

NEPAD: New Partnership for Africa's Development

NTBs: Non-Tariff Barriers

OAU: Organisation of African Unity

PTA: Preferential Trade Area

RECs: Regional Economic Communities

SACU: Southern African Customs Union

SADC: Southern African Development Community

SADCC: Southern African Development Coordination Conference

SAIIA: South African Institute of International Affairs

SEA: Single European Act

TFTA: Tripartite Free Trade Area

TRALAC: Trade Law Centre

UK: United Kingdom

UNCTAD: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UNECA: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and Background

1.1.1 African Regionalism and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

Promoting regional economic integration and cooperation in Africa was an integral part of the pro-decolonisation[1] struggles and has been a long-standing aspiration shared by generations of pan-Africanists (Oloruntoba, 2020; Mbeki, 2011). From their inception, Africa's historic anti-colonial struggles were, in the main, characterised by a shared interest in advancing political and economic liberation and shared prosperity through strong ties of political and economic cooperation facilitated by a continental organisation (Oloruntoba, 2020; Biney, 2008; Qobo, 2007). Regionalism[2] in Africa is fundamentally anchored in Pan-Africanism, a philosophy embraced by independence crusaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and others (Aniche, Alumona, and Moyo, 2021). As affirmed in the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, Pan-Africanism envisions "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena" (African Union, 2015:1). Nkrumah (1963) posited that the pan-African dream of integration would be accomplished through a supranational continental union and its coordination, harmonisation and alignment of states' policies to establish a political and economic union in a politically and economically liberated Africa. He envisioned a continent that speeds up economic modernisation and development, leverages its vast resource endowments, and has a common market, a single trade policy, and a common currency. On the other hand, Julius Nyerere, who advocated a gradualist model of continental integration, proposed phased, bottom-up processes and subregion-driven programmes of political and economic integration, grounded in the principles of equality and decentralisation (Nyerere, 1963).

With its firm foundation in aspirations for regionalism and unity among African states, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), formed in 1963, championed the development of strategic frameworks to forge a workable agenda for regional and continental integration (Shumba, 2023). The late 1970s were synonymous with a growing wave of shared aspirations

[1] The tides of decolonisation—a hard-fought process of political liberation, self-determination and self-governance—engulfed different parts of Africa during the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Talton 2012).
[2] Regionalism in the disciplines of economics and international affairs refers to the desire to form multilateral arrangements that undertake joint and formalised programmes among governments within a geographical area. The formation of institutions such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation is an example of regionalism (Hoshiro, 2019).

for the acceleration of continental economic integration, as the 1976 Kinshasa Declaration and the 1979 Monrovia Declaration made a clarion call for the establishment of the African Economic Community (AEC) and the development of action plans for realising this AEC (Luke and MacLeod, 2019). Consequently, seminal mechanisms and instruments like the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa (LPA) and the Final Act of Lagos (FAL) of 1980, the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (Abuja Treaty) of 1991 and the Constitutive Act of the African Union (CA) of 2000 were adopted to drive the integration of African markets to create an African common market, and ultimately an economic union (Uzodike, 2009; Shumba, 2023). The Abuja Treaty envisioned the establishment of the AEC by the year 2000 through a six-phase process of economic integration (Oloruntoba and Nshimbi, 2023). Agenda 2063 of the African Union (AU), approved by the Heads of State and Government of the AU, embraced and envisioned full economic integration characterised by an economic union, technological transformation, and dynamic economic development (African Union, 2015). The Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA Agreement), signed in Kigali in 2018, is a critical phase in the realisation of the Abuja Treaty's AEC vision and the pan-African dream of an integrated and prosperous Africa (Oloruntoba and Nshimbi, 2023).

As noted in the Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade, the African continent has dismally low volumes of internal trade. Thus, it is highly vulnerable to global macroeconomic shocks and fails to leverage synergies and complementarities across its economies. This is a consequence of several challenges, including dissimilarities in trade regimes, commercially limiting customs processes, bureaucratic and technical restrictions, deficient productive capacity, inadequate infrastructure required for transnational trade, trade financing and trade information challenges, lack of factor market integration, and meagre focus on matters affecting internal markets (African Union, 2012). The AfCFTA Agreement seeks to reconfigure and enhance Africa's trade patterns by maximising economies of scale, fostering vibrant structural economic transformation, accelerating high-speed industrialisation, and promoting export diversification through comprehensive trade liberalisation (Moyo, 2024). In its configuration, the AfCFTA's Agreement has eight main priority areas: trade in goods, trade in services, investment, intellectual property rights, competition policy, dispute settlement, digital trade, and women and youth in trade. It proposes the progressive removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade to boost intra-African trade. It lays the groundwork for a future

common market with a free flow of capital and labour, thereby deepening economic integration (African Union, 2018).

1.1.2 Role of Interest and Identities in Shaping Regional Economic Integration in Africa

The trends and prospects of political and economic regionalism globally are significantly influenced by manifold interests and identities. Hooghe and Marks (2009) and Capello (2018) postulated that the intersection of interests and identities was a crucial part of the evolution and deepening of European integration. Ingebritsen and Larson (1997) noted that divergent interests, like Finland's economic interests and belief that the EU would not dilute Finnish national identity, and Norway's fear that the EU could corrode the Norwegian national identity, were the reasons for the difference in choices when Finland embraced EU membership, and Norway rejected it. Fossum (2019) also observed that, as it concerned Norway, national interests and issues related to national identity, including cultural, socio-economic, political, and historical factors, affected European integration negatively as they propelled Norway to decline EU membership. The impact of interests and identities on European integration provides validation of the positions advanced by social constructivists and neo-functionalists regarding the interrelationship between interests and identities. In this respect, Behravesh (2011) argues that these two forces—interests and identities[3]—have a mutually reinforcing relationship; identities influence the development and display of particular interests, while interests can influence identities over time. Risse (2005) argues that the growth of pro-European integration identities and interests inspired people to support the EU's programmes and supranational agenda; they were not solely incentivised by the spillover effects of integration that many neofunctionalists emphasised.

Regarding Africa, various scholars recognise that interests and identities shape the possibility and trajectory of regional integration. Tavares and Tang (2011) contend that competing and divergent interests stifled regional economic integration in several sub-regions of the continent. Macharia, Nzomo and Shaw (2023) emphasise that, while the pan-African identity cultivated by various black intellectuals and political leaders has fecundated the vision for continental cooperation, expressions of distinct nationalisms and reverence for narrow interests on the continent have had a debilitating effect on regional integration. Similarly, Qobo (2007:6) argued that the "task of ensuring regional integration with the aim of achieving economic and political union will be complicated all the more by the lack of shared values and common

[3] One of the prominent proponents of social constructivist of the twentieth century, Wendt stated, "interests are dependent on identities and are not competing causal mechanisms but distinct phenomena" (Wendt, 1994:385).

interests". He notes that the lack of common interests and commitment to building a united and prosperous continent among African countries derailed integration. Tavares and Tang (2011) underscore that while RECs have been formed to champion integration, the formation of too many sub-regional organisations and membership overlap perpetuate the rise of incongruent interests, making the facilitation of economic integration very cumbersome. Indeed, Tavares and Tang (2011) also argue that the absence of common interests and identities undermines the capacity of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to achieve regional economic integration.

Given the described interconnection between interests and identities, this study probes the roles of interests and identities of actors such as political movements, political elites, social groups, civil society, the business elite, African states, RECs, external nations, multinational institutions, and others. It recognises the complex nature of African regionalism and probes the extent to which converging and diverging interests and identities influenced the emergence and development of the AfCFTA. It thus underscores that analysing the role of interests and identities in shaping the AfCFTA's creation is the best way to illuminate its underpinnings, prospects, and challenges.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Trends in AfCFTA scholarship lean strongly towards analysing the economic significance and prospects of the AfCFTA, focusing mainly on factors such as institutional capacities, administrative hurdles, infrastructure deficits, technical challenges, and security concerns. While such scholarship is crucial in the field of regional integration and in examining the feasibility of the AfCFTA, scholars tend to under-explore the extent to which a variety of other forces and factors shape Africa's regionalism. This study departs from that embedded norm and focuses on sociological and sociopolitical forces, as well as interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis, thereby enhancing scholarship and possibly framing a new conceptual framework for African integration. In AfCFTA-specific literature, the influence of converging and diverging interests and identities on shaping the development of the AfCFTA has not been significantly examined. Also, the role of socially constructed identities in the establishment and implementation of the AfCFTA remains underexplored. The failure to encompass interests and identities, including ideational identities, in the examination and analysis of regional integration prospects and challenges makes it difficult to fully understand the AfCFTA's trajectory.

Recognising the role of economic and political interests and shared socio-cultural, economic, and political identities in the emergence of Europe's political and economic integration, it is pertinent to scrutinise similar underpinnings in the evolution of the AfCFTA. In Africa, ascriptive and normative identities—cultural identities, ethnic identities, nationalistic orientations, regional loyalties, identity politics, diverse ideological beliefs, external identities, etc—have always influenced politics and other spheres of life at national, regional, and continental levels. The role of collective, competing, and conflicting identities and interests in either enabling or impeding the emergence or development of the AfCFTA thus merits exploration or examination. The study presumes that successful economic integration and the achievement of the AfCFTA depend, to an extent, on understanding and managing these factors. The study thus examines the role and impact of identities and interests (existing at state, regional, and continental levels) on the viability and fruition of the AfCFTA project. This study probes and examines the role and possible influence of social, cultural, political, and economic interests and identities in both the development and operation of the AfCFTA.

At the theoretical level, Julius Nyerere's concept of gradual integration does not feature prominently in mainstream scholarship on Africa's regional economic integration, which calls for a theoretical intervention. Most studies on Africa's integration programmes, including the AfCFTA and the Abuja Treaty, tend to underemphasise the role of Julius Nyerere's gradualist, development-centred pan-Africanist model of regionalism as the primary pathway African States and their intergovernmental institutions have chosen to achieve regional and continental integration. The overemphasis in much of the African regionalism literature on Kwame Nkrumah's advocacy of rapid continental integration tends to suggest that the pursuit of the AEC aligns more closely with his perspective. This study is also premised on the assumption that since all the post-1970 African regional integration policy milestones—such as the Kinshasa Declaration, Lagos Plan of Action and its Final Act of Lagos, and the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community— consistently prescribed bottom-up, gradualist and RECs-driven approaches, the use of Julius Nyerere's theory of incremental integration in the theoretical framework may better explain the development of the AfCFTA.

The study is also based on the proposition that Eurocentric theories of regionalism do not fully capture the distinctiveness of the AfCFTA. A combination of relevant theories from African political thought and mainstream international relations and regionalism scholarship is vital in the study of the AfCFTA's emergence. Therefore, this study undergirds the pursuit of its

objectives in Nyerere's integration philosophy, alongside intergovernmentalism and social constructivism.

This study has also sought to address a theoretical deficiency inherent to the study of the AfCFTA and African regionalism more generally. Political science and international relations scholars studying African regionalism tend to use the mainstream theories of regional integration, namely neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. International economics scholars tend to use the customs union theory, the optimum currency area theory, and Bela Balassa's theory of economic integration. While the aforementioned political and economic theories of regional integration have been highly useful for explaining regional integration, especially in Europe, they do not fully capture the distinctiveness of African regionalism. In many ways, these theories do not capture the context and the trajectories of regionalism in former colonies that have not completely escaped the trap of neocolonialism and lack of structural economic transformation. In this respect, the study addresses this deficiency by incorporating an African and pan-Africanist theory of regionalism—Nyerere's theory of regional integration—and develops a theoretical synthesis consisting of a mainstream theory of regional integration (intergovernmentalism), a mainstream international relations theory (social constructivism), and a pan-Africanist theory of African integration (Nyerere's theory).

1.3 Aim of the Study

The study examines how the different identities and underlying interests of the major players influence the AfCFTA's emergence, orientation, and development. It analyses the establishment of the AfCFTA, identifies the major players and their interests, and examines how the interests and identities of different players influence the AfCFTA's establishment.

1.4 Research Proposition

1.4.1 The development of the AfCFTA is shaped by the interaction between the identities and interests of its major players, with convergence propelling regional integration and divergence constraining it.

1.5 Research Problems and Objectives: Key Questions to be Asked

1.5.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

i. To explore how the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area can be understood.

ii. To interrogate the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

iii. To evaluate the interests of the major players in the African Continental Free Trade Area.

iv. To examine how the interests and identities of different players shape the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

1.5.2 Research Questions

The study seeks to address the following questions:

i. How can the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area be understood?

ii. Who are the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area?

iii. What are the interests of the major players in the African Continental Free Trade Area?

iv. How do and will the interests and identities of different players shape the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area?

1.5.3 Research Problems and Objectives: Broader Issues to be Investigated

As stated in the AfCFTA Agreement, the deepening of economic integration through the AfCFTA is an essential step towards liberalising intra-African commerce, paving the way for possible capital and labour mobility, laying the groundwork for the realisation of a future Continental Customs Union, promoting sustainable development, driving inclusive socio-economic transformation, fostering gender justice, enhancing competitiveness, boosting industrial development and economic diversification, and ensuring a thriving agricultural sector that guarantees food security (African Union, 2018). The study examines the intersection of various interests and identities and the extent to which the African Union and the RECs are developing methods and interventions to address divergent interests and identities. Therefore, the study also scrutinises the degree of preparedness and pragmatism attached to ensuring the viability and successful operation of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

Mistry (2000:554) contends that "Africa's commitment to integration appears to have been visceral rather than rational, more rhetorical than real" and that integration efforts have been driven by "lofty transcontinental ambitions, evocative political slogans, a plethora of treaties

and regional institutions, high-minded principles, and protectionist proclivities". This conception suggests the prevalence of baseless ambitions, pan-African fanaticism, and populist narratives in Africa's regional integration discourse. It creates a perception that programmes designed to promote regional integration could be an exercise in futility, likely driven by a negation of reality. It is also against this backdrop that this study examines how the AU is moving to make this giant economic step the continent's landmark success over its many economic troubles. Logically, the study examines how AU institutions, including the AfCFTA Secretariat, are implementing the right tools and mechanisms to ensure a positive endgame and avoid a recurrence of the failures that have characterised previous sub-regional integration initiatives.

The study indirectly poses the question: Are the AU, RECs, and states united in purpose and acting in the interest of the economic well-being of all the peoples of Africa? Indeed, given that there are notions that, in the past, identities and interests have shaped the development and prospects of integration processes at sub-regional levels, the study examines the possible manifestations and intersections of such forces in the development of the AfCFTA. Ultimately, this study offers a way forward for implementing the AfCFTA given these interests and identities.

1.6 Justification and Significance of the Study

The study's theoretical framework and focus enable an analysis of the AfCFTA as an economic integration programme, the identification of the major internal and external players, the examination of the role of interests and identities, and the production of knowledge on the imperatives that AfCFTA signatories, RECs, and the AfCFTA Secretariat need to consider as they implement the AfCFTA. Since the initial signing of the AfCFTA in Kigali in 2018, scholars have analysed its prospects and challenges, focusing on issues such as security, regulations, policy alignment, soft infrastructure, and hard infrastructure. The study transcends the focus on regulatory, technical, and infrastructural challenges to the AfCFTA's implementation discussed in much of the literature to spotlight abstract factors, the distribution of power on the continent, and socio-cultural, socio-political, and economic forces affecting the AfCFTA. The study seeks to advance the existing body of literature on the AfCFTA and African regionalism more broadly. It explores the sociological and sociopolitical forces (interests and identities), provides a deeper understanding of converging and diverging identities and interests, and highlights the role of socially constructed identities in shaping the AfCFTA's creation. The study offers a conceptual framework that incorporates African and

external sociocultural and sociopolitical dynamics. Significantly, this transcension enables the study to holistically examine the paradigm of AfCFTA's evolution by looking beyond the written, formal, binding assurances represented by the treaty and its protocols and analysing how the aforementioned forces influence the AfCFTA's establishment. In the end, the findings of this study contribute to the scholarship on the potential of Africa's economic integration experiment as an instrument for fostering shared prosperity and getting Africa to a new economic destiny (phase).

This study is pioneering a multi-layered theoretical framework that no existing study has conceptualised and leveraged. This framework encompasses Julius Nyerere's theory, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism to develop a theoretical synthesis that illuminates economic motivations and the social, economic, historical, cultural, and political factors shaping the AfCFTA. While previous studies have used Nyerere's theory, constructivism, and intergovernmentalism to study African regionalism, to the author's knowledge, no peer-reviewed article or dissertation integrates all three to study the role of interests and identities in the AfCFTA's creation. This study does that and, in the process, enters into a new conceptual terrain.

By utilising Julius Nyerere's gradualist pan-Africanist theory, the study addresses a theoretical deficiency in African regionalism scholarship and balances the existing literature, which highlights Nkrumah's perspective more than Nyerere's. The study uses the framework for both exploratory and explanatory purposes. The combination could be high-yielding, as it leads to a conceptual model that explains the integration-interest-identity interplay that advocates of the AfCFTA may need to carefully navigate as they negotiate and implement the AfCFTA. The theoretical synthesis (Nyerere's theory, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism) developed in this study helps explain the AfCFTA (and by extension African regionalism) in postcolonial and neocolonial contexts—something that would have been difficult to achieve with only Eurocentric theories. The interdisciplinary orientation of the study (with perspectives associated with African history and politics, European regionalism, sociology, and international politics) enables it to portray the foundations, features, and orientations of the AfCFTA and to produce a robust analysis of its dynamics. Lastly, at the policy level, the study helps to illuminate how identities and interests are being and can be managed to ensure the successful implementation of the AfCFTA.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The study focuses specifically on the AfCFTA. While the introduction, literature review, and discussion of the historical evolution of African trade integration leading to the AfCFTA look at milestones from the twentieth century, the data analysis and discussion of findings focus largely on the period from 2012 to 2025. The AfCFTA, as a phase in the implementation of the Abuja Treaty, can be best analysed by selecting, discussing, and analysing the several landmarks in African trade integration history. These milestones include the 1976 Kinshasa Ministerial Declaration, 1979 Monrovia Declaration, 1980 Lagos Plan of Action and its Final Act of Lagos, 1991 Abuja Treaty, RECs formations, 1999 Sirte Declaration, 2000 Constitutive Act of the African Union, 2009 Minimum Integration Programme, 2012 Action Plan on Boosting Intra-African Trade, 2013 AU Agenda 2063, 2015 Tripartite Free Trade Area and the AfCFTA negotiations and establishment. While these are important to the study, the main focus is on the interests, agendas, and identities that significantly shaped or defined them, and how these factors manifest in the pioneering and development of the AfCFTA.

Despite this study's rigorous nature, it contains certain limitations inherent in most qualitative studies. First, since the perspectives and analyses of different experts and analysts are critical pillars of the study, it is difficult to achieve total objectivity in the data and findings. This categorically means the results are determined by context, analysts' perceptions, and the levels of erudition each analyst brings to the study. Admittedly, while the processes of reflexivity, data source triangulation, and theory triangulation are used to enhance accuracy and validity, they do not guarantee perfection or total objectivity in the data, analysis, and discussion of findings. Bryman (2016) accentuated that, since the investigator has the leeway to pose follow-up questions during the interviews, the investigator's phrasing, manner of speaking, or emphasis can unintentionally affect how the respondent responds. Given that the interview schedule's format allows variation in how questions are asked to different respondents, consistency and reliability across interviews could have been affected. Also, the lack of material incentives meant the researcher relied heavily on respondents' goodwill and mood. Consequently, not all the knowledgeable and reputable experts, scholars and analysts the researcher contacted were willing to assist.

1.8 Conceptual Clarifications

Common Market (CM): This is a formal bilateral or multilateral agreement in which countries eliminate all tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, adopt a common external tariff, and permit the free flow of goods, services, and factors of production, particularly labour and capital, between

themselves. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), an economic zone of 21 states, is a case in point.

Customs Union (CU): This is a formal economic agreement in which countries establish a free trade area among member states while applying a common external tariff on imports from non-member states. The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), formed in 1991 and comprising Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay as its principal members in South America, is an example of a customs Union.

Economic Development: This is the process by which low-income and small economies achieve economic transformation, becoming modernised, advanced, and high-tech economies, leading to higher levels of economic growth, structural transformation, social and economic well-being, and quality of life.

Economic Union: This is a formal economic agreement or region in which countries have eliminated all tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, have free movement of production factors, have adopted a common external tariff, established an operational common market, and have closer coordination of member states' economic and fiscal policies. It is almost the most advanced level of regional economic integration. The European Union (EU) is the best example of a modern-day economic union, as it possesses all the features mentioned.

Free Trade Area (FTA): This is a formal economic agreement or trade bloc in which countries eliminate or significantly reduce tariffs and other trade barriers to ensure free trade. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the largest FTA in the world in terms of geographical size and number of member states.

Identities: Identity refers to who someone or something is. In social constructivist theory, this is a structure composed of social relationships, norms, rules, shared meanings, and practices. An actor's identity is socially constructed and shapes their interests in international politics.

Interests: Interests[4] are stakes, desires, or goals that are important to an actor. The social constructivist theory holds that social context, rather than predetermined forces, determines interests. They are shaped by social interactions, identity, shared practices, values, norms, and ideas. In fact, Wendt (1992) states that identities are the basis of interests.

[4] Wendt (1992:398) argues that "Identities are the basis of interests. Actors do not have a 'portfolio' of interests that they carry around independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situation"

Macroeconomic Convergence: Economic convergence occurs when low-income and small economies experience a catch-up effect, enabling them to grow more rapidly and become more economically productive, like developed economies. Macroeconomic convergence occurs when key economic indicators, such as debt levels, interest rates, and inflation rates, are aligned across countries within a trading bloc. This process boosts economic integration by enabling countries within a trading bloc to promote economic stability and deter economic shocks.

Monetary (Currency) Union: An economic zone in which a group of countries adopts a single currency and develops a single monetary policy, thereby coordinating their money supplies, interest rates, and exchange rates. The Eurozone, which uses the Euro as its only official currency, is the best-known and most successful monetary union in the world.

Pan-Africanism[5]: This is a movement of or belief in political, economic, social, and cultural solidarity among people of African descent and African countries who share a common rejection of colonial, imperial, and external subjugation of Africans and aspiration for regional and continental cooperation among African states. Pan-Africanism emerged as a means of opposing European colonialism and slavery.

Regional Economic Communities (RECs): In the context of African politics, a regional economic community is a grouping of countries within a sub-region established to promote and facilitate regional economic integration and cooperation, enabling future continental integration in accordance with the Abuja Treaty and other historical agreements of the African Union. These RECs[6] include the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), East African Community (EAC), Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Southern African Development Community (SADC).

[5] According to Malisa and Nhengeze (2018), Pan-Africanism is also defined as a philosophy or intellectual movement that advocates the idea of an emancipated, united and progressive Africa. Having first been conceptualised in the Caribbean and North America, the movement gained prominence among thinkers and activists outside the continent of Africa. The intellectual and political work of iconic thinkers such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Robert Sobukwe and Malcolm X is acknowledged as a source of the historical incubation or manifestation of the pan-African movement.

[6] Regional Economic Communities like the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and others are the building blocks for continental integration and operate under the auspices of the African Union (UNECA, 2019).

REC-level integration vs AU-level integration: According to (Fawcett, 2004: 432), a region "may be a large continent, or a small group of contiguous states". Nye (cited in Fawcett, 2004: 432) defined a region as "a group of states linked together by both a geographical relationship and a degree of mutual interdependence". Thus, regional integration generally refers to economic and political integration pursued at the continental or a smaller geographical level. The Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, also known as the Abuja Treaty, formally laid out two paths for regional integration in Africa. The first one is sub-regional integration, and the second is continental integration.

Regarding sub-regional integration (the RECs Level), the Abuja Treaty sets up a sequential path to integration, where clusters of states in the five macro-regions of the continent, which are North, West, Central, East and Southern Africa, pursue integration among themselves. These blocs of states constitute sub-regions, and their groupings (economic communities) serve as the building blocks for continental integration (Organisation of African Unity [OAU], 1991). Groupings such as the East African Community, the Arab Maghreb Union, and the Economic Community of West African States are examples of sub-regional groupings, as they comprise a small number of African states within a defined geographical space. Regarding continental integration (AU-level), the Treaty makes clear that the RECs exist primarily to facilitate Africa-wide integration (OAU, 1991). Therefore, the term sub-regional integration refers specifically to regional integration at the RECs level, while continental integration refers specifically to regional integration at the level of the African Union. Nevertheless, the term regional integration is used in reference to either level.

Regional Economic Integration (REI): This is a multi-phase process in which countries in a geographical region engage in trade liberalisation and economic cooperation to spur economic growth, competitiveness, and dynamism by removing tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers, creating the free flow of goods, services, and, sometimes, labour and capital, among themselves. According to Bela Balassa (1961), economic integration has five phases: the Free Trade Area, the Customs Union, the Common Market, the Economic Union, and Total Economic Integration.

Single Market: This is an economic zone with a common or unified market, tariff elimination, capital mobility, labour mobility, and the elimination of all non-tariff barriers, such as physical barriers, incongruent regulations, technical barriers, different standards, and fiscal barriers. The

EU Single Market is the most advanced single market ever. This can be considered the most advanced stage of a common market.

Supranationalism: This is when a regional or international organisation, such as the European Union or the African Union, gradually or rapidly exercises decision-making powers and authority that traditionally belong to nation-states; in essence, power and authority are transferred from member states to the international body. The EU is the near-perfect embodiment of a supranational body.

Trade Creation: This occurs when economic welfare increases and trade within a trade bloc, such as a free trade area, customs union, or common market, increases.

Trade Diversion: This is when a trade bloc causes trade to shift from a highly efficient producer (or low-cost country) to a less efficient producer (or high-cost country), thereby undermining economic welfare.

1.9 Structure of the Dissertation

The structure of this dissertation is as follows:

Chapter One: Background and Introduction

This chapter provides a background to the study. It includes the background of Africa's integration agenda, the AU's and RECs' integration programmes, the configuration of the AfCFTA, the role of interests and identities in regional integration, statement of the problem, research objectives and questions, hypothesis, justification and significance of the study, the scope and limitations of the study, and the conceptual clarification and definitions of key concepts.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter Two explains the literature review, the literature search strategy, and gives a systematic review of literature on regional integration in Africa, the configuration, implementation, and successes of Africa's free trade area initiatives, the role of the major sub-state, national, regional and external players in regional economic integration in Africa, the role of interests and identities in shaping regional integration in Africa, and the development of AfCFTA.

Chapter Three: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Chapter Three is the theoretical and conceptual grounding of the study. The main focus of the chapter is the discussion of the underpinnings and central propositions of theoretical traditions

or perspectives relevant to the study. It offers a justification for the adoption and operationalisation of Nyerere's theory (of regional integration), intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism, which are the main focus of this chapter. The chapter also explains why a conceptual framework derived from the combination of these perspectives is applicable and beneficial to the entire study.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Methods

Chapter Four entails the methodological orientation of the study. It explains and justifies the type of research undertaken, the research design, the methods and instruments of data collection, the ethical considerations, the triangulation techniques, the data analysis process, and the sampling techniques used.

Chapter Five: The Historical Evolution of African Trade Integration Leading to the AfCFTA, 1976 To 2025

Chapter Five presents historical milestones in the evolution of African trade integration leading to the AfCFTA from 1976 to 2025. The chapter looks at the 1976 Kinshasa Declaration, the 1979 Monrovia Declaration, the 1980 Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) and the Final Act of Lagos (FAL), the 1991 Abuja Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community, formation of RECs, the 1999 Sirte Declaration, the 2000 Constitutive Act of the African Union, the 2002 New Partnership for Africa's Development and the 2003 African Peer Review Mechanism, the 2007 Accra Declaration, the 2009 Minimum Integration Programme (MIP), the 2012 Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT), the 2013 African Union Agenda 2063, the 2015 Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA), the 2015 Decision on the Launch of Continental Free Trade Area Negotiations, and finally the 2018 historic signing of the AfCFTA Agreement.

Chapter Six: Data Presentation

Chapter Six presents the results using thematic analysis (TA). It presents the data elicited from primary sources (through semi-structured interviews). The chapter presents the qualitative data generated and the themes and patterns that arise from it. But it does not engage in extensive data analysis and discussion, leaving that for the next chapter.

Chapter Seven: Data Analysis

Chapter Seven presents the analysis and interpretation of the findings, along with their implications. It discusses issues arising from the interview data, literature review and the

theoretical framework. It critically analyses the data gathered. It operationalises the three theoretical perspectives in the discussion of the findings and draws analytical inferences about how interests and identities shape the development of the AfCFTA.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions, Summary of Findings, Contributions and Recommendations.

Chapter Eight offers a summary of the research findings, restates the study's central arguments, draws conclusions, and provides recommendations for both the research and policy arenas. It discusses the significance of the findings and their contribution to advancing disciplinary scholarship, and it recommends essential themes for future research.

1.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an introduction and background on the AfCFTA. It briefly discussed the historical origins of African integration and the AfCFTA, as well as the central aspects of the AfCFTA Agreement. It briefly explained the role of interests and identities in regional integration, highlighting their relevance to the study of the AfCFTA. The chapter provided the problem statement, highlighting unresolved debates and potential areas for exploration in the study of the AfCFTA. It outlined the study's aim, proposition, objectives, questions, broader issues, significance, scope, limitations, important concepts, and structure. Basically, this chapter provided clarification on the study's orientation. The next chapter provides a literature review, highlighting key insights and debates among scholars on topics such as regionalism, the AfCFTA, and interests and identities.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on regionalism in Africa, the AfCFTA, and the role of interests and identities in shaping regional integration. The chapter explains the purpose and essence of a literature review, lays out the literature search strategy used, reviews the literature on regionalism in a historical context, the AfCFTA's creation, prospects and challenges, and the role of interests and identities in regional integration. This literature review presents summaries and syntheses of scholarly works and debates on the mentioned themes. It shows the direction and scope of scholarly discourse on African regionalism and the AfCFTA. Consequently, this chapter evaluates the relevant literature and identifies knowledge gaps and areas with meagre scholarly discussion and debate regarding the evolution and realisation of the AfCFTA. The chapter explains the study's potential contributions to the scholarship on regional integration and economic development in Africa. It also reveals the apt theoretical framework—theories suitable for presenting, discussing, and analysing results—for the study.

2.2 What is a Literature Review: Definition, Purpose, and Relevance in the Study

A literature review is an evidence-based, comprehensive analysis and critical appraisal of the body of scholarly knowledge on a subject, which is undertaken to determine the state-of-the-art scholarship, detect knowledge gaps, and determine the potential contribution academic research can make to advance and enrich the field (Winchester and Salji, 2016; Hart, 2018). Boote and Beile (2005) state that without a thorough, methodical evaluation of the existing literature, scholarly research cannot produce substantive, rigorous, and pioneering scholarship that generates new insights into a subject. A literature review, therefore, puts research in context by showing established knowledge and the state of scholarly discourse, while identifying deficiencies in scholarly debates and knowledge, including limitations, contradictions, and inconsistencies (Winchester and Salji, 2016). Winchester and Salji (2016:308) also reveal that "a literature review will enable you to identify other research that supports or corroborates your findings as well as results that differ, enabling you to position your research in the field".

Boote and Beile (2005) assert that a literature review also situates existing literature in a broader scholarly and historical context. They assert that it should not only report on claims in the existing literature but also critically examine the research methods used to better assess their merit. Moreover, it allows the author not only to summarise the existing scholarly insights

but also to synthesise them in a way that fosters a new perspective. In this respect, a proper literature review advances conceptual, theoretical, and methodological sophistication (Hart, 2018:13). In sum, conducting a thoroughgoing literature review is critical for clarifying the pedigree, relevance, and usefulness of this study.

2.3 Literature Search Strategy

A multifaceted literature search strategy was used to locate the most relevant articles, books and book chapters. The study accessed several online scholarly resources and databases, including Google Scholar, Sabinet, HeinOnline, ResearchGate, Taylor and Francis, JSTOR, and others. Eke, Omekwu and Agbo (2014) assert that a sound literature search strategy is always needed to ensure the retrieval of the most relevant sources. According to Atkinson and Cipriani (2018), a search strategy is a prerequisite for conducting a literature review. It defines how relevant literature is sought, identifies the sources the researcher intends to search, and determines the keywords used in the literature. A clear, structured literature search strategy ensures that the literature review is thorough, replicable, and largely free of bias. Consequently, this study optimises a search strategy detailed below.

i. The study used keyword and phrase searching to find literature relevant to the research topic and its purpose. Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou (2016) state that keywords enable investigators to locate appropriate sources with precision, reproducibility, and high efficiency. Grewal, Kataria and Dhawan (2016) explain that phrase searching helps researchers find pages that contain the exact words they enter as a phrase, without any intervening words. The study used key phrases and keywords, including inter alia identities, interests, regionalism, regional integration, economic integration, economic development, free trade area, trade liberalisation, and AfCFTA.

ii. The study also used abstract screening and evaluation. Booth, Sutton and Papaioannou (2016) and Hart (2018) explain that reading abstracts enables researchers to quickly assess the relevance of sources, filter sources by quality, and exclude irrelevant sources. Upon finding each source, the study read and analysed the abstracts to determine their suitability for developing the literature review.

iii. The study employed citation searching[7] to find relevant scholarship. According to Briscoe, Bethel, and Rogers (2020) and Haddaway, Grainger, and Gray (2022), citation

[7] According to Haddaway, Grainger, and Gray (2022), "citation chasing is a popular supplementary search method because it helps to build on the work of primary research and review authors. It does so by identifying potentially

(chain) searching is a method of finding relevant literature by reading reference lists in scholarly writings and retrieving the scholarly materials cited as references. This process is executed through bibliographic mining and forward citation searching. Bibliographic mining (backward searching) examines the reference list of an article to identify older articles that influenced it and extracts valuable information from them. Forward citation searching involves examining articles that have cited the known (used) article, enabling the researcher to find state-of-the-art scholarship with newer insights on the topic (Briscoe, Bethel, and Rogers, 2020).

iv. The study used the Boolean search strategy to broaden and narrow search results. Ugwu and Opah (2023) explain that Boolean Operators[8]—namely, the words AND, OR, and NOT— are used to combine keywords to refine search results during literature searching in electronic databases. According to Atkinson and Cipriani (2018), Boolean Operators enable the use of standardised search terms and the combination of free-text terms.

v. The study also applied search filters to focus the literature search and limit search results in the databases. Filters such as the date, study focus, and study type have been utilised. According to Beale (2014), search filters are valuable tools for researchers seeking research-specific study designs or topics because they are time-saving and can provide reliable, citable elements for a literature search strategy.

This strategy enhances the study in several ways. Fundamentally, it ensures a broad coverage of relevant, interdisciplinary literature on regional integration and the AfCFTA, which this literature review requires. The use of phrase searching, Boolean operators, and filters ensures precision by narrowing results to studies that directly align with this study's orientation. Abstract screening helps ensure quality control by excluding irrelevant sources, thereby maintaining the rigour of the literature review. Also, citation searching enhances scholarly depth and ensures that the study draws on recent scholarship. Therefore, this strategy is appropriate for a study of this kind.

relevant studies that might otherwise not be retrieved by other search methods; for example, because they did not use the review authors' search terms in the specified combinations in their titles, abstracts or keywords".

[8] The three words used in the Boolean strategy are written in capital letters to ensure that the search results are about the exact information related to the keywords (Ugwu and Opah, 2023).

2.4 Regional Economic Integration

2.4.1 Concept of Regional Integration

The word region[9] is a fundamental component of regionalism and regional integration. Nye (1968:vii) defines a region as "a limited number of states linked by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence". De Lombaerde and Van Langenhove (2005:1) define regional integration as "a worldwide phenomenon of territorial systems that increases the interactions between their components and creates new forms of organisation, co-existing with traditional forms of state-led organisation at the national level". Regional integration has two dimensions— economic and political integration (Langton, 2024). This study is about economic integration and therefore focuses predominantly on regional economic integration. Balassa (1961) regards regional economic integration as both a process and a state of affairs. As a state of affairs, regional integration is the absence of discrimination across national markets. As a process, regional integration refers to the policy steps taken to eliminate discrimination between the economic units of various countries.

Garba and Alexander (2023) assert that regional integration refers to the economic, political, or social cooperation encompassing trade liberalisation[10] processes, a free flow of capital, and the free movement of people among countries within a specific region. Regional economic integration encompasses both the process of transnational commercial exchange and the process of macroeconomic convergence among countries, creating trade opportunities, gaining access to foreign markets, and offering a safeguard against the breakdown of multilateralism (Biswaro, 2003; Langton, 2024). Economic integration brings together two or more national markets through regional trading pacts (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022).

Scholars Jacob Viner and Bela Balassa offer more encompassing descriptions of regional economic integration. According to Viner (1950), regional economic integration has several dimensions, including tariff and non-tariff barrier elimination, the development of a common external tariff against non-members (of a trade bloc), a free flow of goods and services, transnational factor integration, harmonisation and alignment of monetary policies among members, and adoption of the same currency within an integrating region. Balassa (1961)

[9] In the field of international relations, regions are often defined as a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence. According to Schulz, Söderbaum and Öjendal (2001:5), depending on how 'region' is defined, a regional frontier may very well cut through a particular state's territory, positioning some parts of the state within the emerging region and others outside it.

[10] Trade liberalisation refers to policies and processes that lead to the elimination of trade restrictions, including tariffs, import quotas, and licensing regimes. Trade liberalisation supercharges trade boom and economic prosperity among nations (Diallo, 2024).

explained the five phases of regional economic integration: the creation of free trade areas, the creation of a customs union, the creation of a common market, the creation of an economic and monetary union, and total economic integration. The programmes of regional economic integration in the contemporary world are based on the model explained by Bela Balassa (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022).

2.4.2 The Merits and Demerits of Regional Economic Integration

Many scholars regard regional integration as an enabler of economic growth and development. They note that the increase in regional integration momentum in the second half of the twentieth century bolstered economic development and thus advanced the social and economic well-being of societies (Debrah et al., 2024; Oloruntoba, 2016; Igwe, Ochinanwata and Madichie, 2021). Regional integration serves as a pathway for developing regions to accelerate economic growth, build economies of scale, leverage location and specialisation, improve industrial efficiency, build stronger economic resilience, and bolster their bargaining power in international trade negotiations (Langhammer, 1977; Wapmuk and Ali, 2022). In essence, scholars consider regional integration a vital tool for propelling structural economic change and building strategic advantage in the global economy.

Regional integration creates a favourable economic environment by reducing geographical and transaction barriers, uncertainty, and the adaptation costs companies incur in cross-border commercial transactions (Alday, 2022; Buckley and Hashai, 2020). Well-integrated regions with aligned policies are synonymous with trade efficiency and are more economically attractive to international business than regions that are not integrated (Sapir, 2011). However, some scholars consider regional integration a threat to national culture and sovereignty, particularly when decision-making on significant matters is carried out by officials not directly accountable to citizens, which creates disgruntlement in some member states. They posit that this situation can fuel nationalism, trade protectionism, and populism among member countries (Enderwick and Buckley, 2020).

2.4.3 Free Trade Areas

A great deal of regionalism scholarship shows that free trade areas (FTAs) are the most crucial and commonly followed step of regional economic integration. A free trade area is an introduction and application of trade liberalisation, which ends trade discrimination and boosts intra-regional trade, without the development of a common external tariff against countries outside the trade bloc (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022; Langton, 2024). In creating a free trade area, integrating states engage in tariff elimination to mitigate trade diversion, protect revenue lost

from tariffs, and foster product competitiveness (Schiff and Winters, 2003). Free trade areas among developing countries boost intra-industry trade, unleash industrial development, create lower production costs, and enable the maximisation of economies of scale (Balassa, 1979).

Nevertheless, regionalism scholarship shows that FTAs are not a panacea because they can create new problems. Free trade is not always restriction-free because governments often use the fine print of the Rules of Origin[11] (RoO) to protect their domestic industries from the very competition the free trade agreement was supposed to encourage (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022). While free trade areas are often framed as an unalloyed economic benefit, they sometimes result in trade diversion[12] and structural unemployment, which shows that the gains from trade are rarely distributed equitably across all sectors of society (Handoyo, Sugiharti and Esquivas, 2021; Dutt, Mitra and Ranjan, 2009).

2.5 Pan-Africanism, Independence, and Integration

Historical and scholarly analyses regarding Africa's aspiration for unity and integration reveal that the instillation of pan-African consciousness was propelled by the oppression and degradation of Africans over centuries. The works of scholars such as Okoeguale (2020) and Malisa and Nhengeze (2018) show that the hardships and injustices suffered by Africans throughout history, including subjugation, colonialism, and imperialism, nurtured a hunger for political independence and a desire for unity and integration. They assert that pan-African ideas, promulgated by intellectuals like Marcus Garvey, Henry Sylvester Williams and W.E.B. Du Bois, inspired the realisation that Africans on the continent and across the seas faced unique injustices and discrimination because of their race, and that fighting these tribulations required a giant crusade for liberation. According to Daudu (2019), the growth of Pan-Africanism in the Americas spurred black people's opposition to slavery and exploitation, thereby fostering the desire for African unity and economic development. Spel (2020:998) observes that "Pan-Africanism strongly and emotively sought a political, social and economic stance against imperialism, racism and the defragmentation of the history, identity and land of the African".

[11] Rules of Origin (RoO) are regarded as the passport of a product because they are the criteria used to determine the economic nationality of a good to ensure that trade preferences—like the zero-tariff rates in the AfCFTA—only apply to products that are actually made within the trade bloc (Ornelas and Turner, 2023).

[12] Scholarship shows that beyond administrative complexities, the removal of internal tariffs incentivises member nations to shift procurement from more efficient global suppliers to less efficient producers within the bloc and this this ultimately distorts global resource allocation and diminishes overall economic welfare (Handoyo, Sugiharti and Esquivas, 2021; Yang and Martinez-Zarzoso, 2014).

Scholars postulate that Pan-Africanism[13] was the catalyst for the twentieth-century regionalism in Africa. Scholars Okoeguale (2020) and Malisa and Nhengeze (2018) observe that in the last century, there was a greater incubation of Pan-Africanism, as evidenced by the spread of ideological consciousness, political activism, and conferences outside Africa, driven by advocates of freedom and decolonisation. They note that Pan-Africanism promoted self-definition, self-determination, common purpose, solidarity, and shared destiny in Black communities in Africa and in the diaspora. Okoeguale (2020) states that the growth of Pan-Africanism within Africa, as expressed in the political efforts of Kwame Nkrumah, encouraged the appreciation of intra-African trade as a tool to develop Africa. Bach (2016:77) emphasises the intrinsic nature of Pan-Africanism in African regionalism, stating, "Pan-Africanism is the oldest and most pre-eminent form of expression of African regionalism".

Scholars observe that the realisation of political independence in the twentieth century paved the way for the promulgation of regionalism in Africa. Pasara (2019) asserts that at the heart of the formation of the OAU was the vision to promote regional integration in Africa. A generation of pan-Africanist independence-era leaders, including Haile Selassie, Julius Nyerere, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ahmed Sekou Toure, and Kwame Nkrumah, was instrumental in championing the integration agenda that led to the founding of the OAU (Okafor and Aniche, 2017; Aniche, 2020). Shumba (2023) asserts that the OAU Charter provided a legal basis for establishing the African Economic Community (AEC) as visualised in the Abuja Treaty, as it prescribed coordinating and harmonising economic cooperation and pursuing both sectoral and total integration among OAU member states. However, Daudu (2019) argues that while the OAU was a profound display of pan-African brotherliness and cooperation, its formation and existence did not reflect any firm commitment to continental integration or the creation of the 'United States of Africa'.

Scholarship on Pan-Africanism and African regionalism shows that pan-Africanists espoused different models of regionalism in Africa. As Makinda and Okumu (2008) note, right from the decolonisation era, African states had distinct preferences concerning the undertaking of integration in Africa. According to Carciotto and Agyeman (2017), the Casablanca and Monrovia groups conceptualised Africa's regionalism differently. They detail that the

[13] Pan-Africanism is an ideology and movement that encourages the solidarity of Africans worldwide. It is based on the belief that unity is vital to economic, social and political progress and aims to 'unify and uplift' people of African descent. The ideology asserts that the fates of all African peoples and countries are intertwined. At its core, Pan-Africanism is a belief that African peoples, both on the continent and in the Diaspora, share not merely a common history, but a common destiny (AU ECHO cited in Okoeguale 2020).

Casablanca group, led by Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure, desired an immediate formation of a continental political federation—the United States of Africa. In contrast, the Monrovia group, led by Senegal's Leopold Senghor, defended national sovereignty, emphasised national identities, and a gradualist approach to integration. As Wapmuk and Ali (2022) succinctly state, the Monrovia group advocated for functional cooperation. According to Wolfers (1976), the OAU's concept of regionalism was a gradual, cautious approach that did not threaten the sovereignty of newly independent African states. However, Ngwenya (2011) contends that the colonial legacy and the system that sustains the neocolonial economic relationship between Western Europe and Africa, rather than common history and shared values and vision, have been the basis for Africa's regional integration pursued after the formation of the OAU.

Several studies show that African regional integration is a tool for building self-reliance and advancing economic development. Ngwenya (2011) conveys that the desire for regional integration in Africa was a galvanising force in the struggle for decolonisation and independence. For instance, Mulaudzi (2009) asserts that the All-African Peoples' Conference held in Accra, Ghana, in 1958 underscored the primacy of economic integration to promote African-led development and end the mendicancy that had become the hallmark of Africa's relationship with nations of the West. Hansohm et al. (2005) and Bach (2016) note that since independence, African leaders have acknowledged the importance of regional integration in unleashing Africa's economic potential, spurring its economic development, and resolving African challenges. Regional integration in postcolonial Africa has been considered a good instrument for safeguarding independence and a strategy for enabling internally driven economic development (Mukamunana and Moeti, 2005).

2.6 The Model of Economic Integration Espoused in Postcolonial Africa

2.6.1 The Impact of European Regionalism

African regionalism scholarship portrays that regionalism in postcolonial Africa is inspired and shaped by the success of the European integration project. Bach (2016:81) states, "The EU and its institutions were a major source of inspiration for pan-Africanists throughout the 1990s". He states that "African regional groupings undertook to revise and adjust treaties to emulate the developmental and integrative achievements of the EU" (Bach, 2016: 81). Nubong (2020) explains that the seminal agreements crucial to integration in both regions— the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which created the European Economic Community (EEC), and the 1991 Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (AEC) — have similar orientations. Tools such as the Abuja Treaty and the 2000 Constitutive Act of the African Union advanced a model of

African integration that replicates the EU's (Gottschalk, 2022). Scholarship shows that, as a result of this modelling, the African Union deliberately evolved into a structural imitation of the European Union by developing political, economic, and legal institutions resembling those of the EU (Nubong, 2020; Bach, 2016). In addition, Bach (2016) states that even the regional economic communities in Africa adopted this approach in their pursuit of sub-regional integration.

Scholars also note that, while Africa's regionalism resembles European regionalism significantly, distinct contexts and historical experiences have inevitably created differences between the two experiments (Bach, 2016; Olivier, 2010; Nubong, 2020). Nubong's (2020) scholarly work shows that, unlike the African Union, the European Union has a strong coordination capacity that advances its integrative programmes more effectively and has established sound mechanisms for compensating countries that suffer economic losses due to regional integration. Bach (2016) observes that the mimicry of European integration has not led to greater institutional effectiveness in African regional bodies. Olivier (2010) observes that African integration reflects a complex and non-linear pattern of regionalisation, marked by multiple, non-cumulative trajectories rather than the linear progression associated with European regionalism. He characterises African regionalism as predominantly state-led, developmental and market-based in its policies, practices and institutional arrangements. Thus, scholars show that African regionalism presents a kaleidoscope reflecting both trends associated with European regionalism and distinct features shaped by the African context.

2.6.2 Regional Integration in Africa Post-1980

2.6.2.1 Processes, Policies, and Agreements

Much of the scholarship on African regionalism shows that the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century represented turning points in the cause of Africa's economic integration. Scholars note that the formation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, the adoption of the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa and the Final Act of Lagos in 1980 and the Abuja Treaty of 1991 by a generation of pro-independence leaders were defining moments in the coupling of political independence with economic integration (Okafor and Aniche, 2017; Okeke-Uzodike, 2009). Similarly, Shumba (2023) argues that the OAU Charter and the Lagos Plan of Action—a product of deliberations and joint efforts by the OAU and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa— and its Final Act of Lagos provided a direction for what economic integration on a continental basis in Africa could look like. The *LPA* called for the integration of the continent based on "self-

reliance, self-sustaining, and developmental regionalism" (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022:4). The *LPA* and *FLA* provided a blueprint for advancing endogenous economic development through the regional integration process (Qobo, 2007; Shumba, 2023). In line with this, Okechukwu and Chikata (2018) assert that intergovernmental efforts facilitated by the African Union spur African-led economic development and enable African states to develop policies and programmes without external distortion of their agendas.

Scholars consider the Abuja Treaty the cardinal framework for African regional integration. The Abuja Treaty maps out the path to the AEC through successive phases, namely strengthening RECs and creating new ones; tariff stabilisation and non-tariff barrier elimination; creation of sub-regional FTAs; creation of a customs union; creation of a continent-wide common market; and finally, the creation of a continental economic and monetary union (Bach 2016; Uzodike, 2009; Moyo, 2020). Bach (2016) further notes that the completion of the final stage is supposed to enable the formation of the Pan-African Parliament, an institution designed to ensure the meaningful participation of the peoples of Africa in economic development and continental integration. This model of regionalism was inspired by Bela Balassa's scholarly work on regional economic integration, which lays out successive stages (Moyo, 2020).

According to Hartzenberg (2011), the Abuja Treaty focused on promoting solidarity, self-reliance, and internally driven development. Belijge, Tafesse and Hadaro (2024), Wapmuk and Ali (2022), and Moyo (2020) state that, in line with the Abuja Treaty, regional integration geared towards establishing the AEC is spearheaded by the AU-recognised RECs, which accelerate economic development and regional integration and serve as the pillars of continental economic integration. The RECs coordinate and harmonise member states' trade-related policies and regulations (Mukamunana and Moeti, 2005). These RECs are the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN–SAD), East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022). Chirisa, Mumba, and Dirwai (2014) assert that, despite their flaws, these RECs have helped advance macroeconomic convergence and policy alignment, which are crucial to furthering shared economic prosperity.

Beyond the LPA and the Abuja Treaty, scholars note several other programmes for enabling African integration. Mishra (cited in Chukwu, Agbanike and Anochiwa, 2021) explains that African states engaged in several other integration schemes to advance economic development, including the establishment of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD); (ii) the African Free Trade zone (AFTZ); (iii) the Minimum Integration Programme; (iv) Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT); and (v) the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) agreement. These initiatives have all contributed to the furtherment of development-centred regionalism in Africa (Chukwu, Agbanike and Anochiwa, 2021). Therefore, regionalism in post-colonial Africa is incremental, based on the adoption of policies and programmes that foster sub-regional integration, and geared towards both political and economic continental integration.

2.7 Constraints to Regional Integration in Africa

The literature on African regionalism highlights a range of obstacles that continue to hinder the continent's progress toward effective regional integration. Okafor and Aniche (2017) identify several core issues, including the absence of a shared vision among African states, the domination of smaller markets by larger ones, persistent instability and conflict, and the limited structural transformation of African economies. Similarly, Kimaro, Makokha and Muhenda (2022), as well as Belijge, Tafesse and Hadaro (2024), argue that nationalistic tendencies which prioritise individual state interests over collective goals—alongside the failure of some states to honour multilateral agreements—significantly impede integration efforts. This point is reinforced by Macharia, Nzomo and Shaw (2023) and Qobo (2007), who assert that many African states approach regional integration primarily as a means to achieve national objectives rather than to advance shared continental progress.

Previous studies show that the orientation of African economies, including the lack of economic diversification and dependence on imports for non-primary products, undermines their export capacities and intra-African trade opportunities (Geda and Seid, 2015; Uzodike, 2009). The postcolonial African countries still have primitive economies, supplying primary products to the global economy as they did during the colonial period (Masumbe, 2024; Ngwenya, 2011). Geda and Seid (2015) and Masumbe (2024) argue that this chronic lack of competitiveness and weak productive capacity encumber Africa's ability to leverage trade for transformation. Ogola (2025) and Wapmuk and Ali (2022) argue that underdeveloped, non-complementary production structures and the small size of African economies make trade integration difficult. In essence, Africa's lack of structural economic transformation and competitiveness cripples its trade integration and its position in global commerce.

Several studies note that Africa's fragile political and security environments pose considerable constraints on integration. Okechukwu and Chikata (2018) note that political crises and instability in several African states are responsible for poor intra-African trade performance. Scholars Okafor and Aniche (2017), Aniche (2020) and Qobo (2007) explain that the perpetuation of various conflicts, internal divisions and the reality of political instability in countries such as Somalia, Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Mali, South Sudan, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo are vast impediments to the achievement of meaningful integration on the continent. In addition, Okechukwu and Chikata (2018) argue that African states' attitudes towards opening borders to facilitate trade are shaped by security and political stability concerns, leading to a preoccupation with security threats and a lower momentum for trade integration. These challenges of insecurity and instability compel the RECs to devote significant attention to mitigating conflicts and building peace rather than advancing the regional economic integration mandate that inspired their existence (Jaiyebo and Adetula, 2020).

Scholars regard the lack of political commitment as a crippling factor in Africa's regional integration efforts. This position is affirmed by Jiboku and Okeke-Uzodike (2021), who state that the slow pace of progress and the underachievement of regional integration goals in Africa derive from the absence of political fortitude and determination to champion their realisation. Similarly, Kaydor (2025) and Belijge, Tafesse and Hadaro (2024) argue that, because there is no indication of solid commitments to achieving continent-wide integration, support for regional integration agendas is largely rhetorical and not backed by tangible policy action. In addition, Pasara (2019) notes that bureaucratic inertia and legislative delays in ratifying trade agreements have slowed progress in trade integration. Scholars thus highlight the centrality of deep and strong political will as the basis for the action and sustainable implementation of regional integration policy initiatives in Africa.

Previous scholarship accentuates that weak macroeconomic policy harmonisation derails integration plans. Uzodike (2009) suggests that previous integration schemes undertaken by the RECs yielded undesirable results because of a lack of macroeconomic policy convergence. This view is supported by Habeenzu's (2024) argument that the lack of fiscal and monetary convergence in RECs such as ECOWAS and SADC, a consequence of a lack of political will and overlapping memberships, prevented the RECs from achieving their integration goals. Geda and Seid (2015) identify the reluctance of African states to cede some sovereignty to RECs as a factor that hamstrung macroeconomic convergence among member states. The

UNECA (2019) work recommends pursuing sustained convergence to limit development disparities, foster public accountability, and promote efficiency, thereby ensuring deep integration.

Scholars maintain that weak institutions encumber regional integration in Africa. They explain that differences in preparedness, the lack of institutional capacity, and the failure to enhance efficiency across many key institutions derail regional economic integration (Tavares and Tang, 2011; Nubong, 2020; Ogola, 2025). This view is further elaborated by Hailu's (2014: 318) assertion that a lack of progress derives from "the adoption of unrealistic and unfeasible dates for implementation and lack of institutional architecture of the regional economic communities that have the power, authority and resources to enforce decisions and monitor the implementation of programmes". Therefore, Ogola (2025) suggests that enhancing institutional capacities should be done diligently and consistently to help ensure the progress of integration.

Scholars also identify the colonial legacy as a constraint to African economic integration (Bach, 2016; Ngwenya, 2011). Parashar and Schulz (2021) and Ngwenya (2011) point out that the perpetuation of colonial legacies, the acceptance and maintenance of colonial frontiers, meant to serve the interests of the colonial powers, by the founders of the OAU, laid the basis for the failure of the countries on the continent to achieve successful regional integration. Bach (2016) explains that the legacy of colonial amalgamation policies continues to characterise some regional groupings and profoundly affects popular narratives of regionalism. Adotevi (1997) argues that the pervasive adoration for the colonial design of the African states militates against the engineering of well-planned integration strategies and efficient implementation of integration initiatives. He argues that successful integration in Africa depends on African people's ability to transcend their obstructive obsession with current nation-states and their institutions, and to re-embrace norms of cooperation grounded in cultural values and historical foundations.

Some scholars of African regionalism underscore that externally driven economic structures and integration models have been unhelpful to the integration agenda as they perpetuate dependency. In this respect, Pasara (2019) argues that the international economic system has been harmful to economic integration work in Africa and has unfairly advanced the economic agendas of advanced Western countries. Ngwenya (2011:256) argues that "it is no accident that trade integration that has been religiously espoused by all regional integration organisations has not produced the desired results because it is not based on social and economic

modernisation of pre-colonial structures". Ngwenya (2011) argues that the model of economic integration adopted by African countries has deepened dependence and neo-colonial economic relations with the rest of the world, stifling progress toward structural transformation and modernisation.

Many scholars point to the fact that several African states belong to more than one regional economic community with programmes and priorities that do not always complement each other as a hurdle to integration (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022; Odusote, 2015; Tavares and Tang, 2011). The disadvantages of overlapping membership include duplication of programmes, wasteful use of limited resources, adoption of incongruent integration schemes, and consequent difficulty in policy coordination and alignment (Jiboku and Okeke-Uzodike, 2021; Uzodike, 2009; Okechukwu and Chikata, 2018). Okechukwu and Chikata (2018) thus deduce that, since these multiple economic arrangements weaken programme coordination and trade regime harmonisation, they create uncertainty about the achievability of the AfCFTA. Indeed, Bach (2016) and Tavares and Tang (2011) acknowledge that many countries across multiple RECs lack the wherewithal to meet their financial obligations to these organisations. The scholars' accentuation of overlapping memberships in RECs as the source of difficulty in furthering regional integration and an unanticipated consequence of the sub-regional integration model that has dominated African regionalism and policy initiatives since the 1970s and 1980s.

Scholars suggest that there is a widely shared perception that integration leads to an uneven distribution of gains between small and large economies. According to scholars Geda and Kibret (2008) and Schulz, Söderbaum and Öjendal (2001), the possibility of unequal distribution of benefits and losses weakens the desirability of regional integration among African states. Jiboku and Okeke-Uzodike (2021) and Choramo et al. (2024) note that there is a perception that regional economic hegemons are likely to take the lion's share of the gains, while small economies may suffer significant economic losses. Okeke-Uzodike (2009) and Nubong (2020) point out that the RECs' lack of effective compensation mechanisms has led to this consternation about the detriments of embracing regional integration. Nubong (2020) also clarifies that fears of losing tariff revenue in states that depend heavily on it compound the lack of political will. These scholars emphasise the longstanding belief that the cost-benefit calculus shapes trade integration and thrives when there is a positive-sum game for all actors.

Africa's lack of modern, suitable infrastructure is a major constraint on regional economic integration that scholars highlight (Ogola, 2025). According to Wapmuk and Ali (2022), the

poor condition of the current road, rail, maritime, air, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure required for commercial activities militates against trade growth, economic development, and regional integration in Africa. Similarly, UNECA (cited in Gumede, 2021) found that this poor state of infrastructure and high cost of transportation make conducting intra-African trade difficult, thereby diminishing the potential benefits.

Some studies point out that the lack of broad participation in the development of Africa's integration agenda slows progress. Scholars Pasara (2019) and Mkandawire (2011) contend that previous regional integration efforts lacked momentum due to the underrepresentation of vital political constituencies—such as business and mass movements. Similarly, Okeke-Uzodike (2009) states that regionalism in Africa has largely been a project of the political elite, with African leaders failing to promote it in ways that engage and inspire the broader public. Wapmuk and Ali (2022) support this view, arguing that regional integration initiatives are primarily driven by political leaders and technocrats at the AU and REC levels, with minimal participation from crucial actors, including private-sector stakeholders, civil society, and the general population. This lack of popular support made it difficult for countries to align regional integration goals with their national development strategies. In light of these challenges, Mkandawire (2011) thus recommends that African states avoid a purely technocratic approach to regionalism and instead pursue integration grounded in democratic principles and participation.

2.8 The African Continental Free Trade Area

2.8.1 Objectives and Expectations Underpinning the Establishment of the AfCFTA

The levels of intra-African trade and Africa's share of global trade have been considerably low, and this problem is the main foundation upon which the AfCFTA is built. While Africa's trade performance is dismal, other continents have, over the years, performed far better in trade at both the regional and international levels (Okafor and Aniche, 2017). As explained by UNECA (cited in Wapmuk and Ali (2022)), Africa had low levels of internal trade due to various factors, including poor economic development, overreliance on commodity production and exports, protectionism, poor infrastructure, and insecurity. Hence, scholars agree that the AfCFTA is an opportunity to drive unprecedented trade integration and supercharge economic development on the continent (Okechukwu and Chikata, 2018; Ogbole and Ogochukwu, 2022).

Scholars generally consider the AfCFTA a crucial tool of continual economic integration and development. For instance, Wapmuk and Ali (2022:3) explain that the "main objectives of the

AfCFTA are to create a single continental market for goods and services, complemented by free movement of persons and investments and thus enable the establishment of a continental customs union". Garba and Alexander (2023) and P. Ackon and V. Ackon (2019) point out that the AfCFTA aims to promote trade liberalisation, enable capital mobility, foster sustainable development, boost Africa's economic competitiveness in the global economy, develop regional value chains, and facilitate continental economic integration. Furthermore, Debrah et al. (2024) and Volkov and Konstantinova (2023) state that the AfCFTA has the potential to generate significant revenue for countries and extricate millions of Africans from poverty.

2.8.2 The Potential of the AfCFTA

Scholars regard the AfCFTA as a transformative framework for deepening market integration and fostering a trade boom. Wapmuk and Ali (2022) state that the AfCFTA has the potential to create a continental market with a GDP of USD3.4 trillion, attract investments from external players, and increase intra-African trade by over 50%. They reinforce UNECA and UNCTAD's anticipation that the AfCFTA could enable various kinds of businesses to flourish in an economic environment characterised by policy harmonisation, value addition, greater trade financing, and substantial foreign investments in African economies. Ajewumi, Afolabi and Joe-Akunne (2024) state that the AfCFTA eliminates non-tariff barriers (NTBs) that have persistently hindered cross-border trade, including cumbersome customs regimes, and regulatory and standardisation-related inconsistencies across African states.

Scholars consider the AfCFTA a pathway to economic prosperity in Africa. Volkov and Konstantinova (2023) argue that the AfCFTA's elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers and improvement of requisite infrastructure promise to supercharge intra-African trade and boost Africa's export capacity. P. Ackon and V. Ackon (2019) submit that if carefully implemented, the AfCFTA could empower Africans to make the best use of the continent's natural resource endowments and foster African-led development. Chisaira (2018) asserts that the AfCFTA is an opportunity to shield Africa's businesses from being crushed by more competitive corporations from advanced nations, while helping African consumers buy less expensive products due to the positive effects of trade liberalisation. Jibrilla (2018) states that the AfCFTA's agenda has the potential to empower African youths and women, who dominate informal trade. However, scholars like Kiiza (2025) argue that, given Africa's structural and institutional constraints, the AfCFTA's makers may have been overly optimistic and ambitious regarding its potential benefits.

2.8.3 Challenges to the AfCFTA

Despite the promise of the AfCFTA, scholars highlight several challenges that make it less likely to be as successful as envisioned. Scholars Garba and Alexander (2023) revisit the challenge of overlapping membership, which leads to programme duplication, and argue that the RECs' incongruent programmes could undermine the implementation of the AfCFTA. Gathii (2019) points out that developing uniform trade norms and practices through policy alignment and coordination between the AfCFTA and the RECs could be a cumbersome process. However, the scholarly works of Wapmuk and Ali (2022) and Gumede (2021) negate this proposition, pointing to a silver lining: the AfCFTA has the potential to minimise membership overlap and address the problems created by competing regional trade agreements. Gumede (2021) also notes that this challenge is acknowledged in the AfCFTA treaty and that there are prescriptions for possible solutions. He argues that implementing the agreement would show whether or not the prescriptions were effective.

Some scholars consider the absence of a continental monetary union as a constraint to the AfCFTA's success. Debrah et al. (2024) and van Niekerk (2025) argue that the absence of a common currency and consequent use of many different currencies could negatively affect the successful realisation of the AfCFTA's goals. Garba and Alexander (2023) cite Masson and Pattillo's 2004 study, noting that a monetary union in Africa would enhance intra-African trade, underscoring that the absence of a continental currency union deprives the AfCFTA of the ease and efficiency it requires. However, several scholars do not acknowledge the lack of a single currency as a major constraint to the AfCFTA's implementation.

AfCFTA-specific literature revisits the challenge of infrastructure weaknesses, highlighting that efficient trade and mobility under the AfCFTA are fundamental concerns. Scholars such as Khan (2025) and Garba and Alexander (2023) argue that the infrastructure problem undermines the AfCFTA's viability. This perspective is supported by Wapmuk and Ali (2022) and UNECA (cited in Garba and Alexander, 2023), who established that serious infrastructure deficiencies in Africa mean that AfCFTA's goal of boosting intra-African trade would be pursued under highly unfavourable conditions. Alexander and Garba (2021) suggest that suitable infrastructure is not merely a development indicator but a tool that enables the efficient movement of goods, factors of production, and information, while ensuring that economic activities take place in a favourable environment.

The challenge of Africa's crisis of political instability and insecurity also arises in several scholars' identification of major hurdles to the realisation of the AfCFTA. Garba and Alexander (2023) and Ajewumi, Afolabi, and Joe-Akunne (2024) state that the multifaceted challenges of political instability and insecurity deny the AfCFTA's goals the favourable space they need to be achieved. They opine that the chaos and destruction caused by challenges of political violence, horrendous organised crime, transnational criminal activities, human exploitation, and syndicated crimes will likely make the AfCFTA's implementation very difficult. Ajewumi, Afolabi and Joe-Akunne (2024) assert that instability has the potential to discourage foreign investments and undermine the development of infrastructure needed for regional trade connectivity. Pasara (2019) also points out that governments tend to dedicate less attention to advancing economic integration due to the need to devote more effort to addressing the crisis of conflict and instability. This is the dilemma faced by several African states amid internal political crises in the era of the AfCFTA.

The uneven distribution of economic gains and the potential for anti-AfCFTA backlash are identified as possible constraints on leveraging the AfCFTA (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022; Pasara, 2019). Several scholars argue that the AfCFTA may lead to weaker economies not benefiting as much as the bigger economies, leading to African countries with more advanced economies, like Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa being the biggest winners in the continental market as their firms have an edge over their competitors and may thus flourish while crushing weaker firms (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022; Okafor and Aniche, 2017). Pasara (2019) uses Jacob Viner's postulation of trade creation and trade diversion to argue that the inequitable enjoyment of economic gains between the economically large and more advanced African countries and the economically smaller and landlocked African countries has always undermined trade liberalisation, as the disadvantaged countries adopted protectionist practices in fear of economic losses. Pasara (2019) and Okafor and Aniche (2017) argue that losses in customs revenue, which are essential to several African states, coupled with the uneven distribution of economic welfare gains, may fuel the rise of economic nationalism, leading to a lack of commitment to the AfCFTA among countries facing heavy losses. Hence, Pasara (2019) argues that the AfCFTA should include mechanisms for sharing welfare gains and for avoiding possible resistance from countries that receive considerably smaller gains therefrom.

Scholars suggest the AfCFTA is intrinsically flawed and not very viable because the values of transparency and inclusivity were not upheld during its establishment (Berthelot, 2017; Wapmuk and Ali, 2022). Citing studies by Millstein and Hailu, Garba and Alexander (2023)

explain that state-centrism stifles the potential of the AfCFTA to succeed because important non-state actors are not afforded the right opportunity to influence the trajectory of regionalism in Africa. This point is further clarified by Wapmuk and Ali (2022) and Berthelot (2017), who observe that the AfCFTA's creation had considerable flaws, as non-political players such as civil society, manufacturers, traders, workers, farmers, women, and others were not given a suitable opportunity to contribute to the negotiations. In this regard, Gumede (2021) and Wapmuk and Ali (2022) argue that the general public should be informed about the utility of the AfCFTA and given the opportunity to shape its development to enable its success.

Scholars argue that foreign interests pose a threat to the realisation of the AfCFTA's promise. Berthelot (2017) notes that the AfCFTA faces criticism for being sponsored by First World countries and their neoliberal institutions with the intent of giving them easy access to the integrated African markets. Wapmuk and Ali (2022) assert that some consider the AfCFTA to have the same disadvantages as the Economic Partnership Agreements advocated by the EU and rejected by many countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Wapmuk and Ali (2022) note that there were pertinent fears, including those expressed by the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), that the AfCFTA and its trade liberalisation agenda could put African businesses under unbearable pressure to compete with more successful companies from developed countries. In addition, Garba and Alexander (2023) argue that the lack of human capital development in Africa may mean that entrepreneurial ventures may not flourish, as there may not be sufficient know-how to leverage in the era of the AfCFTA.

2.9 Identities and Interests in International Relations

2.9.1 The Interface of Identities, Interests, and International Politics

The international relations literature, including the scholarship of Wendt (1992) and Onuf (1989), advances the proposition that actors' identities and norms influence international politics. Constructivist scholars such as Wendt (1992), Jepperson et al. (1996), and Alexandrov (2003) highlighted the centrality of identities, arguing that, in international politics, identities shape and create interests. Lebow (2016) explains that identities—which derive from sources such as roles, affiliations, institutions, and biographical narratives—are fundamental forces as they inform behaviour and choices, and that state identities are manifold, situational, and fluid. This position indicates that the actions and choices of actors in international politics are determined by the awareness of their identity (Berenskötter, 2010). In line with this perspective, scholars of global politics, political economy, and regionalism see interdependence between identity, interests, and regionalism (Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000).

Interestingly, this identity-interest-regionalism dynamic is not examined in the existing AfCFTA-specific literature; hence, this study intervenes to interrogate it in the context of the AfCFTA's emergence and orientation.

2.9.2 The Role of Identities in Regional Integration

According to Bach (2016), at the heart of the regionalism process are ideas, philosophies, policy-based frameworks, and visions geared towards creating the circumstances favourable to the creation of a regional entity. Adler (1997) posits that regionalism has a cognitive element that relies on shared identity and perceptions to determine what constitutes a region, whereas Bach (2003) argues that regionalism encompasses identity formation and thus rests on perceptions. Adler-Nissen (2016) argues that social practices play a crucial role in advancing regional integration. In essence, regionalism is about social and cognitive forces grounded in political practice, rather than simply about geographical and market-related aspects (Katzenstein, 2002; Hettne and Söderbaum, 2000). However, much focus is on pan-African norms, the existing literature does not methodically and thoughtfully address several social and cognitive forces that specifically affect the AfCFTA.

The existing literature also shows that regional integration succeeds or fails based on prevailing identities and the extent to which it aligns with them. This point is made by Slocum and Langenhove (2004), who point out that identity-based factors influence integration and the kinds of regional schemes that are embraced and pursued—identities can either boost or undermine regionalism. In his study of European integration and the rise of the EU, Risse (2005) acknowledges variations in national identities and argues that such variations determined the degree of integration. He asserts that a complementary coexistence between European identity and national identity has helped ensure progress in European integration. Cram (2009) also underscores the harmony between identity and regionalism, maintaining that regionalism in Europe neither threatened nor undermined national identities. He adds that it instead reinforced different national identities, as it did in Wales and Scotland. This proposition is contested in regionalism literature. For instance, Macharia, Nzomo and Shaw (2023) assert that nationalism and regionalism cannot coexist and that people therefore abandon their national identities and embrace a supranational identity as regional integration progresses. Indeed, Bach (2003) argues that congruent identities based on historical or cultural ties pave the way for regional integration.

The work of Kaina and Karolewski (2009) indicates that a shared European identity enhances cooperation, mitigates fragmentation and divergence of interests, and fosters friendship among European countries. Using Germany as a case study, Banchoff (1999) argues that Germany's dominant identity as a state that embraced supranationalism in Europe gave it the impetus to champion the actualisation of European integration. Equally, Fligstein, Polyakova, and Sandholtz (2012) assert that the dominance of nationalistic identities and the disinclination of Europeans in countries such as the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Sweden to embrace Europeanness or a more supranational European identity derailed the European project. They point out that the anti-EU forces who perceived integration as a 'kill pill' for national identity were driven by nationalism and sought to undermine European integration.

According to Bach (2016) and Macharia, Nzomo, and Shaw (2023), a nationalistic mindset is predominant and negatively affects African regionalism. Macharia, Nzomo, and Shaw (2023) and Eke and Ani (2017) argue that nationalistic penchants in Africa have been synonymous with the instillation and cementation of ideas that overly prioritise national agendas and thus negate the vision promulgated by pan-Africanists. Macharia, Nzomo, and Shaw (2023) go on to assert that nationalisms in Africa have fuelled divergence among African states, with disputes over territorial frontiers, natural resources, and political systems, hampering cooperation and slowing African integration. Looking at dynamics within the EAC, O'Reilly (2023) argues that economic nationalism—which primarily involves trade protectionism—has undermined integration and the actualisation of the EAC's economic development agenda. On the other hand, Ntalindwa (1997) noted that, in the context of Africa, nationalism was rooted in anti-colonial struggle and Pan-Africanism, and that unity among Africans in different countries could be cultivated, as these ideational identities could coexist. In advancing a similar proposition, Macharia, Nzomo, and Shaw (2023) acknowledge that nationalisms in Africa have also inspired a common commitment to homegrown solutions and cooperation in confronting problems such as socio-economic hardship and conflict. The scholarly debates on the congruence between nationalistic and pan-African agendas do not provide clarity on how nationalism could fuel defensive economic behaviour, weaken legitimacy, and impede the growth of the African economic identity required for the operation and success of the AfCFTA.

The strategic importance of Pan-Africanism is a prominent theme in the literature on African integration. Scholars underscore the centrality of developing a shared pan-African identity to boost integration in Africa (Moyo, 2020; Oloruntoba, 2018). Indeed, Moyo (2020) notes that the colonial frontier lines that define modern African states are used to perpetuate disunity and

discrimination among Africans, thus undermining the progression of regional economic integration. Okechukwu and Chikata (2018) state that divergent loyalties among countries belonging to different regional blocs hinder effective integration. Aniche (2015) argues that a lack of allegiance to broader regionalism leads to a lack of commitment to the work of regional bodies. Remarkably, Moyo (2020) also notes that the scholarly discourse on regional integration in Africa focuses primarily on economic pragmatism and the role of formal players and formal businesses, overlooking identity-related factors. However, in the AfCFTA-specific literature, scholars have neither theorised nor systematically disaggregated this identity variable.

Eke and Ani (2017) argue that ethnic differences are a huge impediment to African integration. As Lead-Link (cited in Mashau, Kone and Mutshaeni, 2015) stated, the African continent is characterised by vast national, racial, tribal, and ethnic differences. When the colonial powers engaged in the Scramble for Africa[14]—bringing colonial control and imperial domination to independent African territories—they imposed national frontiers without meaningfully considering the cultural and tribal composition of these territories (Ali et al., 2019). Mashau, Kone, and Mutshaeni (2015:235) state that this colonial design has been synonymous with cultural and ethnic divisions that undermine national harmony, shared nationhood, and enduring stability; fostering national unity and shared identity has been very cumbersome because the colonial powers bequeathed a legacy of disunity. Moreover, Ali et al. (2019) state that Britain's execution of a 'divide and rule'[15] strategy, which empowered local chiefs to preside over tribe-based administrations in many African colonies, made ethnic identities the centrepiece of social, economic, and political life and, consequently, crushed the development of a common identity. These differences negate the momentum for cooperation and regionalism (Eke and Ani, 2017).

Previous studies consider Africa's language diversity and its implications for social interaction and integration as a constraint to the realisation of the regional integration and the AfCFTA (Garba and Alexander, 2023; S. Folarin, O. Folarin and Olorunyomi, 2015). Garba and

[14] Mpofu (2013) explains that the Scramble for Africa was the rapid colonisation and partitioning of Africa facilitated in the 1884 Berlin Conference. Military force, economic extraction and coercion were used to achieve the purpose of the Scramble. Mpofu argues that the Scramble for Africa was also a historic cultural and epistemic conquest of Africa, and that it has inculcated coloniality in Africa.

[15] The Divide and Rule Strategy employed by the British colonial authorities created ethnic, religious, and linguistic fragmentation of societies in order to cement administrative control and cement the colonial system (Jawad and Shabbir, 2025). This strategy, which was an antithesis of the French assimilation policies, was designed to shield the British colonial authorities from resistance and clashes with the native populations (Christopher, 1998).

Alexander (2023) perceive the ideological, ideational, and cosmological aspects of the language as potentially harmful to forging a common, shared identity among Africans. Similarly, Betek, Fayomi and Agboola (2018) and Eke and Ani (2017) assert that the use of colonial languages, namely English, French, and Portuguese, has limited the emergence of a common identity. S. Folarin, O. Folarin, and Olorunyomi (2015) suggest that, in the context of West Africa, the language-driven identity differences imperilled regional integration. Based on similar insights, Garba and Alexander (2023) conclude that this phenomenon, and the division and conflict it fuels, could undermine the AfCFTA's ability to advance regional integration in Africa. The limited AfCFTA-specific literature, such as Garba and Alexander's work, does not seriously theorise or identify multiple social or normative identities in the AfCFTA context. Also, they do not meaningfully examine how colonial geo-linguistic spheres, such as Francophone and Anglophone blocs, shape popular support and cooperation under the AfCFTA.

2.10 Gaps in The Literature and The Contributions of The Study

The existing literature on the AfCFTA has several gaps. First, the extent to which the AfCFTA represents a break from colonial legacies remains an issue that scholars have not adequately examined. There is an inadequate effort to link the current configuration of the AfCFTA and its protocols to the eradication of the colonial economic legacies in Africa. Also, the current scholarship has not adequately examined the alignment of the AfCFTA's design with the furtherance of endogenous development in both small and large economies in Africa.

The existing literature does not systematically and rigorously examine the roles and interests of multiple players in shaping the AfCFTA's orientation and development. The literature on regionalism worldwide shows the roles of various players, including subnational, national, regional, and external actors, in advancing integration. Therefore, questions about the major players and their interests in the AfCFTA's creation are crucial to determining whether the AfCFTA effectively promotes pan-African interests and sustainable economic development in Africa.

A vast literature across fields like political science, international relations, and regionalism shows that identities and interests are the mainsprings of regional integration. Yet, as seen in the literature, including Alexander (2023) and Volkov and Konstantinova (2023), the discourse on the prospects and challenges of the AfCFTA often overlooks or trivialises identity dynamics. There is a lack of scholarly effort to examine the potential impact of shared and

incompatible political, cultural, social, and economic identities among various players on the initiative's fruition. The meagre focus on how divergent identities or identity-based dichotomies shape economic and political interests to promote or derail the AfCFTA's implementation is another indication of this lacuna. Also, while there has been a focus on the effects of ascriptive identities and normative identities such as Pan-Africanism and nationalism on African regionalism and development, there has been little attention to the impact of other normative social, political, and economic identities on the creation of the AfCFTA.

Several questions about the AfCFTA still need to be asked and debated, including: i. What threat or challenge do distinct national, cultural, political, and regional identities pose for the emergence of a thriving free trade area? ii. To what extent have normative or socially constructed identities influenced the emergence and establishment of the AfCFTA? iii. To what extent is the AfCFTA a meld of economic imperatives and normative ideational orientations? iv. How do the AU and the RECs handle identity dynamics affecting or likely to affect the AfCFTA's implementation? Therefore, there is a need to further examine the possible hybrid nature of the AfCFTA by probing the role of collective, complementary, competing, and incompatible identities and interests in the development and realisation of the scheme.

The use of a three-theory synthesis—Nyerere's development-centred gradualism, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism—bridges African political thought with mainstream international relations theory. This is something the scholarly works on the AfCFTA have not done. This inadequacy means the existing literature does not adequately address the interaction among developmental goals, intergovernmental bargaining, and socially constructed identities in the development of the AfCFTA. Notably, the operationalisation of Nyerere's theory alongside intergovernmentalism and constructivism offers this study a more context-specific model of African integration, characterised by incremental institutional design, intergovernmental bargaining, developmental legitimacy, and identity mobilisation, which Eurocentric perspectives do not adequately capture.

The study leverages primary data and theoretical triangulation to develop a methodological tool that facilitates the generation of new insights and knowledge. The study thus offers a hybrid framework that recognises identities and interests as forces that are integral to the AfCFTA, thereby transcending the economistic thinking pervasive in the current discourse. In essence, unlike previous studies on the AfCFTA, this study reshapes the scholarly discourse

by revealing the identity-interest-integration interface affecting the AfCFTA. It examines the implications of these integral forces for the AfCFTA's viability, implementation, and utility.

2.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a literature review comprising several topics and themes. The chapter started by clarifying the purpose of a literature review and elaborating on a literature search strategy. In terms of the topic-related literature, the study discussed regionalism, free trade areas, the merits and demerits of regional integration, Pan-Africanism, decolonisation, OAU, the impact of the European experiment on African regionalism, the model of regional economic integration in postcolonial Africa, the constraints to regionalism in Africa, and the AfCFTA's purpose, potential, and challenges. The study also discussed the role of identities and interests in international politics and regional integration, the gaps in the current literature, and the potential contributions of this study to the AfCFTA. The next chapter discusses the study's theoretical framework, which comprises Julius Nyerere's theory of regional integration, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism.

CHAPTER THREE
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces and explains the theoretical framework for this study. It discusses three theories and explains the usefulness of each to the pursuit and realisation of the objectives of the study. These theories are Julius Nyerere's model of economic integration, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism. Each section that discusses a theory begins with an explanation and description of the theory and ends with an explanation and description of its relevance to answering research questions and achieving the study's objectives. The chapter ends by highlighting the importance of employing multiple theories in the study and demonstrating how the strengths of each complement and enhance the overall study. This is followed by a conclusion that summarises the chapter's content and key aspects.

3.2 Definition and Purpose of a Theoretical Framework

The concept of a theoretical framework is a product of the words "theory" and "framework" (Molefe, 2014:10). Kerlinger and Lee (2000:11) define a theory as a set of interrelated constructs, explanations, and assumptions that systematically explain phenomena and clarify the relationships among variables, enabling researchers to explain or anticipate phenomena. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014:13), a theoretical framework consists of a theory or theories that underpin the approach to conducting and analysing the study, and the concepts and definitions emanating from those theories that are relevant to the topic being studied. Grant and Osanloo (2014:12) explain that a theoretical framework functions "as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions". They state that it provides a "grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis".

Caliendo and Kyle (cited in Molefe, 2014) state that a well-developed and lucid theoretical framework is what distinguishes scholarly writings from those of the press. A theoretical framework is an essential tool that determines the study's central focus and orientation, fostering clarity and coherence (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). Producing a good dissertation requires the use of a suitable theoretical framework (Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin, 2006). The lack of an appropriate theoretical framework undermines the quality and usefulness of the study (Sarter, 2006). The theoretical framework employed in this study was developed from a combination of three political and international relations theoretical perspectives.

3.3. Nyerere's Theory of Integration

3.3.1 Julius Nyerere's Perspectives on Development, National Self-Reliance and South-South Cooperation

Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had a humanistic and altruistic approach to social and economic life. His perspectives on society, development, and national self-reliance shaped his perspective on African unity, integration, and cooperation. Nyerere viewed society as an extended family and adopted the concept of Ujamaa, meaning familyhood, as a central aspect of his governance in Tanzania (Nyerere, 1968). His Ujamaa philosophy was based on the idea that a human society should strive for shared progress and communalism, as people flourish better in a community. This belief was based on the understanding that historically, African people upheld the values of cooperation, mutual responsibility, and inclusive decision-making. In line with this perspective, Nyerere believed that the hallmark of development was human development, which enhances people's capacities, rather than the accumulation of material gains by an individual (Nyerere, 1966).

However, some scholars critiqued Nyerere's ideas as inadequate. Nsari (1975) suggested that he misread African norms, and Ergas (1980) argued that, while Nyerere promoted voluntary cooperation, his government used coercion to get people to comply with his policies. Nsari (1975) argued that Nyerere overlooked the structural constraints imposed by neocolonialism and promoted rhetorical autonomy, while he could not build structural economic autonomy for Tanzania. Ergas (1980) argued that Nyerere did not pay attention to economic constraints that perpetuated underdevelopment, such as market access and infrastructure challenges. While the study recognises the criticisms of Nyerere's theory made by these scholars, it appropriates elements useful for contemporary Africa.

Julius Nyerere believed that freedom and development are intrinsically linked. He believed that freedom was essential, a moral and universal entitlement for all human beings, and a vital foundation for development (Nyerere, 1966; Degreume and Delanga, 2023). He believed that freedom depends on development and that development depends on freedom, indicating that a thriving human society needs both. Julius Nyerere offered three viewpoints on freedom (Degreume and Delanga, 2023). First, he explained freedom as the Tanzanian people's right and power to exercise for self-determination and self-governance without external interference. Second, he explained it as a life without social and economic deprivation and recognised that the attainment of people-centred development necessitated the eradication of deprivation and the upholding of individual and national freedom. Third, he explained it as the ability of citizens

to enjoy rights and fulfil their citizenship responsibilities, signifying that an engaged citizenry and good governance, characterised by accountability, were vital for people-centred development (Degreume and Delanga, 2023; Nyerere, 1991). In the final analysis, Nyerere's philosophy positions freedom as both the foundation and the ultimate goal of development.

Nyerere believed in and advocated for people-centred development and national self-reliance (Nyerere, 1991). He believed that the pursuit of development should always focus on enhancing people's welfare, be internally driven, and avoid dependence on foreign aid (Nyerere, 1968). He believed that while external players and contributions could help advance people-centred development, endogenous growth was essential to promoting it. In view of historical experiences, including structural adjustment programmes and debt rescheduling negotiations, Nyerere underscored the importance of achieving national self-reliance. He observed that a lack of self-reliance, characterised by dependence on foreign actors for development or viable socio-economic well-being, created a serious vulnerability, as dependent nations had no leverage and could lose some of their self-determination (Nyerere, 1991).

Nyerere acknowledged that this pursuit of national self-reliance would be best achieved through South-South cooperation (Nyerere, 1991). Nyerere recognised the primacy of promoting and leveraging cross-border commerce among the developing countries to advance development and national self-reliance through inter-state and regional planning. He drew lessons from the experiences of developed countries that had established trade-facilitating schemes and recognised that the developing countries could benefit economically from expanding trade among themselves using similar arrangements. Nyerere acknowledged the disadvantage and exclusion from decision-making that developing countries faced as developed countries made decisions about international commerce through platforms like the Group of 7 (G7) and others, without due consideration for their effects on the developing countries' economies and societies. He believed that pursuing this national self-reliance agenda in developing countries required a significant commitment to creating programmes and production methods that help optimise a nation's human and natural resources (Nyerere, 1991).

Nyerere appreciated the importance of African Unity, anti-colonial solidarity, and regional cooperation in the political, cultural, and economic life of African societies. Nyerere believed that the respect for a country's territorial integrity and sovereignty by other countries was important for promoting people-centred development (Nyerere, 1991). He believed that African unity and regional cooperation facilitate the achievement of self-reliance, thereby

reducing dependence on external powers (Nyerere, 1968). Nyerere believed that the success of colonial powers was enabled by the disunity and lack of common purpose among the peoples of Africa, and that united Africans could achieve greater success in the international arena (Nyerere, 1966). While safeguarding Tanzania's sovereignty, Nyerere believed that the long-term unification of Africa was a worthwhile goal, as it could boost development (Nyerere, 1968). He extended the principle of Ujamaa to the East African region and the continent, considering African Unity a reflection of Ujamaa at a continental level. He believed that regional integration enabled African countries to achieve together what they could not achieve alone (Nyerere, 1966). Thus, Nyerere firmly believed in promoting regional cooperation and integration, not out of ideological fanaticism, but because he realised that it favoured economic development and Africa's strategic autonomy.

3.3.2 Nyerere's Conception of Pan-Africanism and Regionalism

Julius Nyerere believed that the best way to achieve continent-wide integration was through the promotion of pan-African ideals and a gradualist model of economic and political integration. Nyerere (1963) argued that Pan-Africanism and the achievement of Africa's political and economic integration at the continental level should be top priorities. Like Kwame Nkrumah, Nyerere had the aspiration for continental unity and integration in Africa (Legum, 1975). In his propositions regarding the integration of Africa, Nyerere (1963) argued that the destiny of Africa must be a United States of Africa,[16] an enduring union that could protect and preserve its development and sovereignty. He believed in achieving African Unity to solve African problems through a unification process similar to that of the United States of America as a political union (Smith, 1973). Nyerere (1963) argued against elevating nationalism at the expense of continental unity, contending that regionalism and nationalism must work together to promote pan-African unity. Degreume and Delanga (2023) state that advancing Nyerere's vision of African unity and integration would enhance regional integration and economic cooperation, thereby cultivating a common African identity.

3.3.3 An Incrementalist Path to Unification and Integration

The promotion of African unity and development was an effort Nyerere considered worthwhile (Chacha, 2002). Nyerere stated that an "indissoluble African unity is the stone bridge which would enable us to carry more easily the economic and social loads which now threaten to

[16] The idea of a United States of Africa was a dream about the formation of a political union with integrated economies advanced and shared by pan-Africanists during and after the struggle against colonialism (Ayittey, 2010).

overwhelm us" (Nyerere, 1963:1). According to Nyerere, pursuing unification must focus on ensuring the optimal use of the continent's resources to build shared economic prosperity and sovereignty (Nyerere, 1963). Nyerere (1963) also believed that good diplomatic relations were necessary in Africa's pursuit of unity and integration. Nyerere believed that African unification would have to be based on the principles of mutual respect, equity, and dialogue (Nyerere, 1963). This way of thinking shaped Nyerere's conception of unification and integration, as he found the top-down approach antithetical to the values of people-centredness and cooperation based on will.

Nyerere believed in promoting unification and integration based on an incrementalist approach – a phased process (Smith, 1973; Agyeman, 1975). Nyerere (1963) suggested that the best path to continental integration was a gradual process involving a loose association of states, the development of sub-regional common markets, and joint economic planning, leading to functional cooperation, regional economic integration, and, ultimately, continent-wide integration. He justified his view by stating that "it will happen that in some parts of Africa a loose association of states, with consultation on matters of mutual interest and the constant exchange of visits, is all that is possible in the first stage" (Nyerere, 1963:4). Nyerere stated that "Many of us in East Africa believe that our best path to unity may be through a regional association. This would bring us some immediate strengthening of our economies at the same time as showing to our people the benefits of unity. A Federation of at least Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika should be comparatively easy to achieve" (Nyerere, 1963:5). Nyerere believed that regional associations were vital in regional economic coordination and served as the best building blocks for continental integration. Accordingly, he co-founded the East African Community, headquartered in Arusha, in 1967, replacing the East African Common Services Organisation formed in the colonial era, to further regional economic integration and boost economic development (Smith, 1973). Therefore, Nyerere shared the vision for a political and economic union achieved through sub-regionalisation. The extent to which Africa's historic policy frameworks, including the Lagos Plan of Action, the Abuja Treaty, and the AfCFTA, resemble the approach Nyerere advanced provides strong validation of that approach.

3.3.4 Nkrumah's Model of Rapid Integration Vs Nyerere's Model of Gradual Integration

Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere held different perspectives regarding the unification and integration of Africa. Nkrumah promulgated rapid continental unification and integration (a political union), while Nyerere preferred the formation of regional intergovernmental

institutions as a prelude to continental unification (Haussler, 2017). In his book *Africa Must Unite*, Nkrumah argued that Africa's economic development had been impeded by colonialism. He argued that the colonial legacy in Africa has been underdevelopment, and that Africa's economic recovery and development would have to be based on a self-help initiative spearheaded by a supranational continental body for them to be successfully achieved (Nkrumah, 1963). Nkrumah (1963:157) argued that the best way to utilise the vast economic potential required the establishment of a "central organization to formulate a comprehensive economic policy for Africa which will embrace the scientific, methodical, and economic planning of our ascent from present poverty into industrial greatness". Nkrumah (1963) argued that a continental political, economic and monetary union would best fulfil Africa's economic aspirations, promote economic development, and enhance Africa's position in the global economy.

Nkrumah argued that, just as the Soviet Union did, an integrated Africa had the potential to function as a viable political union. However, Nyerere considered the process of unification at the sub-regional level as a more realistic and viable path to continental integration (Haussler, 2017; Smith, 1973). Nkrumah was critical of Nyerere's moderate, gradualist approach, believing it could aid the agendas of neo-colonialists and imperialists, whose goal was to keep Africa mired in an endless cycle of economic exploitation (Agyeman, 1975). Nkrumah also believed that relying on small regional organisations, such as the East African Federation that Nyerere had proposed, would lead to the rise of regional loyalties, disunity, and the weakening of continental unity. He believed that this would benefit the agenda of neocolonial powers. Nyerere challenged Nkrumah's approach because he viewed it as ill-conceived and harmful to genuine African unification. He pointed out that a bottom-up approach would have a better long-term impact on advancing continental integration (Agyeman, 1975). According to Haussler (2017), Nyerere also rejected the idea of rapid continental integration due to the Cold War-era ideological divisions that led to disagreements among African countries.

3.3.5 Relevance and Applicability of this Theory

Julius Nyerere's understanding of the connection between Pan-Africanism, self-reliance, people-centred development and freedom best reflects the interests and agendas of many African states and institutions engaged in regional integration and the AfCFTA. The focus on using pan-African unity, solidarity and mutual respect to foster shared economic prosperity through regional integration characterises the approach and way of thinking that many African bodies and states demonstrate in their decision-making. Nyerere's model of integration thus

provides this study with a unique way to explore and understand the factors that create the incentive or shape the prospects of regional integration and the AfCFTA. Nyerere's explanation of the essentials helps indicate what could either enhance or derail the AfCFTA's implementation.

Second, Julius Nyerere's approach is crucial as an explanatory theory because it shows the post-LPA and post-Abuja Treaty evolution of economic integration in Africa, grounded in Pan-Africanism, gradualism, respect for sovereignty, and the eradication of colonial, neocolonial, and imperial legacies. Nyerere's theory explains the economic and political logic behind the formation of free trade arrangements in Africa. Given Nyerere's concern for national sovereignty and bottom-up integration, his theory helps explain the logic behind the current prioritisation of low-level economic integration, which does not include preparation for immediate political and monetary integration. It enables the study to explain and analyse the rationale of the AfCFTA within the context of the postcolonial pan-Africanist agenda, and to assess the significance of the AfCFTA in Africa's development. The theory helps explain how the AfCFTA addresses the colonial and neocolonial legacies, while promoting endogenous development. Indeed, the theory also allows the study to analyse the extent to which the pan-African identity gives the AfCFTA the momentum it needs to succeed.

3.4 Intergovernmentalism (Towards Intergovernmental Cooperation)

3.4.1 Historical Development of Intergovernmentalism as a Theory

Intergovernmentalism emerged in the 1960s as an alternative theoretical approach for explaining regional integration (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019). Stanley Hoffmann propounded intergovernmentalism as a counter-thesis against neofunctionalist claims regarding supranationalism and the decline of the role and power of states in regional integration (Moga, 2009). According to Jarvis (1994), the failure of neo-functionalism to accurately explain the European Community's (EC) work in the 1960s and 1970s prompted the rise of intergovernmentalism. Stanley Hoffman's article *Obstinate or Obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe* was the seminal work in the development of intergovernmentalism as a theory of regional integration in Europe. Hoffmann argued that, as self-interested players, governments engage in intergovernmental initiatives in which they cautiously cede relative competencies on issues such as the economy and welfare to a regional body, without ceding sovereignty and authority over issues of national interest, such as security and foreign policy (Moga, 2009). The theory soon evolved into one of the most widely used theories in the study of regional integration (Moravcsik and Schimmelfennig, 2019).

3.4.2. Intergovernmentalist Propositions on Regional Integration

The intergovernmentalist conception of regional integration holds that "state power must match national interest" and that the "orientation and velocity of regional integration are determined by the interaction of sovereign national states" (Bolaños, 2016:5). The progression or stagnation of regional integration is determined by national interests and the capacity of states to use their influence to shape outcomes (Bolaños, 2016). The intergovernmentalist approach regards integration as a process of bargaining between the executives of sovereign governments, in which common interests determine the pursuit of joint programmes. This occurs in the context of cooperative relations rather than as a result of conformity to supranational arrangements (Mattli, 1999). According to Sweet and Sandholtz (1997), effective intergovernmental processes enable policy coordination among member states by reducing information costs, fostering innovative policy development, and facilitating bargaining. Thus, intergovernmentalism recognises the interests, influence, and centrality of states and national governments in determining regional integration agendas (Uzodike, 2009). The unanimous decisions they make as partners legitimise and boost regional integration, enabling them to preserve their position as the ultimate decision-makers (Moga, 2009).

3.4.3 Intergovernmental Decision-Making and the Role of Hegemons

Intergovernmentalism posits that joint regional agreements are facilitated by the convergence of national interests among sovereign member states, as well as through interstate bargains, in which the more economically powerful nations dominate and influence the making of collective decisions (Moravcsik, 1991). The powerful states and their political leaders, who seek to advance their major interests, exert significant influence on the integration process and on the regional integration agenda. Small states are not the primary drivers of decisions and policies, and they are either compelled to follow the direction chosen by the hegemons or offered incentives by them. This ensures that the integration programmes focus more on the pursuit of priorities that are of greater concern to the leading states (Mattli, 1999:29). Ultimately, the outcomes from the process of bargaining reflect two things: national interests, which are the rationale for the states' engagement in regional processes, and relative power (resources). However, because in democratic societies political executives change over time, state interests change–sometimes this change becomes a turning point for the processes of regional integration (Moravcsik, 1991:27). The small states with less leverage partake in a regional community's initiatives because they recognise the importance of multilateral institutions in the mitigation of the serious internal challenges they face (Uzodike, 2009).

3.4.4 The Centrality of States

"Intergovernmentalism concerns itself with the dominance of sovereign nation states and their subsequent bargaining power. It argues that states are central actors in regional integration, and that they maximize their economic interests in the context of regional interdependence" (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025:88). Intergovernmentalism holds that as principal actors, national governments tend to show more willingness for deepening cooperation in areas such as the economy and welfare, while simultaneously showing unwillingness to give significant decision-making powers to the regional body (Moga, 2009). In his state-centrist assertion, Milward (cited in Hooghe and Marks, 2019) argued that, because the desire for economic gains is at the heart of integration, the participation of state actors in integration programmes actually enhances sovereignty. The intergovernmentalist perspective reflects a cautious, deliberate guarding of sovereignty against the supranational tendencies of the regional organisation (Moravcsik, 1991). Intergovernmentalists challenge the idea that the supranational institutions make binding decisions and exercise formal authority over member states. They instead argue that these institutions are merely instruments for implementing the agreements made during intergovernmental bargaining among member states (Sweet and Sandholtz, 1997). Thus, intergovernmentalists believe that regional institutions simply play a facilitative role in regional programmes (Moga, 2009). Intergovernmentalists view integration as a process driven by growing interdependence, which in turn influences national politics and preference formation. This makes governments engage in intergovernmental bargaining, which ultimately results in some decision-making competencies being given to the regional body (Sweet and Sandholtz, 1997).

Critics of the intergovernmentalist perspective challenge Hoffman's position regarding the primacy of national governments in the trajectory of integration. Moga (2009) states that neofunctionalists such as Sandholtz and Zysman disagreed with Hoffman's perspective. They argued that in the context of Europe's economic integration through the Single European Act (SEA), the European Commission (EC), not the states, initiated and spearheaded the development of the policy framework that created the single market. The EC championed and led the process of its creation and subsequently pushed the states to certify this economic arrangement (Moga, 2009). Wallace (1990) states that institutionally, the SEA represented a historic resurgence of a significantly supranational decision-making authority that had been lost after 1966. However, Moravcsik (1991) explains that the role of leading European powers – Britain, France, and Germany – in the development of the SEA indicates the power and

relevance of intergovernmentalism. Moravcsik (1991) posits that the role of these leading states invalidated neofunctionalist propositions on European integration because the process reflected convergent national interests and did not negate the political wills of these governments.

3.4.5 Liberal Intergovernmentalism

A new kind of intergovernmentalism, known as liberal Intergovernmentalism, has emerged due to the deficiencies in the original intergovernmentalist theory. Mattli (1999:29) notes that, by not clearly explaining the complexities and causal factors that lead to interstate bargaining and the challenges that undermine the success of integration initiatives, the theory offers a simplistic conception of intergovernmental cooperation, making integration difficult to understand. These inadequacies led to the expansion of the theory, which has since become known as liberal intergovernmentalism, as scholars sought to enhance its relevance in the integration discourse (Mattli, 1999). Conceptualised in the early 1990s, liberal intergovernmentalism views "nation states as key actors in the integration process, entities that have roles to play alongside transnational and supranational actors in determining regional integration outcomes" (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025:88).

New intergovernmentalist propositions, however, have placed greater emphasis on the importance of international political economy in intergovernmental bargaining and have opposed initial arguments about the zero-sum nature of intergovernmental bargaining and cooperation (Hooghe and Marks, 2019:1115). In this stream—liberal intergovernmentalism—the central thesis is that integration is "a process of inter-state bargaining in which governments are chiefly motivated by economic preferences rather than by geopolitics or ideology" (Hooghe and Marks, 2019:3). Moravcsik (cited in Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter, 2015:707) asserts that liberal intergovernmentalism "has focused on domestic interest groups and has attempted to systemize the role played by socioeconomic interests, individual leaders and political ideology". These intergovernmentalists argue that in interstate cooperation characterised by economic interdependence, participating states enjoy considerable economic benefits. They argue that heads of government negotiate regional cooperation agreements to advance economic interests (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). These economic interests include "the commercial interests of powerful economic producers and secondarily the macroeconomic preferences of ruling governmental coalitions" (Hooghe and Marks, 2019:3).

Liberal intergovernmentalism is based on the idea that states act based on rationalist considerations. It assumes that national governments understand societal needs and turn those

needs into actionable priorities that political leaders strive to fulfil. These leaders employ bargaining to advance their interests and resolve disputes in the international arena (Caporaso, 1998). Thus, integration is explained by focusing on three areas: (i) the national-level creation of preferences (economic and issue-specific interests), which are influenced by domestic interest groups like corporations, (ii) the processes of bargaining between national governments, and (iii) the formation of regional institutions for facilitating cooperation (Hooghe and Marks, 2019). In the bargaining process, which is often significantly influenced by interest groups, states consistently act based on a cost-benefit calculus—seeking the best opportunities for themselves and avoiding situations that could have detrimental effects on them (Caporaso, 1998). For instance, the trade and commercial benefits of European regional integration were a vital incentive that made many states support and engage in the process (Hooghe and Marks, 2009).

3.4.6 Relevance and Applicability to the Study

The use of intergovernmentalism in this study helps explain the role of national interests, sovereign states, and hegemons in the evolution and establishment of the AfCFTA. Thus, the theory enables the study to explain the major state players and their agendas in the development of the AfCFTA. It enables the study to examine the role of converging national interests, such as economic prosperity, economic self-sufficiency, and economic and social development, in the establishment of the AfCFTA. Given the AU Summit of Heads of State and Government's role in Africa's programmes of economic cooperation and integration, it is essential to examine the centrality and interests of African governments in the development of the AfCFTA. Recognising that, like most AU and REC programmes, AfCFTA is fundamentally an intergovernmental programme, the use of intergovernmentalism in this study is crucial. The AU and the RECs do not have any significant supranational authority; their programmes are an expression of intergovernmental cooperation and converging interests. Notably, even as the AfCFTA is being implemented, African states continue to retain full decision-making authority regarding trade and customs policies. In essence, the institutional design of the AfCFTA and the character of regional integration in Africa align more with intergovernmentalism.

The theory also explains the role, influence, and bargaining power of regional hegemons in shaping the AfCFTA. It explains the leverage they have in shaping the AfCFTA's emergence and the rational actions they have undertaken to do so. The role of Africa's regional hegemons, including South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Egypt, and the implications thereof in the development and implementation of the AfCFTA, is something the current AfCFTA literature

does not adequately address. The use of intergovernmentalism helps explain the role, behaviour, and ambitions of these states in the development of the AfCFTA. The theory also enables the study to explain the behaviour of African states and the slow implementation and conclusion of the AfCFTA, including behaviours of states like Nigeria and Eritrea, whose publicly known hesitations have been linked to the protection of their domestic industries.

3.5 Social Constructivism

3.5.1 The Historical Development of Social Constructivism

Social constructivism (also known as constructivism) was explicitly introduced in the scholarship of IR "in the late 1980s" (Eriksson and Giacomello, 2006:232). In the theoretical debate that ensued in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some IR theorists, who identified as postpositivists and reflexivists, challenged the rigid empiricism (positivism) cherished by scientists, opposed the negation of norms and values in studying IR, and promulgated the use of reflection and reason to explain international politics (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). The term constructivism, however, was coined by Nicholas Onuf in his 1989 book, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations* (Onuf, 2014). No theorist in international relations scholarship is regarded as the sole originator of constructivism, as the contributions of various scholars propelled its emergence (Peltonen, 2017). This makes the constructivist propositions manifold, shaped by diverse insights and strong analytical utility. This allows it to have multiple elements of social reality, including norms, identities, and interests (Eriksson and Giacomello, 2006; Peltonen, 2017).

Postpositivists rejected the focus on discovering facts through observation and the idea of objective reality, considering that language is subjective. They argued that a sound theory capable of explaining phenomena well should come from insight and imagination (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). Positivists argued that since the truth cannot be established empirically, nobody has a credible (truthful) view. This debate culminated in the emergence of the constructivist theory of IR. According to Mansbach and Taylor (2012), constructivism emerged from discontent with realism and liberalism and with the preponderant influence of scientific methodology in IR scholarship. Constructivists sought to bring together empiricists and positivists and claimed that people's behaviour is determined intrinsically by their perceptions of the world and reality.

Various scholarly contributions to the emergence of the constructivist thinking were made by thinkers like Karl Deutsch, Ernst Haas and Hedley Bull; Richard Snyder, Henry Bruck, Burton

Sapin, Robert Jervis, Ned Lebow, John Ruggie, Friedrich Kratochwil, Richard Ashley, Rob Walker, Spike Peterson, and Ann Tickner (Wendt, 1999). Onuf's perspective introduced "a cross-disciplinary and agent-structure-integration approach" to IR scholarship and holds that a pre-social anarchy does not exist as such whenever agents act; "they have to draw on practice-based rules of the game, including past experience, habits, and more or less mechanical routines" (Wind, 2005:255**).** In his *Social Theory of International Politics*, Alexander Wendt, another scholar in the constructivist tradition, contested realism's and liberalism's claims that it is materialist or individualist orientations that shape state behaviour. Wendt focused heavily on the role of shared ideas and norms in influencing a state actor's behaviour (Wendt, 1999). Many constructivists emphasise the role of subjective factors, such as norms, ideas, and values, in shaping state behaviour (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012).

3.5.2 The Role of Identities, Norms, and Interests in International Politics

Contrary to the realist and liberal assumptions that identities and interests are rigid, constructivism views the development of identities as a dynamic process and interests as being transmitted through experience. Identities and interests evolve over time as interactions happen (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). Indeed, Eriksson and Giacomello (2006) elucidate this point by stating that constructivists argue that since social reality is characterised by its susceptibility to change, interests and identities cannot be perceived as static but should be viewed as continually produced and reproduced. As a result, constructivists seek to understand the way norms develop, the way identities are acquired by the actors, and the way identities foster the actors' knowledge of their interests. They argue that shared ideas and norms influence the production of identities and interests, and that actors are likely to pursue a common agenda based on the evolving beliefs or norms (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). According to Hopf (1998), an actor's identity influences its interests, preferences, and resultant behaviour, and the preferences of other actors are shaped by how the actor is perceived. In international politics, identities play a crucial role in determining interests and courses of action. While constructivism and neorealism both assume that preference is based on interest, constructivism critiques and contests the neorealist proposition that states have inherently fixed (national) interests and argues that states' identities are a variable that is determined mainly by circumstances of historical, cultural, political, and social nature (Hopf, 1998:176).

Constructivists argue that social forces, including ideas, understanding, norms, and rules, shape a state's identity and interests, as well as the orientation in international politics (Baylis, Smith, and Owens, 2011). "In contrast to other theoretical approaches, social constructivism presents

a model of international interaction that explores the normative influence of fundamental institutional structures and the connection between normative changes and state identity and interests" (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2002:50-51). The focus on making and remaking international politics highlights constructivism's interest in global change. Different schools of thought within the constructivist theory have a shared interest in how ideas shape the structure of international politics, the way the structure shapes identities, interests, and states' foreign policies, and the way state and non-state actors reproduce or transform the structure (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2011).

According to Mansbach and Taylor (2012), realism and liberalism suggest that actors decide and take courses of action using the logic of consequences, while constructivism suggests that actors decide and take courses of action based on the logic of appropriateness (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). According to Baylis, Smith, and Owens (2011:155),

> "The logic of consequences attributes action to the anticipated costs and benefits, mindful that other actors are doing just the same. The logic of appropriateness, however, highlights how actors are rule-followers, concerned with whether their actions are legitimate. The two logics are not necessarily distinct or competing. What is viewed as appropriate and legitimate can affect the possible costs of different actions; the more illegitimate a course of action appears to be, the higher the potential cost for those who proceed on their own".

Griffiths and O'Callaghan (2002) argue that state and non-state actors reproduce and reshape institutions and that institutions and actors are mutually conditioning forces. Constructivists argue that international institutions perform regulative and constitutive roles. Regulative norms create foundational guidelines for acceptable conduct, while constitutive norms define and explain behaviour. Since institutions reflect these two roles, they influence, limit, and explain a state's behaviour. Constructivists place great emphasis on the most vital societal institutions, including international law, diplomatic processes, and national sovereignty. Constructivists also argue that regimes reinforce these constitutive and regulative functions by enabling the creation of a social context that makes actors' behaviour meaningful and understandable (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2002).

According to Hopf (1998:176), who views interests as a central variable, "constructivism explores not only how particular interests come to be, but also why many interests do not". Interests, Hopf notes, only exist in situations where there is reason for them, and they do not

exist where there is no rationale for them, where there is no promise of immense benefits. Constructivism also makes assumptions about what the absence of interests means. Hopf (1998:176) states, "just as identities and interests are produced through social practices, missing interests are understood by constructivists as produced absences, omissions that are the understandable product of social practices and structure". The social norms that shape an identity cannot lead to interests that are incongruent with the practices and structure that shape it. This line of reasoning indicates that actors have many options concerning the best course of action and that the ultimate choice is strongly influenced by shared meanings and practices within their historical context (Hopf, 1998:176). Griffiths and O'Callaghan state that the state's corporate identity propels it to pursue basic goals like security, stability, recognition, and economic development. The country's self-perception vis-à-vis other nations determines how it pursues its objectives. The state's self-identity determines how it defines its national interests (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2002:51).

3.5.3 The Agent-Structure Problem

In their proposition regarding the agent-structure problem, constructivists contend that it is not structural factors but the identities and intentions of actors that shape their behaviour (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). The introduction of this line of reasoning in the constructivist conceptualisation of international relations is the work of Alexander Wendt in 1987 (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2011:152). While the neorealists argue that structural factors, like the anarchic nature of the international system and the "global distribution of military capabilities", determine the actors' behaviour, constructivists argue that identities and norms determine the constitution and reconstitution of the structures within the system (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012:23). Wendt argued that structures do not just constrain agents, but that they also form and shape their identities and interests (Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2011). In his world-systems theory, Immanuel Wallerstein proposed another formulation, stating that the pro-capitalist structure of the global system determines the formation of state identities and the actions states take in the international environment (Baylis, Smith, and Owens, 2011).

According to constructivists, when leaders regard states as crucial parts of the global system, they tend to approach pressing global challenges through state-led efforts (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). However, when states deem other actors, including international institutions, as important for addressing global issues, they tend to consolidate the competencies and functions of these non-state actors to lead global efforts. Constructivists argue that serious phenomena, such as dreadful wars, influence states' orientations and interests and, therefore, how they

engage in international relations (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012). Therefore, if actors exhibit behaviour that fosters goodwill and peace, others will reciprocate when they interact with them, thereby cultivating a diplomatic context among them (Wendt, 1992).

By arguing that the beliefs of political leaders, the conduct of governments, and the decisions made in the context of structural factors, such as anarchy and the distribution of power, determine global politics, the constructivist debate concerning the agent-structure problem boils down to the individual, unit, and global levels of analysis. Constructivists rebut the claim coming from neorealist and neoliberal schools of thought that anarchy creates a self-help system. They argue that the anarchic reality of the global system does not inevitably generate the self-help problem and that, when actors interact reciprocally, they build solid social structures capable of shaping how they identify and what they want. In this context, factors like human nature, national politics, and historical wrongs may underpin a state's aggression, posing a threat that prompts other states to engage in self-help behaviour (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012).

3.5.4 The Downside of Constructivism as A Theory

Griffiths and O'Callaghan (2002) state that, as a theory, constructivism is difficult to employ. They argue that social constructivism does not predict specific social structures that control state behaviour. Instead, the theory requires an examination, articulation, and understanding of social relationships to enable the prediction of state behaviour (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2002). Since constructivism has a social construction, its evolution has not followed a specific theoretical development model. A key part of constructivist scholarship is the diversity of perspectives on how the theory became part of mainstream IR. Therefore, no single interpretation dominates how the theory is understood in IR (Peltonen, 2017). As a result, different constructivist approaches still exist because there is no scholarly consensus regarding the actual paradigm constructivism represents (Barkin, 2003). In critiquing the theoretical rigour of constructivism as a theory of international relations, Baylis, Smith, and Owens (2011) argue that part of the problem is that it is a social rather than a substantive perspective on international relations. According to Nugroho (2008), a criticism of constructivism from scholars is that it is more of a method than a substantive theory of international politics. Nevertheless, constructivism remains acknowledged and used as an essential theoretical perspective in international politics and the social sciences.

3.5.5 Relevance and Applicability of the Theory

Given that identities and interests are the hallmarks of social constructivism, the study uses the constructivist theory to explain the role of shared, complementary, and competing identities and interests in the development of the AfCFTA. This fosters an analysis of the identity dynamics in the development and future of the AfCFTA, a gap in current scholarly discourse on the AfCFTA. The theory is used to understand the importance and influence of social forces, such as identities, norms, ideologies, perceptions, and historical legacies, in shaping the development of the AfCFTA. The use of constructivism enables the study to explain how identities and interests shape the AfCFTA's emergence, evolution and implementation. It enables the study to examine how narratives regarding Pan-Africanism and African unity shape the formation of interests around common identity.

3.6 Rationale for A Theory Synthesis and Consolidated Theoretical Framework

Reliance on a single theory would have led the study to overlook various factors and realities pertinent to the discourse on the AfCFTA. Therefore, the use of these three theories creates a synthesis and synergy that foster rigour and novelty in the analysis of the AfCFTA. Nyerere's theory helps explain the pan-African underpinnings and the gradualist logic of African integration and the AfCFTA. It helps show the socio-economic logic and utility of the AfCFTA as a pan-Africanist programme. The use of intergovernmentalism enables the study to explain the importance of national interests, regional hegemons, and intergovernmental bargaining in the emergence and establishment of the AfCFTA. The application of social constructivism helps illustrate the identity dynamics surrounding the creation, implementation, and future of the AfCFTA.

The longstanding mainstream theories of regional integration have a Western socio-cultural, political, and economic pedigree, as they were developed to explain integration initiatives and the drivers thereof in Europe and later in North America. This poses the question of contextual relevance in their application in the analysis of African regional integration, which has its own historical, social, cultural, political, and economic foundations. This fact suggests that Eurocentric theoretical approaches may be deficient and thus inadequate for analysing Africa's regional integration experiment. This, in essence, makes the inclusion of the constructivist perspective and Nyerere's pan-Africanist and Afro-centric gradualist model of integration suitable for constructing a rigorous theoretical framework.

In the end, these theories complement each other. Nyerere's theory helps explain the economic and African foundations of the AfCFTA. Intergovernmentalism helps explain the convergence

and interface of state-centric dynamics in the AfCFTA. Social constructivism offers insights into the ideational complexity of AfCFTA-related processes and how African states can leverage ideational social and political dynamics to advance the AfCFTA's progress. Ultimately, this creates a situation in which the explanation and analysis reflect a grasp of regional economic integration under Nyerere's (pan-African) gradualism, as well as the intergovernmental dynamics or interests shaped by shared or incompatible identities. By leveraging the strengths of each theory, this study mitigates the analytical challenges posed by their inherent weaknesses.

3.7 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this chapter provided a detailed explanation of the study's theoretical framework and the theoretical and conceptual relevance of each theory to the study. It explained three theories, which are Nyerere's gradualist perspective on regional integration, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism. It explained how and why each of these theories best aligns with the title and objectives of this study. The chapter explained the strengths and weaknesses of each theory and how the combination of the three fosters rigour and conceptual depth. It explained how these theories complement each other in pursuit of the objectives of this study. The chapter explained the importance and value of leveraging this theoretical synthesis in the discussion and analysis. The next chapter focuses on the methodology that aligns well with this theoretical framework and the objectives of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explains and describes the research methodology for the study. Given the importance of research methodology in academic research, this study's methodology comprises several components that explain and justify the research design, data collection, and data analysis. Therefore, this chapter defines research and the research methodology, explains the type of research that has been undertaken, the qualitative nature of the research, the kind of qualitative research tradition the study followed, the process and instruments of data collection, the process and techniques of data analysis, ethical imperatives, and the limitations and delimitations of the study. In essence, this chapter creates a clear picture of the research process by addressing the what, who, why, where, when, and how of the methodological process adopted for the study.

4.2 Defining Research

Goundar (2012) defines research as a process of collection, analysis, and interpretation of information to address questions. Rajasekar, Philominathan, and Chinnathambi (2006) define research as an act of logically and systematically seeking new and valuable information regarding a topic using probing words—how and what. They elaborate that research is a process of enquiry geared towards uncovering hidden facts and solving scientific and social problems through objective and systematic analysis. Through research, a researcher gathers information from a variety of sources, including experience, people, books, journals, and nature. The goal of research is to expand the frontiers of existing knowledge and to advance a scholarly area of study. Goundar (2012:5) states that research must be "controlled, rigorous, systematic, valid, verifiable, empirical and critical" to ensure it meets the established benchmarks.

Scholarly research requires considerable work and a methodical process that leads to the discovery, interpretation, or revision of facts, events, behaviours, and theories (Rajasekar, Philominathan and Chinnathambi, 2006). It is an exercise carried out through studying, experimenting, observing, analysing, comparing, and reasoning. It is conducted for, among others, the discovery of new facts, verification and testing of crucial facts, analysis of realities, processes and phenomena to establish a cause-and-effect relationship, creation of new scientific techniques, conceptual and theoretical tools for resolving and understanding

scientific and non-scientific problems, and to find a resolution to scientific, non-scientific and social problems (Rajasekar, Philominathan and Chinnathambi, 2006).

4.3 Research Methodology Explained

Goundar (2012:13) defines research methodology as "a collective term for the structured process of conducting research". Kothari (2004) describes it as a systematic and logical way of addressing an identified research problem. Research methodology includes research design, as well as the collection and analysis of data (Creswell, 2009; Goundar, 2012). It attempts to clarify the basis for undertaking a study, the way the research problem is explained, the rationale and manner of designing the hypothesis, the kinds of data collected, the methods used, the reasons for using a particular data analysis technique, and several other related questions. Research methodologies are typically used in scholarly research to test hypotheses or theories (Goundar, 2012). While it is ideal to use both qualitative and quantitative methods, constraints such as time and money make it impossible to do so at times (Goundar, 2012).

An intrinsic aspect of research methodology is the study design, which focuses on the way the research is carried out (Goundar, 2012; Creswell, 2009). The study design encompasses research conducted through the administration of questionnaires, interviews, observation, and experimentation. Since conducting objective, representative studies is not easy due to small sample sizes, it is essential for researchers to have a thorough understanding of the research methodologies they are using and their limitations (Goundar, 2012).

4.4 Research Methods

Research methods are specific procedures, techniques, and tools for data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2009). According to Goundar (2012:5), "Research methods help us collect samples and data and find a solution to a problem". Research methods can be categorised into three main types: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches (Mwange et al., 2023). Research methods enable researchers to systematically gather evidence and provide practical tools for data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016).

4.5 Types of Research: Primary and Secondary Research

This study has been undertaken as primary research. As Driscoll (2011) states, primary research empowers a researcher to directly explore and develop a verifiable and objective understanding of a phenomenon with considerable authenticity through observation, interviews, and surveys. According to Hewson (2006), primary research refers to generating new data to address a research question through direct or indirect methods. Direct methods, such as interviews, and

indirect methods, such as observation, are used, and data are gathered solely for the study being undertaken and have never been used in another study. Undertaking primary research involves phases such as the research question formulation, selection of a research design, selection of a suitable method, administration of data collection methods, data analysis, and interpretation of the research results in line with the foundational research question. According to Driscoll (2011), the main purpose of primary research is the production of knowledge about something new, whose veracity can be verified to minimise any bias. According to Stewart and Kamins (1993), the researcher must determine the study design, data gathering process, data analysis process, and draw conclusions. Conducting this study as primary research allowed it to obtain original qualitative data, which were subjected to rigorous scrutiny and interpretation.

According to Winberg (1997), secondary research is a study that is conducted when a researcher does not directly interact with or relate to the researched. A researcher relies on and synthesises information from sources such as reports and documents to advance their study. Through the use of literature reviews, individuals engaged in primary research can greatly benefit from existing secondary research (Winberg, 1997). One of the benefits of secondary research is that, like primary research, it can help identify and highlight issues that still require further scholarly investigation. Its information can help give those engaged in primary research a good point of departure, thereby making their work less difficult (Stewart and Kamins, 1993). This type of research was not preferred for this project because it was necessary to elicit original data on the identities and interests shaping the development of the AfCFTA from those involved in its development or implementation, as well as from those conducting research on regional economic integration in Africa.

4.6 Research Study Design

4.6.1 Research Design Defined

A research design is a plan of action encompassing the various steps needed to achieve the study's objectives and serves as a roadmap for the study. It is a plan designed for data collection and analysis**.** This plan enables the study to accomplish its goals and helps the researcher to actualise the fruition of the study (Hassan and Khairuldin, 2020). This study follows a case study design.

4.6.2 Case Study Design

This study primarily adopts a case study approach, focusing on the AfCFTA as a specific case and seeking to understand how contextual factors (identities and interests) influence its

development. According to Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1991), the case study approach is useful for conducting in-depth studies. Case studies are used to elicit important information reflecting participants' views, using several data sources. Case studies are typically selective, focusing on a few key issues crucial to understanding the system under examination (Tellis, 1997). Case studies involve multi-perspective analyses, meaning that the investigator takes into account the viewpoints of the main players and those of other relevant secondary players and the interaction between players (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, 1991). Case studies use triangulation and are thus known as a triangulated search strategy (Tellis, 1997). Triangulation comprises the protocols that are used to enhance accuracy and alternative narratives (Stake, 1995).

In research, there is data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation (Snowden and Anderson cited in Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg, 1991). In case studies, multiple sources (source triangulation) are used to establish and check research validity (Yin, 1993). The case study approach uses several primary sources of evidence, including documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artefacts (Yin, 1993). While using all these sources is not always required, the use of multiple sources is highly beneficial for enhancing the reliability of the study (Stake and Yin cited in Tellis 1997). Yin (1993) identified three types of case studies: exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. Indeed, this study has, in different parts, the three elements of case studies that Yin mentioned.

4.6.3 Purposes (Goals) of Qualitative Research

4.6.3.1 Explanatory Research

Explanatory research seeks to locate the origin of a phenomenon, establish the causes, test theories, and explain why something occurs (Neuman, 2014). Goundar (2012) states that this kind of research seeks to clarify the cause and nature of a relationship between two or more aspects of a situation (reality) or phenomenon. Explanatory research identifies the reasons behind certain occurrences and suggests steps that can be taken to address a problem (Hart, 1998:47). Explanatory research utilises exploratory and descriptive research to conduct further enquiries. This kind of research usually engages in theory-testing or evaluates its ability to explain phenomena (Neuman, 2014). The main purpose of this study is to examine how two variables, identities and interests, influence the development of the AfCFTA, a programme for regional integration and economic development. Thus, by examining the underlying enablers

of the AfCFTA, the study seeks to understand a causal relationship. This makes the research explanatory.

4.6.3.2 Descriptive Research

Descriptive research is a kind of research that offers a systematic description of phenomena and attempts "to understand a common and uncommon social phenomenon by observing the detail of the elements that make it a phenomenon to provide an empirical basis for a valid argument" (Hart, 1998:47). The investigator's basic familiarity with the subject of investigation is crucial. Descriptive research expands and enhances people's understanding of a phenomenon and tends to operationalise several techniques for gathering data, including field research, surveys, content analysis, and historical-comparative research. This kind of research represents a considerable proportion of social science research in scholarly journals, and it is utilised in policy planning (Neuman, 2014). Elements of descriptive research are part of this study because the effort to understand how identities and interests shape the AfCFTA necessitates describing the identities and interests of different players; this, in turn, creates a picture of the forces and factors shaping the AfCFTA's formation.

4.6.3.3 Exploratory Research

Exploratory research attempts to investigate a new phenomenon or a phenomenon that has not been previously evaluated. Exploratory research utilises vast amounts of qualitative data, is not dependent on a single theory, and can be modified (Neuman, 2014). This kind of research seeks to determine the need for, or the possibility of, future enquiry by highlighting themes or issues that warrant in-depth study. However, this kind of research may lack a broad scope and may have an informal structure (Hart, 1998). This study is not primarily exploratory in its focus, but questions concerning the rationale of the AfCFTA are exploratory. Additionally, given that the AfCFTA is a relatively new initiative being implemented, the flexible nature of the study enabled it to uncover identities and interests that were neither anticipated nor initially considered.

4.7 Research Paradigms

4.7.1 Explanation of Research Paradigm

A research paradigm is the overall worldview or belief system that a researcher uses to understand and study reality, and directs how a person conducts their research (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017; Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). A research paradigm guides what you study, how you study it, and how you interpret data—it determines the approach, methods, and data analysis (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). In qualitative research, interpretivism is a dominant

paradigm (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). According to Lincoln and Guba (cited in Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017), a paradigm has four interrelated components or assumptions, which are epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology. Ontology is concerned with what is believed about the nature of being or reality, and helps researchers examine their underlying beliefs or assumptions about reality or existence. Epistemology is concerned with how knowledge is acquired and how researchers get to know the truth or reality. Axiology is about the ethics and values that researchers pay attention to when undertaking research, and determines how a researcher assesses and knows what is ethical or unethical when undertaking research (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017).

4.7.2 Quantitative Methods, Qualitative Methods, Mixed Methods Approaches

Scholarly research employs a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach. Quantitative research involves measurement and the numerical representation of data. It is non-descriptive, statistical, and conclusive, and it uses tables and graphs (Rajasekar, Philominathan, and Chinnathambi, 2006). Qualitative research is non-numerical, descriptive, and explanatory in nature. It uses words and seeks the meaning, feeling, and description of the situation (Rajasekar, Philominathan, and Chinnathambi, 2006). Mixed-methods research combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods in a study to ensure a thorough understanding of a phenomenon. As Marshall (1996) states, it is the research questions, and not the researcher's preference, that determine the most suitable approach for a study. Since this study aimed to understand how the identities and interests of different players influence the development of the AfCFTA, a qualitative method was more suitable for this study; therefore, this study adopted a qualitative approach.

As explained by Bekhet and Zauszniewski (2012), a qualitative study is explanatory, textual, passive observation-oriented, and can be undertaken through open-ended interviews. This sets it apart from quantitative research, which operationalises questionnaires, statistical analysis of outcomes, and standardised scales, and presents data numerically. This type of research allows a detailed and in-depth analysis of complex phenomena (Rahman, 2017). This method is conducive to information abundance, deep analysis, nuance, context, and comprehensiveness (Mason, 2002). Qualitative research seeks to probe and understand the underlying reasons for human behaviours and their consequences for people's lived experiences by using the participants' words and the investigator's analytical reflections to explain the phenomena being studied (Goundar, 2012; Hassan and Khairuldin, 2020). Since regional integration is generally driven by complex social, political, and economic identities, qualitative methods provide the

depth needed to illuminate how different stakeholders and players in the AfCFTA's establishment experience and interpret these dynamics.

4.7.3 Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative Research

4.7.3.1 Strengths

Qualitative studies allow the researcher to get an insider's perspective of the field (Goundar, 2012). Such an advantage enables the research to detect issues that positivistic enquiries usually miss—including subtleties and complexities. Descriptions in qualitative studies can help indicate possible links, causes, effects, and dynamic processes (Goundar, 2012). Qualitative research is appreciated for its ability to identify a phenomenon's strengths and weaknesses (Fawole et al. 2006:8). Qualitative research enhances the quality and usefulness of social analysis (Goundar, 2012). Unlike the quantitative approach, which has a linear and inflexible nature, qualitative research offers flexibility in its research design and approaches to data collection, allowing the researcher to discover issues that were not initially anticipated (Mwita, 2022). Qualitative research methods such as interviews, observation, and open-ended questionnaires enable the collection of vast amounts of data, yielding in-depth, detailed information. It leverages multiple data collection methods, thereby enhancing data credibility and reducing the likelihood of missing data. The direct, real-time interaction between the researcher and respondents in qualitative research enables the researcher to understand deeper issues, such as respondents' genuine feelings and sentiments regarding specific matters. Qualitative research's ability to reveal people's actual perceptions, attitudes, and convictions is something that quantitative studies cannot achieve (Mwita, 2022).

In the context of this study, the strengths of qualitative research are particularly valuable. Since the AfCFTA is a politically negotiated scheme involving different actors—states, RECs, AU institutions, private sector groups, etc—understanding *why* these actors behave as they do requires attention to meanings, motivations, and perceptions. Qualitative methods are well-suited to uncovering deeper layers of reality, enabling the researcher to understand how identities shape players' interests and decisions regarding the AfCFTA and continental integration. Quantitative approaches cannot fully capture these subjective and symbolic, ideological elements. Furthermore, the research's effort to identify interests and analyse how identities shape integration requires access to insider interpretations and lived experiences. Qualitative instruments, such as interviews and document analysis, enable the researcher to uncover how actors justify the establishment of the AfCFTA and how competing or complementary interests influence the dynamics of integration. Ultimately, qualitative research

strengthens this project by enabling the exploration of emergent issues not yet visible in official policy texts. This approach enhances the credibility of the findings and enables the researcher to provide context-sensitive explanations of how identities and interests drive economic integration and development across the continent.

4.7.3.2 Limitations

However, qualitative research can have several limitations. Given the subjective nature of qualitative data and the fact that it derives from single contexts, the application of conventional standards of reliability and validity is cumbersome (Goundar, 2012). Goundar (2012:23) states, "Contexts, situations, events, conditions and interactions cannot be replicated to any extent, nor can generalisations be made to a wider context than the one studied with any confidence". The selection of findings can be difficult due to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. The problem of possible bias necessitates the illumination of the researcher's and respondents' perspectives (Goundar, 2012). Since qualitative research is often interpretive, it is inherently subjective because different people have varying interpretations of what they see, hear, touch, or smell (Mwita, 2022).

Qualitative research relies on findings from small samples, which are sometimes not adequate to make generalisations, making the studies prone to doubts (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The intrinsic guarantee of anonymity does not always ensure that respondents find the ideal comfort and safety needed to share information freely, due to the fear of repercussions for disclosing sensitive information (Mwita, 2022). The qualitative data collection process can be cumbersome because methods like in-depth interviews, group discussions, and others lead to large volumes of data, compelling researchers to engage in a tedious and time-consuming process of data analysis (Mwita, 2022). The difficulty in replicating qualitative research findings is also a challenge researchers have to deal with because producing similar results is sometimes not achievable when respondents express diverse feelings, experiences, and backgrounds (Mwita, 2022).

This study took several measures to minimise the impact of these limitations. The study employed expert sampling and snowball sampling to ensure the use of data elicited from participants with firsthand knowledge and substantial expertise in the AfCFTA or African regionalism. This focus on people with expertise helps ensure that the data accurately reflects the dynamics discussed. The use of semi-structured interviews helped ensure flexibility, enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues without deviating from the core focus of the

study. Strict ethical protocols helped ensure a high likelihood of honesty, which is necessary for high-quality data. Even though interviewing thirty-five participants was a cumbersome task, the use of thematic analysis helped ensure a systematic approach to identifying, organising, and interpreting themes within data. These measures are explained in greater detail in various sections in this chapter.

4.7.4. Traditions of Qualitative Research: Positivist, Interpretive, and Critical Research

In qualitative research, the major traditions are the positivist, interpretive, and critical paradigms (Punch, 2013). According to Mwita (2022:619), in the positivist tradition, "knowledge and reality should be free from human conception and construction". This tradition uses existing facts and evidence to address the research problem. Through positivism, an investigator is supposed to assess existing information (Mwita, 2022). According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017:30), "Research located in this paradigm relies on deductive logic, formulation of hypotheses, testing those hypotheses, offering operational definitions and mathematical equations, calculations, extrapolations, and expressions, to derive conclusions". It seeks to explain and predict based on measurable outcomes. Studies pursued under this paradigm use experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, causal-comparative, and randomised controlled trials, as well as survey research methodologies (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). While this tradition is used in qualitative research, it is more common in quantitative studies. Its dominance in quantitative research stems from the preference for objective facts over subjective factors such as the researcher's values and beliefs (Mwita, 2022:619). Given the enormous focus on subjective factors, including identities, perceptions, values, and preferences, in this study, this tradition is not suitable for its purpose.

Interpretive research rejects broad generalisations and instead focuses on giving a deep, contextual understanding of phenomena (Willis, Jost, and Nilakanta, 2007). The interpretive tradition is concerned with how a researcher sees the world from a subjective point of view by interpreting meanings from data collected (Mwita, 2022:619; Winberg, 1997). The interpretive paradigm explains how someone's worldview or perspective influences their intentions and the actions they take (Winberg, 1997). It believes that truth and knowledge are characterised by subjectivity, culture, and history, and are rooted in lived experiences and the way people interpret them (Ryan cited in Mwita, 2022:619). The techniques used in interpretive research include observation, document analysis, and interviews (Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso, 2010). In this kind of research, the investigator builds detailed records about people, activities,

and viewpoints of participants to ensure an inductive explanation of what is happening and how things work (Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso, 2010).

Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and context-based; reality or knowledge is subjective and made during the interaction between the researcher and the respondent; and that values are vital parts of research and that research can have biases (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012). Studies undertaken under the interpretive paradigm can employ various methodologies, including naturalist inquiry, narrative inquiry, case study, grounded theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography, phenomenography, action research, and heuristic inquiry (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). This study follows the interpretive research tradition. This study uses the interpretive tradition because it seeks to understand how the identities and interests of different actors shape the development of the AfCFTA, which requires exploring participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, or meanings. By adopting interpretivism, the research can capture the contextual, socially constructed realities of stakeholders, providing nuanced insights into how regional integration and economic development are perceived and championed.

Critical research, which is also known as the transformative paradigm, seeks to understand and critique power dynamics in society (Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso, 2010; Mwita, 2022). The critical paradigm focuses mainly on addressing social inequality and empowering minority groups through scientific research (Mwita, 2022). It actively seeks to challenge and question entrenched values and social structures to advance social change (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). The techniques used in critical qualitative research include document analysis, popular culture, social structures, and documentation of empowerment activities. In this kind of research, total objectivity is not mandatory, even though researchers are obligated to maintain accuracy (Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso, 2010). Studies undertaken under this paradigm use neo-Marxist, Cultural studies, Freirean studies, Participatory emancipation, Postcolonial/indigenous, and Action research methodologies. They also use Feminist, Critical Race, Queer, and Disability theories (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). While critical research offers valuable insights into power and inequality, this study prioritises interpretive explanation and therefore does not adopt a critical approach.

This study is located within the interpretivist/constructivist research paradigm, which is suited to exploring how identities, interests, and meanings are socially constructed within African regional integration processes. This is directly relevant to uncovering how policymakers,

negotiators, AU officials, scholars, and other actors interpret the rationale, identity roles, and interests underpinning the AfCFTA. Examining how identities and interests shape the development of the AfCFTA involves understanding the causal and influential role these variables play in AfCFTA's emergence. The interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach provide a strong foundation for investigating how identities and interests shape the development of the AfCFTA. The approach aligns directly with the research questions, which require a deep understanding of actors' motivations, interpretations, and contextual realities—elements that cannot be captured through positivist designs.

4.8 Data Collection Process

4.8.1 Primary Data Collection

Both primary and secondary sources were used in this study. Primary sources provide the most direct evidence of a topic under development in a research project and should generally be given high priority for inclusion in the research process. According to Alderman (2014), primary source materials include letters, interviews, eyewitness accounts, speeches, newspaper articles, and autobiographical sketches. Ajayi (2023) states that primary data sources include surveys, observations, experiments, questionnaires, one-on-one or group interviews, focus groups, case studies, and others. He states that primary data is original, as the term primary data refers to data generated for the first time in research. The primary data for this study were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between August 2021 and September 2025.

4.8.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview method was imperative for eliciting the primary data needed to determine how identities and interests shape the development and viability of the AfCFTA. As defined by Ajayi (2023), interviewing is a data collection method mainly used to develop a good understanding of the rationale behind people's preferences, choices, or actions. This method can be utilised in one-on-one or group settings. As Alshenqeeti (2014) notes, interviews are important for obtaining narrative data that allows researchers to gather data comprehensively. Interviews can take place in a face-to-face, telephonic, or online context. In online contexts, video conferencing platforms are used (Mwita, 2022).

Semi-structured interviews were utilised in this study. A semi-structured interview is a method of collecting data that is mostly used in social studies (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam, 2022). The semi-structured interviews have a flexible structure comprising open-ended

questions that define the area to be explored (Patton and Cochran, 2002). This method is ideal in social research data collection, as it enables the researcher to extensively probe and unearth new information. It ensures flexibility during qualitative data collection and allows the respondents to express themselves freely during an interview, thereby granting the researcher an opportunity to obtain a great deal of relevant information. It creates an environment for the exploration of new questions based on the content of the participants' replies (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam, 2022). This method aligns with interpretivist assumptions that knowledge arises through interaction, dialogue, and shared meaning-making.

Data were elicited from experts, analysts, and scholars from different fields and institutions. Experts such as the officials from the AfCFTA Secretariat based in Accra, Ghana, African Union Development Agency—New Partnership for Africa's Development (AUDA-NEPAD) based in Johannesburg, South Africa, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) based in Addis Ababa, and the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) based in Johannesburg, scholars of regionalism and economic development, and analysts focusing on African regionalism, African trade and international political economy were invited and recruited to partake in the interviews. Twelve officials from the AfCFTA Secretariat (the AfCFTA Negotiations Support Unit), eight from UNECA, three from AUDA-NEPAD, one from UNCTAD, and one from the SAIIA participated. Also, ten scholars and analysts participated in the interviews. Interviews of about 30 minutes or more were conducted using Zoom and Microsoft Teams. These interviews were recorded, and the transcripts were downloaded afterwards.

The use of video-conferencing platforms offers immense advantages, such as lower costs, easier access, and the ability to collect data from multiple participants in a short time. However, there were ethical concerns. According to Boland et al. (2022), the use of video-conferencing platforms brings up serious privacy and confidentiality concerns. Things like unauthorised intrusion, third-party access, and insecure networks can compromise privacy and disrupt the research process. The study avoided these dangers by ensuring that the personal laptop had strong antivirus protection, that the settings did not allow unauthorised entry into the meeting, and that the researcher was in locations where no third party could gain entry.

4.8.3 Use of Secondary Sources

Secondary sources were also used in this study. As Ajayi (2023) explains, secondary data consists of data that have already been collected by other researchers for different purposes and are subsequently analysed by the researcher. Such sources are published in academic journals, books, reports, etc, that other researchers can use in their studies (Alderman, 2014). Secondary sources were used to support and complement the primary data (Alderman, 2014). According to Alderman (2014:1), "secondary sources provide analysis and discussion by researchers who have examined primary sources and seek to explore their significance". By complementing primary data with secondary sources, the study was able to leverage vast information and enrich its analysis and findings.

4.8.4 Triangulation

The study used theoretical triangulation and source triangulation to advance complementarity, consistency, corroboration, and rigour. There are four types of triangulations, namely: data source triangulation, wherein the researcher looks for the data; investigator triangulation, wherein several researchers critically study the same phenomenon; theory triangulation, wherein researchers with different perspectives analyse the same results; and methodological triangulation, wherein data analysis is used one after another to enhance confidence in the interpretation (Denzin, 1989). Triangulation is a method of enriching the credibility and validity of findings by obtaining information from a variety of sources, methods, or perspectives (Patton and Cochran, 2002).

As Heale and Forbes (2013) explain, to develop a thorough understanding of a phenomenon with high levels of validity and verifiability, a combination of theories, methods, data sources, and researchers is undertaken in a process known as triangulation. Triangulation is done by qualitative researchers in validating their research through an eclectic, thoroughgoing process that enhances consistency and reliability based on corroboration (Golafshani, 2003). The use of several theories, methods, and empirical materials places researchers in a position where they can make findings without significant deficiencies, intrinsic biases, and uncertainties (Honorene, 2017). Theoretical and source triangulation helped foster verifiability, rigour, and consistency in the analysis and findings of this study.

4.9 Sampling in Research

4.9.1 Sampling Explained

Bless, Higson-Smith, and Kagee (2006) explain that sampling is a subset of the whole population the researcher is investigating and that the characteristics found from the study can

be generalised to the whole population. Qualitative studies' samples are mostly purposive as respondents are usually recruited based on their ability to contribute valuable data to the study (Patton and Cochran, 2002). Patton and Cochran explain that while qualitative samples are usually small, the researcher engages in the data collection process until data saturation, when no new data are generated. In choosing the most appropriate sample for this study, the researcher has two fundamental considerations. First, the sample drawn must be adequately representative to enable the researcher to generalise the findings. Second, the chosen sample must not be unnecessarily vast to avoid analytical difficulties associated with data generated from samples that are too large. The researcher chose expert sampling and snowball sampling because they were considered the most suitable for upholding these considerations and achieving the study objectives.

4.9.2 Sampling Techniques and the Study Population

The sampling strategy refers to identifying the research population and deciding how to choose a sample from it. This enables the researcher to design a viable data collection plan and know the related limitations (Turner, 2020). The study employed two non-probability sampling techniques, namely expert sampling and snowball (chain) sampling. As Makwana et al. (2023) explain, probability sampling involves making statistically valid generalisations about the characteristics of the entire population from which it was drawn. Since this study has no defined population and seeks an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the role of identities and interests in shaping the AfCFTA, rather than statistically generalisable findings, probability sampling would have been methodologically inappropriate.

Expert sampling, which is one of the many types of purposive sampling, was adopted in this study. Purposive sampling is the selection of research participants based on their familiarity with or ability to meaningfully address the research questions (Bekele and Ago, 2022). The questions the study sought to answer require the use of the purposive sampling process. Purposive sampling is utilised based on the understanding that there is a variety of views among the participants regarding the issues the study is investigating (Campbell et al., 2020). Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016:3) define expert sampling as a technique with a focus on eliciting responses from well-informed people in a field and which is optimal for exploring or conducting a study in fields where there has not been much primary research or evidence. Expert sampling was considered necessary because the study required insights, experiences, and views from persons directly engaged in the establishment and promotion of the AfCFTA, as well as from those conducting scholarly research on the AfCFTA.

Snowball (chain) sampling was operationalised as a secondary technique. In snowball sampling, an interviewee suggests to the researcher the name of another potential and suitable interviewee. That interviewee also suggests another potential interviewee, and this continues as a pattern, thereby leading to a larger sample of two or more interviewees (Kirchherr and Charles, 2018). As the researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with experts from the selected institutions and from research and scholarly backgrounds, maximising snowball sampling was necessary and beneficial for data collection.

4.9.3 Sample Size

In qualitative research, it is important to have the appropriate sample size. The sample size refers to the representation of the target population, and therefore, it must have the characteristics of the target population to be a sound representation (Andrade, 2020)**.** Mason (2010) states that a qualitative sample should include more than 15 participants. Morse (2000) and subsequent discussions by Morse (2015) highlight the importance of considering several relevant factors when choosing a sample size. These factors include the study range, subject nature, research design, researchers' experience, budget, and time. In this study, the total number of participants was 35, with 25 from the AfCFTA Secretariat, AUDA-NEPAD, UNECA, UNCTAD, and SAIIA, and 10 from scholarly and analyst backgrounds.

4.9.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

An important part of the sampling strategy operationalised in this study is the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The criteria consider the important characteristics of the target population chosen for addressing the research questions**.** Inclusion criteria ensure consistency and objectivity (Garg, 2016). The exclusion criteria consider the qualities that make the population unsuitable for the study. These exclusion criteria look at the characteristics of potential study participants who may have characteristics that disqualify them from the study (Garg, 2016). The use of these criteria ensured that the study's sample was well-defined and suitable for addressing the main research questions, thereby increasing the study's validity and reliability.

The inclusion criteria for this study are as follows:

i. Officials, scholars, or analysts who either have experience in programmes and processes that promote regional integration or economic development in Africa or have conducted published research on regional integration and economic development in Africa.

The exclusion criteria are as follows.

i. All people who have neither participated in programmes, processes, or events that promoted regional integration or economic development in Africa, nor conducted published research on regional integration and economic development in Africa.

4.9.5 Recruitment Plan

Recruitment is a requisite part of research methodology and plays an important role in the outcome of the research. A sound recruitment plan boosts the trustworthiness and potential of a research project (Negrin et al., 2022). Recruitment depends on the gatekeeper's explicit approval and, consequently, it begins when such approval is granted (Lysaght et al., 2016). Researchers utilise direct and indirect methods of recruitment. Direct methods include person-to-person interactions (Fleming et al., 2015; Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014), while indirect methods include flyers, posters (Fleming et al., 2015), and newsletters (Porter and Lanes, 2000). This study relied on a direct approach for participant recruitment. After obtaining gatekeepers' letters from the AU, UNECA, AUDA-NEPAD, UNCTAD, and SAIIA, and finally the ethics approval letter from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the researcher was able to recruit participants. Most participants from these organisations were recommended based on their familiarity with the AfCFTA's development. As soon as the participants expressed their willingness to assist, the researcher provided more information about the study and shared the informed consent forms. After this, the researcher arranged for Zoom and MS Teams meetings to conduct the interviews.

4.10 Method of Data Analysis

4.10.1 Thematic Analysis

The study used thematic analysis to analyse the data because of its suitability for qualitative data analysis. According to Smith and Firth (2011), thematic analysis is a process of data interpretation that entails an examination of qualitative data generated through interviews or focus groups to find recurring themes or patterns that become the basis for an informative description of the phenomenon, and organise the data into hypotheses or research questions. This technique requires a researcher to firmly adhere to inductive enquiry standards and avoid any need to shape them. It enables a summary of the most important aspects of a vast amount of data, necessitating the use of a well-thought-out strategy for handling data (Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules, 2017). The technique provides six steps for analysing qualitative data, and the application of these steps makes the study more rigorous and analytically strong (Naeem et al., 2023).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and Naeem et al. (2023) these six steps are: i) familiarisation whereby the researcher transcribes, takes notes, and reads and re-reads the data transcripts to gain a deep understanding of their content; ii) generation of initial codes whereby the researcher studies the entire datasets, identifies meaningful features, systematically breaks down the data by giving short descriptive labels (codes), and uses these code to organise the data into groups; iii) searching for themes whereby researchers attempt to find themes relevant to the research purpose by examining the codes for patterns, and then organise the codes into more meaningful themes representing overarching ideas; iv) reviewing themes to ensure coherence, ensure they accurately represent the data, and determine whether or not some themes should be separated, combined or abandoned; v) defining and naming themes whereby the researcher elucidates the meaning of each theme, and its relevance to understanding the data and gives it a concise descriptive name; and vi) generating a report whereby the researcher weaves the themes together and produces a coherent written narrative that addresses the research question, and presents findings using data excerpts (quotes) and discusses the implications. This data analysis approach was deemed the most suitable because it enables a logical description and interpretation of participants' views. The technique was chosen because it is very convenient for handling large volumes of qualitative research data and is easy to utilise. Thematic analysis supports the interpretivist commitment to exploring multiple realities and contextually grounded interpretations.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

Upholding ethical principles is a requisite part of academic research, as the protection of research participants and their well-being is required. Ethical considerations protect the participants, nurture trust between the researchers and the participants, promote the integrity of research, and prevent improper and unethical behaviour that could negatively impact their lives and the organisations with which they are affiliated (Israel and Hay, 2006). During research, participants express opinions explicitly and provide answers that contain sensitive and non-sensitive information. Therefore, the researcher has an obligation to ensure that participants' integrity is protected (Maldonado, 2008). Research projects must have both credibility and integrity by upholding standards that ensure anonymity, privacy, protection, and trust. To avoid potential harm to participants, the research project must be carried out in full adherence to ethical principles, including obtaining valid ethical clearance, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and protecting

participants from harm. This study sought to uphold all these principles and standards throughout the process of data collection.

The researcher reached out to the AU, UNECA, AUDA-NEPAD, UNCTAD, and SAIIA, and presented the research brief and an informed consent document. The researcher obtained formal letters of approval for data collection from the African Union Commission (AUC), UNECA, AUDA-NEPAD, UNCTAD, and SAIIA. The letters explicitly granted the researcher access to available knowledge resources and professional expertise through interviews with professional staff. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, the researcher provided a detailed explanation of the research project and shared the informed consent document with all the respondents. All participants gave consent by completing and signing the informed consent form and by verbally confirming their understanding of its content before the interviews commenced.

The collection, protection, and management of data is the primary responsibility of the researcher. After the generation of transcripts, the recordings are supposed to be destroyed to ensure participants' protection. If the study is not yet completed, the data should be kept in a secure location or system (Alase, 2017). To protect the participants, the researcher in this study stored all recordings on a password-protected computer with AES 256-bit encryption and in a Microsoft OneDrive cloud storage account that requires Multi-Factor Authentication (using institutional credentials, including a highly secure password created by the researcher). The password is known only to the researcher. Authorised access to the transcripts and recordings is securely granted to the supervisor through institutional OneDrive sharing permissions. Also, participants were not grouped by job title, and no names or personally identifiable information were included in the dissertation. Participants' names were not used; instead, unique identifiers such as P1, P2, P3, etc. were used in the data presentation. Interview recordings and transcripts will be securely stored for five years, after which they will be permanently deleted using secure erasure software.

4.12 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

According to Akanle, Ademuson, and Shittu (2020), researchers face various challenges and hurdles when carrying out their research, and as such, all studies have limitations that affect the study outcomes and interpretations. In undertaking this study, the researcher consciously sought to overcome all limitations. However, a few challenges persisted, and they are explained below. The reliance on semi-structured interviews and non-probability sampling indicates that

the findings are not statistically generalisable or representative of the full range of views on the role of identities and interests in AfCFTA's evolution. As is the case in many thematic analysis-based studies, the complete elimination of subjectivity is neither probable nor guaranteed. The use of snowball sampling can lead to participants recommending people whose perspectives align with theirs. This could have been the case when participants recommended potential participants during the semi-structured interviews. Due to financial constraints, the researcher did not meet the participants face-to-face and accordingly relied on telephonic and videoconferencing channels to elicit data. The researcher was unable to interview the desired number of AU, UNECA, AUDA-NEPAD, UNCTAD, and SAIIA officials, as some were either unavailable or uninterested in participating.

The study focused solely on qualitative methods. In this respect, it used the interpretive paradigm, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis to explore meanings and perceptions. It did not use techniques such as statistical generalisation. The participants were selected based on their expertise. In this context, only the policymakers, negotiators, and officials involved in the AfCFTA, and the scholars and analysts who have researched and published on regional economic integration and development in Africa, were considered. The research did not include officials from the RECs. In addition, despite possible comparative analyses, this study did not involve the participation of officials from other regional and continental bodies outside Africa, such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, nor did it directly elicit their views.

4.13 Chapter Summary

This chapter explained in detail the research methodology utilised in this study. The chapter explained important concepts such as research, research methodology, qualitative research, quantitative research, mixed-methods research, and sampling. It explained the qualitative methods, techniques, and strategies used to undertake the study and accomplish its objectives. The chapter explained the relevance and utility of these methods and techniques in data collection and analysis, thereby revealing their underlying logic and purpose. The chapter also explained the limitations of each method and technique, as well as the overall limitations of the study. In sum, this chapter explained the suitability, value, and indispensability of various research traditions, methods, and techniques in this study. It also explained why other methods, such as the quantitative approach or the positivist paradigm, would be ill-suited for this study. The next chapter will discuss the historical evolution of the AfCFTA, focusing on the major milestones that shaped its establishment and implementation.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF AFRICAN TRADE INTEGRATION LEADING TO THE AFCFTA, 1976 TO 2025

5.1 Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the historical events and turning points that either caused or shaped the development of the AfCFTA in post-colonial Africa. The chapter discusses the importance of economic integration in Africa and the landmark moments and decisions from 1976 to 2025 that have contributed to the current phase of economic integration, the AfCFTA. These include the establishment of intergovernmental institutions, the adoption of intergovernmental policy decisions and roadmaps, the formation of institutional programmes and strategies, and the signing and ratification of the AfCFTA Agreement. The role of each of the eight AU-recognised Regional Economic Communities in paving the way for the establishment of the AfCFTA is also explained. Therefore, the chapter highlights the importance, history, and status of economic integration in Africa.

5.2 The Significance of Trade Integration in Post-Colonial Africa

Trade propels industrialisation and economic growth and is thus a vital part of regional economic integration (African Union, 2025). The continent recognises the need to pursue market integration[17] as a pathway to economic growth and development. Africa's lack of significant endogenous economic development has been linked to its dismally low levels of intra-African trade. Trade within Africa accounts for just 14.6 per cent of the continent's overall trade in the global economy (Karingi, 2025). According to the African Union (2025:20), "As of 2023, intra-African exports represented only 15.0% of total African exports, compared to over 60% in the European Union and 38% in Asia, highlighting a persistent structural weakness in Africa's trade integration". Since the fragmentation of African markets hampers efficiency and undermines economic growth, the continent is among the least competitive regions of the global economy (UNCTAD, 2021). A continental scheme of trade integration thus places African countries on the threshold of a historic change that would empower them to double intra-African trade and better maximise its vast natural resource endowment to boost their economic development (Sebahizi, 2017). By every measure, the trade integration the

[17] When the African Statistical Report on Regional Integration (ASRII) measures the levels of market integration pursued by the RECs, it looks at four dimensions, namely trade regulation, regional trade facilitation, regional trade flows and the degree of diversification (African Union, 2025).

AfCFTA seeks to achieve could have a considerable positive effect, mitigating Africa's economic problems and boosting intra-African trade (Karingi, 2025).

The expansion of intra-African trade is recognised as one of the most effective strategies for stimulating economic growth and driving development in Africa (Olney, 2020; Admassu, 2019). According to Shumba (2024:11), the AfCFTA "is one of the flagship projects of the AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, and a significant step towards a pan-African vision of an integrated and prosperous Africa". Shumba notes that it "lays the foundation for the next phase of economic integration: the customs union" (Shumba, 2024:11). As stated by UNECA, AUC and AfDB (2025:41), "Integration is a key priority on the continent due to its potential to bring together small, fragmented national markets and to create economies of scale for the improved positioning of African economies in regional and global value chains". As the creation of a continental marketplace, the scheme represents an opportunity to inject tremendous dynamism into Africa's social and economic development, thereby repositioning the continent in the global economy (Sebahizi, 2017).

In line with the strategic objectives of the Union's Agenda 2063 Initiative, the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) provides a lever to strategically position the continent to better exploit its numerous trade and investment opportunities (African Union, 2014). The potential advantages of this scheme include food security, higher levels of industrialisation, accelerated innovation, technology transfer, economic diversification, job creation, poverty eradication, trade integration, and structural transformation of African economies (African Union, 2018). Therefore, the AfCFTA represents a historic watershed in Africa's march towards higher levels of economic integration and development. The scholarly insights above suggest that, as a phase in Africa's path towards an economic and monetary union, the AfCFTA presents an opportunity to make the idea of the 21st century as an African century a reality.

5.3 Historical Milestones in African Trade Integration

5.3.1 The 1976 Kinshasa Declaration and the 1979 Monrovia Declaration of Commitment

In the 1970s, the historic adoption of the 1976 Kinshasa Declaration and the 1979 Monrovia Declaration helped pave the way for Africa's decades-long march towards economic integration. Luke and MacLeod (2019) explain that a landmark moment in the evolution of the common commitment to continental economic integration amongst African countries was expressed through the OAU Council of Ministers' Kinshasa Declaration of 1976. The Kinshasa Declaration was adopted during the 11th Extraordinary Session of the Council of Ministers of

the OAU on Economic Development and Cooperation (OAU, 1979). This declaration was a clarion call for the integration of African markets, advocating for the creation of the African Economic Community and subsequently serving as the foundation for the Monrovia Declaration of 1979 (Luke and MacLeod, 2019). The Kinshasa Declaration was the first major official decision calling for the creation of the AEC, which was finally agreed upon in the 1991 Abuja Treaty (OAU, 1991). The declaration signified one of the most important original conceptualisations of the AEC, a vision that the AfCFTA is established to help make a reality.

In 1979, the Monrovia Declaration of Commitment on Guidelines and Measures for National and Collective Self-Reliance in Social and Economic Development for the Establishment of a New International Economic Order was adopted by African governments (OAU, 1979). The declaration underscored the importance of establishing the AEC in promoting Africa's economic prosperity. It issued a clarion call for the OAU, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), and regional bodies to jointly develop an actionable plan for establishing the AEC. In the Monrovia Declaration, African governments undertook to initiate preparatory steps for the establishment of an African Common Market as a pathway to an AEC. The declaration noted the need to build a thriving, interdependent economy at the national, sub-regional, and continental levels. To achieve these aims, the leaders committed themselves to advancing Africa's economic integration to stimulate rapid economic self-sufficiency and self-sustainment through national, sub-regional, and continental organisations and mechanisms that facilitate economic intercourse (OAU, 1979). They committed themselves to the promotion of education and human resources development, the mastery of science and technology, infrastructure development, industrial development (driven at sub-regional and continental levels), people-driven development, environmental sustainability, and the combination of development efforts with socio-cultural values (OAU, 1979). This marked a turning point in the visualisation and promotion of various economic integration programmes geared towards establishing a liberalised continental market in the decades that followed. Following this declaration, the OAU and African governments recognised that they had a vast continental task to undertake in building the AEC to enable the societies and peoples of Africa to flourish.

5.3.2 The Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) and the Final Act of Lagos (FAL) of 1980

Another turning point in the development of intergovernmental policy frameworks for Africa's economic integration and development was the Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa. The OAU developed the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 to promote African self-reliance, economic independence, and African economic interdependence through

trade integration, industrialisation, and regional cooperation, among other objectives (OAU, 1980). Driven by the desire for economic cooperation and the many underdevelopment challenges that confronted African countries in the postcolonial context, at the 1980 Second Extraordinary Session of OAU Heads of State and Government, African leaders adopted the LPA to strive for greater economic integration, cooperation, and development in the decades from 1980 to 2000 (OAU, 1980). Central to the LPA is the realisation of collective economic development using various market integration programmes (Unya and Okorie, 2024). The LPA prescribed several steps for transforming Africa across various areas, including food and agriculture, modern industrial sectors, maximisation of natural resources, a human rights culture, science and technology, transport and communication, trade and finance, institutional development, environmental conservation, human development, and development planning (OAU, 1980).

The Heads of State and Government of the OAU also devised a framework for implementing the LPA. This became known as the Final Act of Lagos (FAL) (ECA, 1985). The OAU members agreed on a bottom-up process for building an African Economic Community by the year 2000 (OAU, 1980). The Lagos Summit committed to advancing this objective by forming and empowering regional economic bodies across Africa, strengthening effective sectoral integration, and enhancing sound inter-REC coordination and harmonisation, to establish an African Common Market in the first decade of the 1980s (ECA, 1985). The Summit undertook to engage in deeper sectoral integration through the harmonisation of policies regarding economic development, monetary policies, regulatory procedures, and economic collaboration in the second decade, from the 1990s to 2000. It resolved to implement programmes and initiatives designed to build an African Common Market and advance the realisation of the AEC (OAU, 1980). However, the FAL had several flaws in its design, was poorly executed, and made no substantial progress in its implementation and in realising its vision (Aniche, Alumona, and Moyo, 2021).

5.3.3 The Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community of 1991 (Abuja Treaty)

The OAU designed a detailed roadmap for the multi-phase establishment of the AEC through the framing and adoption of the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community in Abuja in 1991 (Tavares and Tang, 2011). The Abuja Treaty is considered the master plan for continental integration and economic development (UNECA, 2017). The Agreement was adopted; to boost Africa's development and integration in the economic, social and cultural spheres; to cultivate economic independence and self-sustaining growth; to chart a new

continental course to advance and maximise Africa's human and natural resources and stimulate internally driven development; to encourage cooperation in every sphere of human activity; to promote social upliftment, enhance economic life, nurture friendship and peace among OAU members; and to enable inter-REC policy coordination and harmonisation to facilitate the creation of the AEC through successive phases (OAU, 1991). The Abuja Treaty prescribed the following phases: strengthening and creation of new regional economic blocs by 1999; advancement of integration and policy harmonisation in Africa's sub-regions by 2007; creation of Regional Free Trade Areas and Customs Unions by 2017; creation of a continental free trade area and customs union by 2019; creation of an African Common Market by 2023; the creation of a Pan-African Economic and Monetary Union by 2028; and the creation of the African Economic and Currency Union, and Parliament by 2034 (Sebahizi, 2016; OAU, 1991).

To accomplish these goals, the treaty prescribed several measures. These included improving policy harmonisation and coordination among RECs, undertaking joint investment programmes in the production and trade of major products, and better utilisation of economic inputs in line with the principle of collective self-reliance. The treaty required harmonising policies within states to enhance AEC-facilitating programmes, creating a Community Solidarity, Development, and Compensation Fund, giving special treatment to the most underdeveloped African countries, and espousing special interventions that are economically favourable for landlocked, semi-landlocked, and Island countries (OAU, 1991). The Abuja Treaty thus formalised the establishment of a Continental Free Trade Area as one of the steps towards the realisation of the AEC vision (UNCTAD, 2016). The integration stages in the Abuja Treaty closely resembled the approach to continental integration that Mwalimu Julius Nyerere had promulgated in his writings and speeches, including the focus on people-centred development, a bottom-up approach, and the use of REC-led intergovernmental policy coordination as preludes to continental integration.

5.3.4 The Sirte Declaration of 1999

From the late 1970s, it had become clear to African leaders that the OAU needed to embark on significant internal institutional reforms to enable it to adapt and build greater capacity to lead African countries towards transformation (Adetula, Bereketeab and Jaiyebo, 2016). Following extensive discussions during the Fourth Extraordinary Session of the OAU Assembly in 1999 in Sirte, Libya, the Heads of State and Government agreed to establish the African Union. They sought to enhance the effectiveness of the continental efforts to achieve the objectives of the

OAU and facilitate the establishment of the African Economic Community. The Assembly aimed to strengthen the establishment of the institutions outlined in the Abuja Treaty and enhance the performance of the RECs, as well as the effectiveness of the integration programmes spearheaded by the RECs (OAU, 1999, 2000). The contribution of the Sirte Declaration to the revitalisation of the integration project was profound, as it propelled the conceptualisation of a vehicle that would better enable African states to join the AEC.

5.3.5 The Constitutive Act (CA) of 2000 and the Establishment of the African Union of 2001

In line with the continental aspirations for cooperation, integration, development, and unity, the African leaders adopted the Constitutive Act of the African Union (CA). The Heads of State and Government agreed on and adopted the Constitutive Act in Lomé, Togo, in 2000, based on the objectives of the OAU and the Abuja Treaty, as affirmed in the Sirte Declaration (OAU, 2000). On May 26, 2001, approximately a month after the Federal Republic of Nigeria deposited its instrument of ratification, the Constitutive Act of the African Union came into force, rendering the replacement of the OAU as the continental organisation inevitable (Packer and Rukare, 2002). In its Thirty-eighth Ordinary Session, convened in South Africa in 2002, the Organisation of African Unity was replaced by the African Union (AU), an event that signalled a growing enthusiasm for Africa's pursuit of political unity and economic integration (Maluwa, 2003).

The African Union was formed for multiple political, economic, social, and cultural reasons. These include the promotion of unity, solidarity, and respect for member states' sovereignty, continental integration, common interests, international cooperation, peace, security and stability, democratisation and democratic culture, human rights, sustainable development, social upliftment, inter-REC policy coordination and harmonisation, research-led development and success in Africa's engagement in global affairs (OAU, 2000). Given that Article 3 of this Constitutive Act sets one of the goals of the African Union as the deepening of the continent's political and socio-economic integration, the AU has a mandate to champion continental economic integration through trade integration in Africa (UNCTAD, 2016). The formation of the AU largely reflected Africa's readiness to overcome its major challenges and realise longstanding dreams of social, cultural, political, and economic success and transformation. In this respect, the realisation of the AfCFTA is a significant indication of Africa's intergovernmental and pan-Africanist aspirations to make the continent one of the most economically thriving regions in the 21st century.

5.3.6 The Adoption of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2002

Following the 2001 merger of policy proposals from South Africa, Nigeria, and Senegal into clear policy guidelines, the New Partnership for Africa's Development was adopted. NEPAD was formally established in 2002 at the Kananaskis G8 summit. Its secretariat was based in and funded by South Africa (Maloka and le Roux, 2000). NEPAD supported the continent's regional economic integration project, envisioned in the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty (De Waal, 2002). NEPAD's central goal was the eradication of poverty, the promotion of sustainable economic growth and development, and the repositioning of Africa in the process of globalisation (NEPAD, 2001). This focus on advancing South-South cooperation and Africa's development has enabled NEPAD to become one of the most vital initiatives supporting Africa's development. NEPAD was transformed into the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) and commissioned to lead Africa's implementation of Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2025).

The AU recognised the institutional strengthening of NEPAD as a crucial step in accelerating regional integration in Africa, in accordance with the Abuja Treaty and the Sirte Declaration (AUDA-NEPAD, 2015). NEPAD has committed itself to supporting REC-led efforts to promote economic integration and thereby enhance the global competitiveness of African businesses, ensuring sound coordination and harmonisation of national economic and investment regimes (NEPAD, 200; UNECA, 2012). It committed itself to supporting RECs-level efforts by overseeing the development programmes and plans developed by RECs (NEPAD, 2001). Consequently, the NEPAD agency's work has focused on enhancing RECs' institutional capacity (AUDA-NEPAD, 2015). However, NEPAD was not as effective as intended because it lacked the necessary tools to implement its programmes (Landry cited in Bach, 2016). NEPAD has also been subject to severe criticism because its work depends heavily on aid from economically advanced countries (Unya and Okorie, 2024).

5.3.7 The Accra Declaration of 2007

Inspired by Kwame Nkrumah and other founding fathers of the Organisation of African Unity, in July 2007 in Accra, Ghana, the African Union Heads of State and Government summit affirmed their commitment to the idea of a United States of Africa (African Union, 2007). The Accra Declaration called for the expedited implementation of the continental integration agenda championed by Kwame Nkrumah, which was later endorsed by other OAU founders (Murithi, 2008). In line with this declaration calling for the gradual establishment of the Union Government, African Heads of State and Government undertook to give the African Union

Commission more formal authority. This step had been preceded by the AU's January 2007 decision to prepare a roadmap to advance the African Union and African Unity agendas (African Union, 2007). The Accra summit also highlighted the benefits of market and trade integration, including fast-paced economic development and self-reliance. The Declaration called for improvements in RECs' performance and for policy harmonisation to expedite continental economic and political integration (African Union, 2007).

5.3.8 The Minimum Integration Programme (MIP) of 2009

Following a series of meetings from 2006 to 2008, the African Ministers of Integration recognised the importance of rationalising, coordinating, and harmonising the RECs' programmes and proposed the development of a Minimum Integration Programme (MIP) for the RECs. The MIP was formed in 2009 as an inter-REC link and facilitative tool to direct, assess, and support the RECs in their preparatory efforts for future Africa-wide integration (African Union Commission [AUC], 2010). The MIP strove to ensure that RECs undertook and implemented programmes in line with the Abuja Treaty and within the desired timelines (UNECA, 2012). The programme was spearheaded jointly by African countries, the RECs, and the AUC and had the advantage of providing "more visibility, and precision to donors, partner institutions of the United Nations system as well as other development partners in the actions to be undertaken" (AUC, 2010:48). In accordance with the Sirte Declaration, the MIP sought to advance this goal by enhancing the processes of harmonising and coordinating programmes of trade liberalisation and economic development within and among RECs (AUC, 2010).

Thus, as a RECs' convergence mechanism, the MIP comprises the undertakings and programmes that the RECs sought to accelerate or bring to completion as part of the regional and continental integration process. It also focused on a few priority areas of regional and continental concern, where RECs could strengthen their cooperation and leverage the best integration practices (UNECA, 2012). To enable the successful implementation of the MIP, the AUC and the eight AU-recognised RECs (AUC, 2010) developed a monitoring and evaluation mechanism and plans of action. The implementation of the MIP faced several constraints, including a lack of political will, inadequate understanding of the political landscape, limited human resources, limited funding, poor leadership by the AUC, incongruences between national and regional policies, and overlapping membership (AUC, 2010).

5.3.9 The 2012 Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT)

Another turning point in promoting the integration of African markets and the future AEC was the Boosting Intra-African Trade summit in 2012. In January 2012, African Union member states expressed a shared commitment to forming an Africa-wide free trade area and adopted the Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade (Nkuepo, 2012; Mevel and Karingi, 2012). In accordance with the 2010 call by African Ministers of Trade[18] to accelerate regional market integration and establish a continental free trade area by 2017, the 18th African Union Summit of Heads of States and Governments held in Addis Ababa in 2012 endorsed a declaration on Boosting Intra-African Trade and to accelerate the establishment of a Continental Free Trade Area by 2017 (Mevel and Karingi, 2012; Wapmuk and Ali, 2022). The Heads of State and Government directed that the Tripartite Agreement on Trade between three RECs—EAC, COMESA, and SADC—be concluded and that all the RECs' free trade areas must be harmonised and merged to form a Continental Free Trade Area by 2017 (Nkuepo, 2012).

The Action Plan noted that the continent was not significantly leveraging trade opportunities to spur sustainable economic growth and alleviate poverty because of challenges related to the configuration and extent of African trade. Africa's less-than-5% share in global trade, the concentration of its export markets in the primary sector, the inability to produce exports in secondary and tertiary sectors, and the lack of competitiveness highlighted the importance of enhancing economic integration (African Union, 2012). Thus, the leaders at the Summit resolved to establish and leverage the CFTA to boost economic integration, spur economic growth, foster competitiveness, and facilitate more effective resource reallocation (African Union, 2018; Okechukwu and Chikata, 2018). They commissioned the AU Ministers of Trade to initiate trade talks to advance the realisation of the BIAT (African Union, 2014). The Summit agreed that the RECs must conclude their agreements by 2014 so that all their free trade areas could be integrated as a Continental Free Trade Area from 2015 to 2016 (Nkuepo, 2012).

The Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade recommended seven imperatives to facilitate and accelerate the establishment of the CFTA. These include: the development of national, regional and continental trade regimes that bolster and promote intra-African trade; trade facilitation through an efficient resolution of complex customs and administrative procedures and regulations, inefficient and costly transit systems, differences in rules of origin, trade

[18] African ministers of trade met in Kigali in November 2010, recommending fast-tracking the creation of a Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) by 2017. This was reaffirmed in Accra, in December 2011, at the 7th Ordinary Session of the African Union Ministers of Trade Conference (Cheong, Jansen and Peters 2013).

documentation, and standards; boosting of Africa's productive capacity, competitiveness, and economic diversification; building a suitable trade-enabling hard infrastructure[19] and soft infrastructure[20] for improving interconnectivity; the creation of modern and advanced trade-financing mechanisms and the enhancement of capacities in Africa's existing multilateral financial institutions; the establishment of institutions to enhance the dissemination of trade information; and the deepening of factor integration between African countries and regions (African Union, 2012).

5.3.10 The African Union Agenda 2063

The enunciation of the African Union Agenda 2063 in 2013 was a watershed in the fulfilment of the pan-African commitment to continental transformation, development, and integration (AUC, 2015). In 2013, at the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Organisation of African Unity, the African Heads of State and Government adopted a declaration reaffirming a commitment to strengthen the pan-African agenda by working towards building an integrated, prosperous, and peaceful Africa that was driven by Africans, and which represented a dynamic force in the international arena. They adopted a grand vision, Agenda 2063: Africa We Want (African Union, 2013). This roadmap was built upon the strengths and achievements of the OAU Founding Charter, the Monrovia Declaration, the LPA, the Abuja Treaty, the CA, and NEPAD (AUC, 2015). The AU Agenda 2063 envisioned continental economic integration that enabled cross-border, regional, and continental commerce. It sought to build a continental market characterised by trade liberalisation, factor mobility, and advanced infrastructure that propel economic development and technological progress (AUC, 2015). The leaders committed to bracing the establishment of a continent-wide free trade area as a step towards achieving the AEC (African Union, 2013).

5.3.11 The Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) of 2015

As part of efforts to mitigate the challenges that derail regional economic integration, the institutionalisation of inter-regional coordination between COMESA, EAC, and SADC was endorsed at the inaugural Tripartite Summit of leaders and representatives of member states in 2008 (UNECA, 2012). The COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area[21] was

[19] Hard infrastructure includes roads, rail, air and waterways (African Union, 2012).
[20] Soft infrastructure includes energy and Information and Communication Technology (African Union, 2012).
[21] This gigantic REC was established to foster and boost cooperation in, inter alia, economic integration, planned facilitation of the movement of the factors of production and services within the organisation's geography, generation of collective infrastructure programmes, financing and implementation, undertaking joint projects for agricultural development and food security, and in deepening and advancing unanimously certified positions on trade in multinational platforms (EAC, 2005:3).

"established in 2005 to strengthen and deepen economic integration of Southern and East Africa by harmonising policies and programmes in areas of trade, customs and infrastructure development" (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2014:11). Since the inaugural Tripartite Summit in Kampala, Uganda, the formal talks for the creation of the TFTA, which was to be the largest free trade area in Africa, were undertaken by the member states of the three RECs (Final Communique of the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Summit of Heads of State and Government, 2008). The leaders at the Summit undertook to enhance the process of harmonising the trade policies and regimes of the three RECs and help facilitate the achievement of the AEC through the establishment of this FTA (COMESA, EAC and SADC, 2008).

The goals of the TFTA were to create a liberalised single market for goods and services, in which trade and commerce could be conducted with ease, and to inject greater economic development dynamism into the Region (COMESA, EAC, and SADC, 2015). In line with the 2008 Summit, the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area was launched in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, in 2015, calling on partner states to dedicate themselves to the successful implementation of this arrangement (African Union, 2015). Twenty-six members of these RECs endorsed the establishment of the TFTA, which was scheduled to take effect at the beginning of 2016 (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2014). The TFTA covered trade in goods and services, cooperation in trade and development, competition policy, intellectual property rights, and cross-border investments (COMESA, EAC and SADC, 2015). The COMESA-EAC-SADC Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) detailed trade liberalisation, customs cooperation, factor integration, the movement of services, the establishment of the inter-REC Free Trade Area, and the strengthening of joint economic efforts among the RECs, which would be managed through the Tripartite Coordination Mechanism (COMESA, EAC, and SADC, 2011).

The establishment of the TFTA was underpinned by economic aspirations, including enabling economies of scale, enhancing competition, creating a favourable investment environment, and deepening trade relations among the three sub-regions (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2014). According to Mold and Mukwaya (2016), the establishment of the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) between the EAC, COMESA, and SADC marked a historic economic reinvigoration and a turning point in the pursuit of continental economic integration. The TFTA boosted intra-African trade by causing "a substantial increase in trade creation, despite low levels of export diversification, the small number of traded products and the low share of trade in manufactured

products" (Ferreira and Steenkamp, 2020:5). According to Aniche (2014), a strong and well-integrated TFTA had the potential to be one of the most successful regional economic communities in the world. More than any other free trade area, the establishment of the TFTA brought Africa closer to a continental free trade area, given its vast physical geography, large number of national markets, and significant trade liberalisation efforts. In July 2024, the TFTA Agreement entered into force (Karingi, 2025).

5.3.12 The Decision on the Launch of Continental Free Trade Area Negotiations of 2015

In June 2015, the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Governments convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, and launched negotiations to establish the Continental Free Trade Area. They adopted critical instruments to achieve this objective, including the Objectives and Negotiating Principles for the CFTA, the Institutional Arrangements for the CFTA negotiations, the Terms of Reference for the CFTA Negotiating Forum, and the Indicative Roadmap for the CFTA negotiations (Sebahizi, 2017). With vital preparations for the ACFTA negotiations completed and several strides towards integration made by RECs, the Assembly formally launched negotiations to create the CFTA to facilitate continental economic integration pursuant to the Abuja Treaty. The CFTA negotiations were planned to take place from 2015 to 2017 (African Union, 2015).

5.3.13 The Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area of 2018

The Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area was finally signed in Kigali in 2018 (African Union, 2018). By October 2024, thirty-seven AU member states had established AfCFTA Implementation Strategies, and by early 2025, the AfCFTA Agreement had been ratified by 48 AU member states (Karingi, 2025). The agreement focuses on liberalising trade in goods and services, promoting investment, protecting intellectual property rights, and ensuring a sound competition policy. It seeks to expedite the creation of an African single market characterised by the free movement of enterprises, persons, and capital, as well as appropriate mechanisms for coordinating and harmonising trade policies across Africa's multiple Regional Economic Communities (African Union, 2018). While the implementation of the AfCFTA continues to face hurdles, its establishment marks considerable progress toward the AEC, as called for in the Monrovia Declaration.

5.3.14 The Role of Regional Economic Communities in Enabling Continental Economic Integration

5.3.14.1 RECs and Continental Integration

The Constitutive Act of the African Union recognises the importance of Regional Economic Communities in propelling economic integration[22] through policy coordination and harmonisation (OAU, 2000). From the 1970s onward, Africa witnessed the rise of regional economic institutions dedicated to facilitating cooperation and integration. This mandate was later promoted and formalised by the Abuja Treaty (Maluwa, 2003). The RECs are fundamental pillars in the furtherment of the Abuja Treaty's vision of AEC as they manage and spearhead sub-regional integration initiatives (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). The African Union-recognised RECs—namely ECOWAS, SADC, COMESA, AMU, IGAD, CEN-SAD, ECCAS, and EAC—have been carrying out this mandate (UNECA, 2017; Adetula, Bereketeab, and Jaiyebo, 2016). Without the work of these RECs, the AfCFTA would never have been established, as their progress over the years enabled its creation (Vambe, 2024).

5.3.14.2 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

In 1975, the Economic Community of West African States[23] (ECOWAS) was founded based on the Treaty of Lagos and is headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria (African Union, 2025). It was formed to advance trade integration, social and cultural cooperation, the mobility of the factors of production, the formation of an economic and monetary union, policy harmonisation, regulations, and standards, fostering economic stability, and the improvement of the welfare of the peoples of West Africa (UNECA, 2012). ECOWAS is one of the most advanced RECs in terms of integration (African Union, 2025). The REC has reached the third phase of the Abuja Treaty, namely the establishment of a regional FTA and Customs Union (UNECA, 2017). ECOWAS also has a regional Bank for Investment and Development established to provide funding geared towards boosting the region's economic performance (UNECA, 2012). It has made greater progress in the free movement of people and macroeconomic convergence than other RECs, except the EAC (African Union, 2025). It allows the free movement of people[24] through the "90-day visa-free stay, the adoption of the ECOWAS passport and the ECOWAS

[22] It is crucial to note that trade liberalisation amongst African countries has also been undertaken by the Pan-Arab FTA, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) (UNECA, 2017).

[23] ECOWAS member states are Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and Togo (ECOWAS, n.d).

[24] As noted by UNECA, AUC and AfDB (2025), "Establishing free movement of persons is crucial to implementing the AfCFTA, as it can boost intra-African trade, facilitate labour mobility and skills transfer, increase employment opportunities and contribute to social integration".

Brown Card Motor Vehicle Insurance Scheme, and the elimination of rigid border formalities" (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025:74). By 2025, ECOWAS was the only REC that had achieved this (African Union, 2025). However, it had not yet implemented the rights of residence and of establishment. Additionally, the decision by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to withdraw from ECOWAS and form a separate bloc, as well as their plan to introduce new biometric passports, could undermine the free movement of persons in the region, potentially creating a negative impact on the realisation of the AfCFTA (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

5.3.14.3 Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)

In 1989, the Maghreb countries founded the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) through the Treaty of Marrakech to promote economic integration and cooperation, economic development, and political, security, and diplomatic cooperation (Allouche, 2019; Parshotam, 2020). The organisation is headquartered in Rabat, Morocco. Its member states are Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, and they share a common language, culture, and history. One of AMU's major achievements is the Maghreb Bank for Investment and Foreign Trade, launched in 2015 to promote investment and intra-Maghreb trade (African Union, 2025). Regrettably, the Arab Maghreb Union has not achieved the FTA and Customs Union required under the Abuja Treaty, as the REC's performance has been dismal (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). In the period from 2019 to 2023, 67% of exports from the AMU region went to Europe (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025), indicating a lack of regional economic integration among its members.

AMU countries are signatories to several European-led and Arab-led economic cooperation programmes that have deepened their economic ties with other Arab countries and Europe, thereby slowing the pace of intra-regional integration. Some of these programmes are the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy, EU-Mediterranean Free Trade Area, the Union for the Mediterranean, the Greater Arab Free Trade Area, and the Agadir Agreement (Parshotam, 2020). In addition, two of its member states—Tunisia and Libya—are also members of COMESA (UNECA, 2019). The interplay of European, Arab, Maghreb, and African agendas and interests in the region has hindered progress and the achievement of a common purpose. Incompatible national agendas, better economic benefits outside the AMU region, and political challenges have militated against regional integration in this region. Political dynamics, including Morocco-Algeria tensions and the reluctance to grant regional institutions greater authority to regulate intra-regional trade, have also hindered integration efforts (Parshotam, 2020).

5.3.14.4 Southern African Development Community (SADC)

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) was founded in 1992 in Windhoek, Namibia. It replaced the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), which was formed to promote political and economic cooperation, with a major focus on decolonisation (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). It is headquartered in Gaborone, Botswana (African Union, 2025). SADC[25] was formed to promote sustainable social and economic development, democracy and popular sovereignty, peace, security and stability, internally driven development, policy harmonisation between member states and the Community, unity, and social justice (SADC, 1992). Like COMESA and ECCAS, SADC has implemented an FTA, thereby partially fulfilling the third phase of the Abuja Treaty (UNECA, 2017). The FTA is operational, enabling robust trade in goods (African Union, 2025).

The REC has made significant strides in increasing intra-regional and international trade volumes through the implementation of its Industrialisation Strategy and Roadmap 2015-2063 (African Union, 2025; UNECA, 2019). For example, in 2017, over 70% of African products imported to SADC countries came from other SADC countries (UNECA, 2019). Trade in services still faces regulatory constraints, as the lack of harmonisation persists. Five SADC states, which are South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, have enjoyed trade benefits because of their membership in the Southern Africa Customs Union (SACU), which has removed customs duties and ensured the use of a common external tariff (African Union, 2025). SADC also has a protocol on the free movement of people, which its member states have accepted, but not yet fully implemented (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

Several challenges have hamstrung intra-SADC economic integration. Progress in intra-SADC harmonisation of key norms has been minimal, leading to the continued use of discriminatory technical barriers to restrict imports (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). Predictably, internal crises and instability in countries such as the DRC and Lesotho weakened SADC's ability to implement its agenda. In addition, eleven of the sixteen SADC members are also members of COMESA, subjecting the REC to the Spaghetti Bowl challenge that other RECS endure (UNECA, 2019).

[25] SADC has sixteen Member States, namely Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (SADC, n.d).

5.3.14.5 Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)

In 1994, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa[26] (COMESA) was formed. It was a successor to the Preferential Trade Area (PTA) for Eastern and Southern Africa, established in 1981 (WOAH, 2020). Its secretariat is in Lusaka, Zambia (African Union, 2025). COMESA has twenty-one members and is the largest REC in Africa (UNECA, 2019). The REC seeks to achieve sustainable and shared economic development, develop common macro-economic regimes, attract investment, boost scientific and technical know-how and innovation to propel development, create a conducive political environment for regional economic integration, and help contribute to the realisation of the AEC (COMESA, 2009). COMESA has partly achieved the third imperative—FTA—set out as part of building the AEC, and this has enhanced intra-regional trade, with reciprocal trade estimated at over 75%. Its future customs union is still under negotiation, as policy harmonisation is ongoing, but several protocols to facilitate economic integration have been adopted (African Union, 2025; UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). Since most SADC and EAC member states are also members of COMESA, the FTA regulations of these blocs cover a large share of intra-regional trade within COMESA (UNECA, 2019).

5.3.14.6 Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)

In 1998, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), founded in 1983 and commencing operations in 1985, was relaunched in Gabon by the leaders of member states (NEPAD, 2015; UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). ECCAS[27] is headquartered in Libreville, Gabon (African Union, 2025). The REC was relaunched to promote regional economic and monetary integration, create a sustainable and conflict-free political environment, encourage sound intra-regional policy development, stimulate entrepreneurship, and foster good diplomatic relations among member states (NEPAD, 2015). Having established an FTA in 2006, ECCAS has partially achieved the third phase of the Abuja Treaty (UNECA, 2017; UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). The establishment of a regional customs union has been postponed on many occasions (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). ECCAS has made no substantial progress in improving its performance and increasing the volumes of both intra-Community and intra-African trade since its relaunch (UNECA, 2019; UNECA, AUC and

[26] Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Eswatini, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Trade Law Centre, n.d).

[27] ECCAS has eleven members, which are Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, and São Tomé and Principe (African Union, 2025).

AfDB, 2025). Although ECCAS has a formally established FTA, policy harmonisation aimed at trade liberalisation has not been achieved. As a result, the desired elimination of tariffs and other trade barriers has not been realised, and intra-regional trade patterns have not significantly changed. Nearly 70% of exports from the ECCAS region went to Asia during the period from 2019 to 2023 (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

5.3.14.7 Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which covers the Horn of Africa and parts of the East Africa region, was formed in 1996, replacing the IGADD, which was created in 1986. IGAD[28] is headquartered in the city of Djibouti in Djibouti. It was formed to promote social and economic development, champion common development policies, advance regional economic integration, foster cooperation and friendship, and facilitate the realisation of COMESA and the AEC (UNECA, n.d.). Seven of the eight members of the REC are party to the COMESA macroeconomic convergence goals given that the aims and objectives of the IGAD treaty provide that its members shall "promote and realize the objectives of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)" (UNECA, 2016). Between 2019 and 2023, IGAD outperformed other RECs in intra-African export rates, with 36% of its exports going to other African countries. IGAD member states have also adopted specific protocols regarding the free movement of persons to boost trade and other commercial opportunities (UNECA, 2017; UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

However, IGAD has made no progress in its efforts to establish an FTA and a Customs Union, making it unlikely that it will become a common market (UNECA, 2017; UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). IGAD is among Africa's least successful RECs in regional integration (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). Several IGAD member states are experiencing internal instability and conflict, including Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia, which have forced the organisation to devote significant attention to peace and security (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

5.3.14.8 Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD)

In 2000, the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) was formed to facilitate and promote regional integration (Mburu-Ndoria, 2015). Its headquarters are in N'Djamena, Chad

[28] IGAD members are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Uganda (African Union, 2025).

(African Union, 2025). Like IGAD, CEN-SAD[29] failed to establish an FTA and Customs Union by 2017 (UNECA, 2017). There has not been significant progress towards establishing an FTA in the region, making CEN-SAD one of the most underperforming RECs on the continent (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). The failure of the REC to implement the free trade protocol its members adopted over ten years ago has prevented the realisation of trade integration in the region (African Union, 2025). Between 2019 and 2023, 45% of exports from the CEN-SAD region went to Europe. Additionally, this REC faces serious capacity constraints, as its member states have not been collaborating on joint programmes for a long time (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025). Nevertheless, many CEN-SAD member states have made progress and benefited from trade integration within the other RECs to which they belong (UNECA, 2019).

5.3.14.9 East African Community (EAC)

The East African Community (EAC) was established in 2000 to promote cooperation and shared development in political, economic, social, and cultural fields (EAC, 2007). The city of Arusha, Tanzania, hosts the EAC[30] Secretariat (African Union, 2025). The Community undertook to promote political and economic integration, including a customs union, a common market, a monetary union, and a political union, to boost and monitor cooperation across various fields of human endeavour (EAC, 2007). The EAC has successfully established the FTA, a CU, and a CM that provides for the free movement of goods, services, capital, labour, and persons, as well as rights of establishment and residence, making the EAC the most successful REC in Africa (UNECA, 2017, 2019). Instead of transitioning from an FTA to a CU, as is usually the case in the economic integration process, the EAC founding members—Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda—began by establishing a CU as the first phase in 2006 (UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

In January 2010, the EAC established a common market, which facilitated the free flow of goods and services, factor integration, and the rights of establishment and residence. The EAC has made several strides in implementing internal tariff elimination, common standards, rules of origin, and a common trade policy (UNECA, 2019). The REC had planned to establish a monetary union by 2023, based on the protocol it adopted in 2013 (African Union, 2025), although this is yet to happen. Nevertheless, having introduced a common market in 2010, the

[29] Its member states are Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, and Tunisia (Mburu-Ndoria, 2015)

[30] Its member states are Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia (African Union, 2025).

EAC has been more successful in driving economic integration than other RECs (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2014). The Community has also been making considerable progress in advancing macroeconomic convergence through the harmonisation of monetary policies and financial systems and practices in preparation for a future currency union (UNECA, 2019). Furthermore, the REC has also reduced roaming charges and approved the establishment of cross-border mobile phone services, enabling easy cross-border financial transactions (UNECA, 2019).

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided a detailed discussion of the significance, history, and status of Africa's regional economic integration, as well as the development of the AfCFTA. The chapter explained the political and economic foundations and key milestones in the evolution of the AfCFTA, seeking to clarify the relationship between the formation of Africa's intergovernmental organisations and policy frameworks and the AfCFTA. This chapter situates the AfCFTA within Africa's pan-Africanist socio-economic development agenda. It also sought to underscore the indispensability of the AfCFTA in advancing the AU Agenda 2063, thereby demonstrating the extent to which the AfCFTA marks a turning point in Africa's economic integration and development. It has explained the pan-African strategies that are predominantly used in the integration schemes pursued by sub-regional and continental players. The chapter has also highlighted the significance of intergovernmental commitments and programmes, the bottom-up and gradual nature of Africa's economic integration, and the intersection of national, sub-regional, continental, and external interests. The next chapter presents and analyses data in line with the thematic analysis technique.

CHAPTER SIX

DATA PRESENTATION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on data presentation, followed by data analysis in the next chapter. The study aimed to investigate and examine how the different identities and underlying interests of the major players influence the orientation and development of the AfCFTA. It analyses the establishment of the AfCFTA, identifies the major players and their interests in its establishment, and examines how the interests and identities of different players influence its development. The key research questions of this study were: to explore how the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area can be understood; to interrogate the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area; to evaluate the interests of the major players in the African Continental Free Trade Area; and to examine how the interests and identities of different players shape the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The study uses thematic analysis. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 35 participants. As a requirement to uphold ethical standards, the study does not reveal participants' real names. Instead, labels P1-P35 are used. P represents Participant. The themes were developed based on the study's objectives, while the sub-themes were developed from the interview schedules and interview data.

Table 6.1 Illustration of Theme Development

Themes (Research Objectives)	Sub-themes	Sub-topics / Categories
To explore how the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area can be understood	Rationale for the Establishment of the AfCFTA	- The AfCFTA as a tool for market integration and structural economic transformation - The AfCFTA as a tool for attracting FDI, and enhancing innovation and global competitiveness

	Alignment with Long-Term Continental Integration Goals	- The AfCFTA as a tool for fostering African-led development and ending dependency - The AfCFTA as a basis for deeper integration - Persistent trade barriers as obstacles to deeper continental integration
	Mechanisms and Strategies for ensuring the AfCFTA's success	- The creation of the AfCFTA Secretariat - The Guided Trade Initiative as a Strategic Pilot Programme - The creation of the Dispute Settlement Mechanism - The use of the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities
		- Loss of customs revenue and backlash from society - Uneven gains and differences in levels of development and productive capacities

	Potential Demerits of the AfCFTA Measures for Mitigating Drawbacks	- Movement of people and social tension - Adjustment Fund as a support mechanism
To interrogate the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area	Major Players and Power Dynamics in the Establishment of the AfCFTA	- The role of AU Member States - The role of the African Union - Regional Economic Communities as building blocks - The Supportive Role of UNECA, UNCTAD and AfDB - The Supportive Role of the African Export–Import Bank - The role and influence of Africa's major economies

		- The Supportive Role of External Partners (EU, China, and others) - The Role of the Private Sector
To evaluate the interests of the major players in the African Continental Free Trade Area	Interests of the African Union, its Member States and the RECs	- Trade expansion, economic growth and better quality of life - Addressing colonial economic legacies - Building collective bargaining power - Fostering collective self-reliance and strategic autonomy
	Interests of the major economies	- Market Access and trade dominance
	Interests of the External Players (European Union, Britain and China)	- Market Access, Investment Protection and Access to Natural Resources - Migration management - Addressing Africa's Aid Dependency Problem - Strategic Partnership and Geopolitical Influence

	Show of commitment and momentum	- Speed of Signing and Ratification of the AfCFTA Agreement
To examine how the interests and identities of different players shape the development of the AfCFTA	Identities and Their Influence on AfCFTA Development	- Pan-Africanism as a shared integration identity - African norms of cooperation, unity and collective progress - Liberal economy as a socially constructed identity - Nationalism, protectionism and resistance to deeper integration - Regional and geo-linguistic identities as enablers and constraints of African integration - Identity-based conflicts: ethnic, religious and cultural divisions - Lack of strategies from the AU and the RECs - Lack of strategies from the AU and the RECs

	Measures and Interventions to Address Incongruent Identities and Interests	- Limited authority of the African Union - Revitalising Pan-Africanism: promoting continental unity and self-reliance - Trust building, overcoming divisions and cementing peace
	Ways to Ensure the Successful Implementation of the AfCFTA	- Good governance and strong institutions are prerequisites for the AfCFTA's success - Providing technical assistance and implementation support to countries

6.2 Rationale for the Establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

6.2.1. Significance and Worth of the AfCFTA for Africa's Future

6.2.1.1 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Market Integration and Structural Economic Transformation

A frequently recurring pattern in participants' discussions was their highlighting of the AfCFTA's capacity to drive trade liberalisation and market integration. This sub-theme reflects the emphasis on intra-African trade volumes, tariff reductions, trade integration, industrialisation, value addition, diversification, value chain development, and the ending of economic fragmentation as the key rationales for the AfCFTA's establishment.

The participants highlighted this in the following ways:

P24: "*Trade among African countries is at about 17%, according to UNECA and the African Union... This has to change. And the AfCFTA offers Africans that opportunity—the opportunity to change this situation and have an integrated and functional market for goods and services. It's a good foundation for integration and for development"*.

P30: "*The AfCFTA necessitates 90% tariff reduction and the progressive removal of all non-tariff barriers. That is significant for free trade and trade integration"*.

P15: "*What governments have done and have tried to do is really to establish a platform for businesses to interact with each other on the continent. Approximately 85 to 90% of economies on the continent are dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises. Most of them do not necessarily have access to the markets in the rest of the continent… this is a really huge market for our already existing SMEs to actually take advantage of open markets or market access in many other African countries where the potential for business really exists and has never really been tapped"*.

P24: "*There is enough frustration with dependency and lack of growth. The economic problems in Sub-Saharan Africa and the everyday challenges like food crisis, high cost of living and unemployment that the people have to deal with place a huge obligation on the AU and its member states to find solutions"*.

P17: "*If you look at the founding document of the AfCFTA, you will see that promotion of economic development, economic growth, industrialisation, promotion of regional value chain, and integration of value chain across Africa, the promotion of sustainable development and sustainable development goals, they are part of the general and specific objectives. So, I think AfCFTA is a catalyst to jumpstart massive economic change"*.

P13: "*It is a framework that, if properly pursued and implemented, will bring about economic transformation on the continent… shifting from agriculture and other lower sectors of the economy to manufacturing, services and industrial goods... The kind of trade that is being envisaged in the AfCFTA would only come about through transformation and industrialisation, value addition. So, you are talking about finished and semi-finished products"*.

The extracts reflect a shared view that the AfCFTA is a tool for fostering market integration, spurring economic growth, enabling the expansion of SME operations into new markets and promoting structural economic transformation to provide a better life for Africans.

6.2.1.2 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Attracting FDI, and Enhancing Innovation and Global Competitiveness

Participants frequently noted that the AfCFTA is crucial for boosting innovation and competitiveness. This sub-theme encompasses participants' views on the AfCFTA as a tool to attract FDI, foster innovation, develop human capital, and boost global competitiveness.

This point was expressed in the following ways:

P11: "*AfCFTA will protect and support capital mobility and FDI better because it provides a continental framework with investment protections".*

P3: "*The long-term benefit of the AfCFTA is the boosting of innovation. The FDI, new digital and physical infrastructure, investments in human capital, and the environment for competition are how you innovate, and that's the avenue the AfCFTA provides us with".*

P24: "*The AfCFTA will also enhance the competitiveness of the African economies globally and hence make Africa a big player in the world economy and politics… Because of the elimination of tariffs, rigid customs procedures, and other barriers, more companies in Africa will invest in Research and Development as well as in expanding to other countries or markets".*

These extracts reflect a shared understanding that the AfCFTA will attract investments and foster innovation and global competitiveness.

6.2.1.3 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Fostering African-led Development and Ending Dependency

Several participants emphasised the significance of AfCFTA in promoting African-led development. Participants consistently highlighted internally driven solutions, greater strategic autonomy and overcoming dependency as vital motivations and potential benefits of the AfCFTA.

Participants articulated these points as follows:

P13: "*The treaty identifies the need for infrastructure development, human capital development, modernisation and technological development, diversification, competitiveness, etc. I consider all these the necessary requirements for home-driven growth and development, and if these are developed, the AfCFTA will deliver rapid and enormous growth for everyone".*

P33: "*The AfCFTA shifts focus to internal processing and tries to end the hold of foreign-dominated supply chains. This is how we build self-reliance and internally driven growth. This is how we get Africa out of underdevelopment"*.

P31: "*The AfCFTA has been established because there is some kind of recognition that the current system of depending on the West for handouts is no longer going to work, given the demographic challenges we have on the continent*. *A continental free trade area provides us with a strong lever to overcome dependency and achieve self-reliance*".

These extracts reveal participants' perceptions of the AfCFTA as a tool for driving endogenous, African-led economic development, promoting self-reliance, and freeing Africa from external dependency.

6.2.2 Modelling and Emulation of External Regional Integration Schemes

6.2.2.1 Following the Example of the European Project

Across the interviews, participants emphasised the extent to which European integration influenced the development of the AfCFTA. They highlighted the European project, including the European Union's Single Market, as a model leveraged in the creation of the AfCFTA, and the unique realities of fragmented infrastructure, a lower industrial base, and respect for sovereignty that characterise the AfCFTA.

The participants accentuated this view as follows:

P24: "*Regional integration in Africa is based on the European model…. As a result, you see many similarities between the Single European Act and the AfCFTA. That is why even as an FTA, the text of the AfCFTA says it aims to create a single market for goods and services"*.

P11: "*To a degree, the AfCFTA and integration in Africa are modelled on European free trade schemes, but not entirely. But no one is turning a blind eye to the fragmented infrastructure and lower industrial base Africa has to deal with. So, while the lessons from the EU have been significant, they are neither enough nor totally suitable for Africa"*.

P19: "*The EU's single market model has been a rich source of inspiration. But because of the respect for national sovereignties, the AfCFTA deliberately avoids the supranationalism we see in the EU's single market. That careful reflection of lessons from Europe allows us to learn from the EU's success without imposing things that could blemish the AfCFTA"*.

The extracts reflect participants' appreciation of the European experience as a source of lessons that Africa has utilised, and of the differences between the European and African contexts as factors that have made the AfCFTA more aligned with African political and economic realities.

6.2.3 Alignment with Long-Term Continental Integration Goals

6.2.3.1 The AfCFTA as a Basis for Deeper Integration

A recurring pattern emerging in participants' responses was the perceived role of free trade arrangements in facilitating deeper integration. The sub-theme captures a consistent portrayal of tariff elimination and free trade areas as enablers of deeper economic integration, and the perceived adverse impact of tariff exemptions, sensitive product lists, and non-tariff barriers on deeper economic integration.

This understanding is illustrated below:

P16: "*Now, this is the first time that we're having something of that scale for economic integration, and it realises that these recognised economic communities will serve as the building blocks through their FTAs. So, I think, this is a better approach as opposed to coming from the top down. It's going to build on the successes of the RECs to progress towards the African Economic community"*.

P6: "*AfCFTA is designed to do away with a lot of tariff and non-tariff barriers... If you can deal with tariff and non-tariff barriers, and you can deal with rules of origin, then you are moving closer to a bit of a customs union…there are elements in the AfCFTA that can move Africa towards a single market, or a customs union, or economic or monetary union"*.

P6: "*First of all, the tariff lines… What about the 10%? What does it cover? It covers sensitive products, right? The 10% are very significant… The 10% is about the areas that each country is trying to protect. And if you are talking of a customs union, if you are talking of economic and monetary union, all those levels of protection have to go… There are many exemptions… and once they become entrenched, it becomes so difficult to undo them"*.

P17: "*The non-tariff barriers are very difficult to detect… So, the other problem that could militate against the success of the AfCFTA will be the application of non-tariff barriers. The classifications of non-tariff barriers are so many, and they depend on government regulation"*.

These extracts reflect varied views among participants, reflecting an emphasis on the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers as suitable foundations for advancing towards higher stages of continental economic integration, and the possible negative effect the

remaining restrictions may have on the potential of the AfCFTA to lay the groundwork for deeper continental integration

6.2.4 Mechanisms and Strategies for Ensuring the AfCFTA's Success

6.2.4.1 Institutional Mechanisms and Strategies for Implementing the AfCFTA

Participants frequently noted the creation of institutional mechanisms and strategies as prudent steps in implementing the AfCFTA. They highlighted the perceived usefulness of the AfCFTA Secretariat designed for the implementation and monitoring of the AfCFTA; the Guided Trade Initiative designed to ensure the determination of the AfCFTA's operational and commercial viability and the identification of potential hindrances to its implementation; the Dispute Settlement Mechanism designed to ensure that all parties are bound by common rules and operate in a level playing field, harmonisation of AU and RECs frameworks; and the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities designed to ensure coordination between the AU and the RECs and tracking of the AfCFTA's implementation progress.

The participants expressed their views in the following ways:

P28: "*The fact that you have created a whole secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which mirrors the World Trade Organization secretariat, I think it shows that there's some commitment to focus attention to ensure this thing happens"*.

P30: "*The Institutional Framework for the Implementation of the AfCFTA includes the AfCFTA Secretariat, the Assembly of the Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers of Trade, and the Committee of Senior Trade Officials. They will handle the implementation, monitoring and administration of the AfCFTA"*.

P11: "*The Secretariat has created and leveraged the Guided Trade Initiative as a strategic pilot programme, and more than 40 countries are participating in it. There is a lot to be learnt from it, and the feasibility of the AfCFTA has been demonstrated. Soon, countries will be able to engage under the AfCFTA's harmonised rules"*.

P14: "*For two years now, we have used the Guided Trade Initiative to prepare for the full implementation and identify the economic and regulatory constraints that could derail the AfCFTA. Those insights are being integrated into our frameworks to ensure the AfCFTA is successfully implemented"*.

P32: "*There's a dispute settlement mechanism, which is in place to ensure the AfCFTA provides a level playing field for all parties"*.

P3: "*The AfCFTA treaty has a mechanism for dispute settlement, and that means the AU will be able to ensure the rules are respected by everyone"*.

The responses highlighted the significance of the institutional mechanisms and tools the AU has developed to ensure and/or enhance implementation, administration, progress monitoring, rule compliance, fair implementation, and AU-REC harmonisation, coordination, and progress tracking in the AfCFTA Secretariat's implementation of the AfCFTA.

6.2.4.2 Lack of Continent-wide Freedom of Movement and Weaknesses in Strengthening the AU-REC Coordination

A notable pattern emerging from participants' responses was the emphasis on the lack of continent-wide freedom of movement and the flaws in consolidating AU-RECs' coordination. Participants emphasised the lack of ratifications for the Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons as a hindrance to the AfCFTA's implementation and the failure to fully implement the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities as evidence of inadequacies in the AU's approach.

The participants articulated this in the following ways:

P18: "*The people who sell goods and invest capital outside their country need freedom of movement. The AU's Protocol on Free Movement of Persons has been ratified by fewer than five countries, and there is little hope of anything changing anytime soon"*.

P30: "*Regional integration is not only about goods and services. It is also about capital and the free movement of persons. Right now, the AfCFTA is being implemented without a protocol that protects freedom of movement. In 2018, the AU adopted the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons. That protocol has not received enough signatures to come into effect"*.

P12: "*Somehow, there is an awareness of the extent to which the Spaghetti Bowl effect stifles progress on regional integration. Almost everybody is aware of the seriousness of this problem. But for some reason, the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities the African Union adopted in early 2008 has not been fully implemented, and without a tool of that significance, there will be many challenges emerging during the implementation, including uneven implementation amongst RECs"*.

P23: "*I am not convinced that enough has been done to deter known threats to implementation, and I look at the persistent fragmentation and the weak coordination between the AU and the RECs. If the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities is leveraged, this problem goes away. But it is not being leveraged adequately, and maybe because there is not enough political commitment".*

The responses reflect a shared concern that the lack of an operational free movement protocol and the failure to maximise the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities may hinder the realisation of successful intra-African trade under the AfCFTA.

6.2.5 Potential Demerits of the AfCFTA

6.2.5.1 Loss of Customs Revenue and Backlash from Society

A prominent pattern in participants' accounts regarding the AfCFTA's demerits was the loss of customs revenues and the backlash it may engender. Participants emphasised the possible loss of customs revenues and the social, economic and political problems such a loss may cause as a downside of the AfCFTA's establishment.

The participants highlighted this in the following ways:

P23: *"People must not forget that about 50% or more of the national revenue in countries like Cameroon, Lesotho, The Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, comes from customs duties. In fact, in São Tomé and Príncipe, almost the entire revenue is generated through customs duties. I cannot imagine the pushback from the citizens of these countries if the stronger economies and their monopolies take all the benefits. The whole thing will collapse in front of our very eyes".*

P20: *"Everyone agrees that there will be huge revenue losses for the smaller economies that depend on tariff revenue. What happens if the AfCFTA Adjustment Fund does not deliver as expected for governments and their local companies? That means all kinds of social and economic problems will rain heavily on society. Of course, there will be demands for withdrawal from the AfCFTA, a stronger form of Grexit. Even Afreximbank's fund will not make any meaningful difference if that happens".*

These extracts illustrate participants' concerns that customs revenue losses may trigger a citizen-led pushback against a country's participation in the AfCFTA.

6.2.5.2 Uneven Gains, and Differences in Levels of Development and Productive Capacities

Participants frequently highlighted the differences in levels of development and productive capacities as issues that may lead to uneven distribution of trade benefits. They shared concerns about economic losses, differences in levels of development, and the uneven distribution of trade benefits between small and large economies.

Participants expressed this in the following ways:

P5: "*Generally, we know, and we accept that free trade brings gains and trade liberalisation can result in income and an increase in welfare gains and those things. But at a sectoral level, there are going to be sectors in countries that lose completely. They will be obliterated because of the AfCFTA. They are just not competitive"*.

P24: "*There will not be an even distribution of trade benefits because of the differences in GDP size, productivity, and levels of economic development. There is little or no doubt that South Africa, Egypt and Kenya stand to gain more from the AfCFTA because of their diversified and large economies"*.

The responses highlighted the importance of differences in levels of development and productive capacity as factors that may enable larger economies to benefit substantially, while smaller economies face economic losses.

6.2.6 Measures for Mitigating Drawbacks

6.2.6.1 Adjustment Fund as a Support Mechanism

Participants frequently referred to the Adjustment Fund as a key mechanism for mitigating the drawbacks of trade under the AfCFTA. They highlighted the importance of the Adjustment Fund (Facility), a financial mechanism established by the AfCFTA Secretariat and Afreximbank to support countries facing revenue losses and help them and companies adapt to the AfCFTA.

The following extracts illustrate this point:

P24: "*Another positive mechanism is the Adjustment Fund that will temporarily support weaker economies that face a loss of revenue. The funds will come from Afreximbank, working with the Secretariat… This is what past initiatives and regional levels did not do"*.

P29: "*This Adjustment Facility is being set up where these countries that have lost revenue can then tap into the Adjustment Facility on behalf of the private sector. The private sector will*

therefore use that facility to be able to improve the services and goods that they have so that they can put them in the market".

The extracts illustrate participants' perception of the Adjustment Fund as a key financial mechanism for supporting transitional adjustments and ensuring equitable participation in AfCFTA.

6.2.6.2 Exceptions for Countries that Need to Protect their Industries

Participants repeatedly drew attention to the exceptions for accommodating varying levels of economic development and protecting infant industries. They emphasised a shared view that tariff exemptions, special and differential treatment, and variable geometry are vital safeguards to ensure there are no losers in the AfCFTA market.

Participants articulated this view in the following ways:

P14: "*There are exceptions to the agreement. And some of them are general exceptions, some of them are security exceptions. It allows countries to depart from what has been agreed for a limited period. You have exceptions that allow you to deviate from your obligations, whether it is for issues to deal with the balance of payments or infant industries"*.

P6: "*The AfCFTA agreement itself allows for special measures. The tariff reduction covers only 90%. The 10% are sensitive areas. Every country is allowed to look for the sensitive areas it wants to protect"*.

The extracts highlight participants' portrayal of the AfCFTA exceptions and special provisions for countries with balance of payments issues and sensitive industry concerns, allowing the least developed countries to implement them using a different schedule, as crucial tools to ensure distributional fairness.

6.3 Major Players and Power Dynamics in the Establishment of the AfCFTA

6.3.1 The Role of the AU Member States

A recurring theme across the interviews was the primacy of African Union member states in establishing the AfCFTA. Participants consistently viewed the member states' roles in deciding to establish the AfCFTA, negotiating it, and implementing it as essential to the AfCFTA's creation.

Participants highlighted this in the following ways:

P3: "*The African heads of state have been the most important force behind integration since the independence era. The decision to establish the CFTA in 2012 was made by the Assembly of the African heads of state. When the decision was made, the African Ministers of Trade had to start working on the project".*

P14: "*The AfCFTA is a members-driven process. What that means is the whole process regarding the negotiations, implementation and so on is the responsibility of the African Union member states".*

These extracts illustrate participants' perception of the AU member states' role in the emergence and implementation of the AfCFTA as a requisite part of the AfCFTA's establishment.

6.3.2 The Role of the African Union

A prominent pattern emerging from several interviews was the perception that the African Union and its structures were a critical component in establishing the AfCFTA. Participants expressed a shared view of the African Union (AUC), African Ministers of Trade, the CFTA Negotiating Forum, and Senior Trade officials as key players in the conceptualisation, planning, negotiation, and finalisation of the AfCFTA.

Participants expressed their views as follows:

P28: *"I think from a political perspective, there's no question the mandate of the African Union is to drive policy in the wide spectrum of development issues in Africa, including trade. And so the African Union has championed the African Continental Free Trade Area".*

P20: "*The Negotiating Forum and its Technical Working Groups carried out the tasks of negotiating the terms of the CFTA and reporting to the Senior Trade Officials and the Trade Ministers. They were the architects; they were the strategists. They were the real spade workers during the most critical time. Several meetings were held by the Negotiating Forum, and within a period of three years, the treaty was ready".*

The extracts illustrate participants' portrayal of the AU and its structures as key players in developing and championing the creation of the AfCFTA.

6.3.3 Regional Economic Communities as Building Blocks

A notable pattern emerging across the interviews was the participants' emphasis on the role of Africa's Regional Economic Communities as the building blocks for continental integration. Participants expressed a shared view of the RECs as players advancing sub-regional

integration, developing regional trading agreements, facilitating policy harmonisation, and ensuring the implementation of the AfCFTA in their regions.

Participants illustrated this in the following ways:

P13: "*The Abuja Treaty actually envisaged that certain levels of integration must be achieved first at the sub-regional level, which would then build, serve as building blocks for the continental integration agenda, which would culminate in the African Economic Community"*.

P32: "*The African Continental Free Trade Area is not like a new discovery as such. Because it is built upon the work which has been done by the RECs, there has been a lot of work done by the RECs… when you look at some of the regional trading arrangements. So, the African Continental Free Trade Area is an amalgamation of all these works, which have been taking place over the years".*

The responses highlight the portrayal of the RECs as players that handle more foundational parts of continental integration and facilitate the emergence and implementation of the AfCFTA.

6.3.4 The Supportive Role of UNECA, UNCTAD and AfDB

Several participants highlighted the importance of the support provided by UNECA, UNCTAD, and the AfDB in establishing the AfCFTA. They expressed a consistent perception of UNECA, UNCTAD and AfDB as major players in the establishment of the AfCFTA because they provided research support, technical assistance, analytical support and capacity-building support before and during the AfCFTA negotiations.

Participants illustrated this in the following ways:

P1: "*I would say from the very beginning, the UN Economic Commission for Africa was almost like the research arm of the AU, from the time when the negotiations started to when they concluded. Many of the studies and the analysis that went into helping the negotiations came from UNECA. There was the African Development Bank, UNECA, UNCTAD and then, latterly, Afreximbank. UNECA and UNCTAD helped to do a lot of research that went into the negotiations. In fact, these organisations participated and sat in on the meetings etc… All of that interaction with the AUC helped to make sure that there was this very well-rounded agreement"*.

P3: "*I cannot think of any major economic achievement the AU has made without the help of the UNECA office in Addis Ababa. The joint work between UNECA, the AU, and the African*

Development Bank is why we have the AfCFTA. Without the technical assistance and the amount of research UNECA did years before the decision to establish a continental free trade area was made, there would have been no AfCFTA".

The extracts highlight participants' perceptions of UNECA, UNCTAD, and AfDB as vital sources of research, analytical, technical, and capacity-building support during the AU's conceptualisation, negotiation, and early implementation of the AfCFTA.

6.3.5 The Supportive Role of the African Export–Import Bank

Several participants emphasised the importance of the African Export-Import Bank's financial and digital infrastructure support in implementing the AfCFTA. Participants perceived Afreximbank's support through the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, the Adjustment Facility, MANSA, and trade finance as a critical enabler in the implementation of the AfCFTA.

Participants articulated this view in the following ways:

P1: "*Afreximbank came on board to provide some very useful tools that would help the implementation of the agreement—things like the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, things like the Adjustment Facility, the MANSA, which has to do with payments, trade finance and things like that. They are positioning themselves and shaping themselves up to be a real strategic partner for the AfCFTA Secretariat as it seeks to supervise the implementation of the agreement".*

P24: "*The AfCFTA Secretariat has also given the Afreximbank an opportunity to be a big player in African trade. Afreximbank has provided substantial financing for trade facilitation, for the PAPSS, for the Adjustment Facility, you name it".*

The extracts reflect participants' views on Afreximbank's funding support, payment systems, trade finance, and trade facilitation as significant contributions to the implementation of the AfCFTA.

6.3.6 The Role and Influence of Africa's Major Economies

A prominent pattern emerging in participants' discussions of major players was the emphasis on the influence of the largest economies in the establishment of the AfCFTA. Participants perceived the role of Africa's largest economies—including Nigeria, South Africa, Morocco, Egypt, and Kenya—as influential in the emergence and implementation of the AfCFTA.

However, some participants did not share this view as they observed equal participation in the AfCFTA's establishment.

The following extracts illustrate this view:

P21: "*So, all the big economies are behind it, Nigeria, perhaps, a bit hesitantly so. But certainly, from Morocco, Egypt, South Africa, Kenya, all these big economies are really pushing for it. So that's where the political will is coming from".*

P17: "*When you talk of Egypt, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, these countries cannot be ignored in the configuration of the AfCFTA agenda because of the strategic nature of their markets, and the fact that most of them are middle-income countries, rather than least developed countries".*

P32: "*I can't talk of any superpower within Africa having overridden the rest. All I can see is African countries in their sizes, in their own interest, in their own economic varieties, they sat down and agreed on something. So, I wouldn't talk of any superpower or any big stakeholder or any person with a special flavour".*

These extracts reflect participants' emphasis on the role of the largest economies in providing the political will, strategic market access, and industrial leadership for the realisation of the AfCFTA and its economic development objectives. They also reflect an observation that there was no hegemonic influence in the AfCFTA's establishment.

6.3.7 The Supportive Role of External Partners (EU, UK, China and Others)

A recurring pattern in participants' discussions was emphasis on the role of external players in providing resources and support needed to establish the AfCFTA. Participants consistently portrayed external partners, including the EU, China, and the UK, which provided capacity-building, technical assistance, and funding at national and continental levels, as important players in the establishment and implementation of the AfCFTA.

This view was articulated in the following ways:

P17: "*We should also note that behind the scenes, other non-African institutions have influence. Behind the scenes, the EU is promoting regional integration in Africa. China is supporting regional integration in Africa".*

P1: "*When the negotiations were going on, I have to say that, yes, there was some money from donors like the EU, like the World Bank to some extent, and some other organisations. UK aid at the time was also helping with certain areas".*

P5: "*They [European Union] actually are paying for a lot of technical assistance, for behind-the-scenes work through their various development agencies and through the EU Commission themselves. The Commission actually gave about €700 million for the initial rounds of the AfCFTA negotiations".*

These extracts reflect a portrayal of the EU, China, and the UK as key providers of financial resources, technical assistance, and capacity-building, enabling the establishment and implementation of the AfCFTA.

6.3.8 The Role of the Private Sector

Several participants consistently highlighted the African private sector's role in establishing the AfCFTA. They portrayed the private sector as a key player in the emergence of the AfCFTA, citing the roles of trade associations, business associations, and chambers of commerce, which engaged with the AU and had to be consulted by governments during the AfCFTA negotiations.

Participants articulated this view in the following ways:

P24: "*But it is worth noting that economic integration is something political bureaucracies in Addis Ababa do for the private sector. And there is no scenario where an effort of this kind can be decided and implemented without the participation and support of the private sector. That is why there is so much engagement and collaboration between the Commission and the private sector in Africa".*

P15: "*The African Union, even from the point where negotiations were being done, they were insisting on consultations at the national level with relevant trade associations, business associations, different Chambers of Commerce in different sectors… Actually, it took a lot of consultations from the Nigerian government officials to actually get a go-ahead from the big players in their business sector. Businesses have had a lot of impact in terms of how their countries participate".*

These extracts highlight participants' perceptions of the private sector as a crucial player in the development and establishment of the AfCFTA, stemming from AU-private sector

deliberations and joint work, as well as from government-private sector consultations during the negotiation of the AfCFTA.

6.4 Interests of the Major Players and Political Commitment

6.4.1 Interests of the Major Players

6.4.1.1 Interests of the African Union, its Member States and the RECs

6.4.1.1.1 Trade Expansion, Economic Growth and Better Quality of Life

Participants frequently highlighted trade expansion, economic growth and improved quality of life as core interests of the AU and its member states. This sub-theme captures participants' emphasis on economic growth, intra-African trade, structural economic transformation, decent livelihoods, and private-sector development as the key motivations for states' roles in establishing the AfCFTA.

This view is articulated below:

P7: "*Governments in Africa are under pressure to change people's lives through economic growth, employment and a decent quality of life. They supported and created the AfCFTA mainly for that reason…Much like the OAU, the African Union, its members and the Regional Economic Communities want economic development and the improvement of society in terms of health, education, food security, job creation and opportunities for young people and women".*

P28: "*Member states want to trade more. If the private sector is thriving in the country, the government is happy because people are employed. Their living standard increases because they're making more money. And so, we know that the private sector employs more than 80% of people in many African countries. The more you trade, the more money you have and the more you can invest".*

P24: "*The RECs and the AU want to see African economic renaissance in action and development that benefits the people. The experiences of African countries in international spaces where Africa is constantly marginalised or subjected to outright humiliation have been the norm since the days of colonialism. And this has not changed. So, there is no African government or intergovernmental organisation that does not see the need for African economic renaissance".*

These extracts illustrate participants' emphasis on trade expansion, economic growth, job creation, improved livelihoods, an African economic renaissance and international dignity as the primary motivations for the creation of the AfCFTA.

6.4.1.1.2 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Addressing Colonial Economic Legacies

Participants highlighted the significance of the AfCFTA in addressing the persistent economic legacies in Africa. Participants consistently emphasised the AfCFTA's impact on eradicating colonial economic legacies (neocolonialism, reliance on the extraction and export of raw materials) and advancing economic change.

The participants articulated this as follows:

P27: "The AU and the RECs are trying to overcome the colonial legacy. *Many African countries' economies or trade were export-oriented and mainly in raw materials. This has been the colonial economic system where they will extract raw materials, and African countries will simply import finished goods…So, it breaks with colonial trade patterns"*.

P24: "*The AfCFTA is how Africa erases the colonial legacy…read the popular book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, by Walter Rodney. The extraction and export of African raw materials pushed industrialisation in Europe. But left Africa resource-dependent and poor… Africans were dehumanised and disempowered".*

P3: "*The AfCFTA offers us new tools, new opportunities. Nothing is guaranteed. However, there is a new opportunity to tackle colonialism and neocolonialism better and improve Africa's place in global trade"*.

The extracts suggest that the AfCFTA is viewed as essential for tackling colonial economic legacies in Africa and for propelling economic change that gives Africa a new beginning.

6.4.1.1.3 Building Collective Bargaining Power

Participants repeatedly noted the AfCFTA's importance for developing the collective bargaining power of African countries. The sub-theme captures participants' perceptions of the AfCFTA's potential to strengthen African states' collective bargaining and unity in global economic and political engagements, enabling Africa to become an influential player.

Participants noted this in the following ways:

P33: "*The AfCFTA's implementation means that Africa's collective bargaining power will be increased globally. So, this is an opportunity to reshape the world economy and make Africa an important player in it".*

P27: "*We are witnessing an era when global alliances are being formed….It's not just for the sake of AfCFTA for being a regional trade agreement, it is also a sign of the fact that Africa is united, so it speaks to the language of being united and evolving in global governance in a concerted manner, so the voice of Africa will be heard more if they speak with a single voice in those global economic governance forums".*

These accounts suggest that the AfCFTA offers an opportunity to enhance the collective bargaining power of the parties, thereby making the AU and its members a strong force in the international economy.

6.4.1.1.4 Fostering Collective Self-Reliance and Strategic Autonomy

A prominent pattern in participants' discussion was the emphasis on collective self-reliance as a core agenda for African leaders and the AU. Participants highlighted collective self-reliance and greater strategic autonomy as the underpinning interest in the AfCFTA's establishment.

Participants articulated these points as follows:

P34: "*I see the vision of Pan-Africanism and collective self-reliance in the AfCFTA. It has, of course, been a very integral component of various attempts which have been made over the decades by African leaders or policy makers who essentially want to find Africa-driven solutions to African problems".*

P24: *"Based on the text of the AfCFTA and the Abuja Treaty that preceded it, it's categorically clear that collective self-reliance and economic interdependence among African countries are critical for building strategic autonomy. In that context, AfCFTA is a tool to achieve economic development and collective self-reliance and reduce Africa's vulnerability to global economic shocks".*

These extracts reveal participants' perceptions of the AfCFTA as a vital tool for the AU and its members to foster collective self-reliance and strategic autonomy.

6.4.1.3 Interests of the Major Economies

6.4.1.3.1 Market Access and Trade Dominance

A common pattern emerging from participants' responses is the emphasis on market access and trade dominance as the principal motivations for the largest economies' support for the

AfCFTA. Participants highlighted access to more markets, increased exports, greater productivity, more advanced infrastructure, the best services sector and better manufacturing sectors as factors underpinning the major economies' championing of the AfCFTA.

Participants expressed this view in the following ways:

P30: "*State actors like South Africa and Kenya want access to more markets for their businesses. Strong economies will gain more because they produce more. They manufacture more relative to their neighbours".*

P21: "*The reason why we see that big political push from countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Morocco, et cetera. These countries recognise that if the AfCFTA were to be implemented, they would be the biggest beneficiaries. They've got the best infrastructure, the best services sector, and the best manufacturing sectors. So, if the AfCFTA, if we were to move to duty-free trade, they are the ones that are going to benefit the most"*.

P5: "*If you are Lesotho, or Benin or Nigeria, you know how important customs duties are to your income. So, eliminating most of the trade barriers is not easy. You will not be implementing at the same pace as Rwanda, or South Africa, or Mauritius. That can lead to mistrust and disagreement amongst the parties to the AfCFTA".*

Overall, the extracts emphasise the desire for market access and competitive advantage as the key motivations for the largest economies' support for the AfCFTA, alongside recognition of potential mistrust stemming from uneven implementation.

6.4.1.5 Interests of the external players (European Union, Britain and China)

6.4.1.5.1 Market Access, Investment Protection and Access to Natural Resources

A recurring pattern across the interviews is the emphasis on preferential market access, investment protection, and access to natural resources as key drivers of external players' support for the AfCFTA's establishment. This sub-theme encompasses the emphasis placed on securing preferential access for their exports, investment protection, and access to raw materials as underpinning motives.

Participants articulated this view in the following ways:

P5: "*In terms of why Europe, Great Britain or Canada is interested in the AfCFTA, you have to look at it from the perspective of protecting their investments and securing preferential access for their goods and services. Protection is vital for the energy companies,*

telecommunications companies, mining companies, automotive companies, pharmaceutical companies and other companies that the European countries have built here. As a matter of fact, the Continental Free Trade Area comes with an abundance of opportunities for those companies".

P31: "*The boom happening in China's semiconductors, industrial machinery and other sectors puts them in a position where they need to export a lot to the world. They also would like more regional distribution hubs and corridors, and the AfCFTA can give them that".*

P24: "*We also know the fact that these actors do not want to lose their access to Africa's raw materials. China is building infrastructure in Africa to consolidate its access to Africa's raw materials".*

P19: "*Structural transformation or the development of regional value chains under the AfCFTA clashes a lot with the interests of European, North American or Asian companies that are extracting African resources and processing and beneficiating them in their home countries".*

These extracts reflect the portrayal of external players' core interests as market access, investment facilitation, and resource extraction, which directly clash with Africa's pursuit of structural economic transformation.

6.4.1.5.2 Migration Management

Several participants highlighted the migration crisis in Europe and Canada as the motivation behind their support for integration in Africa. They highlighted the massive influx of immigrants and the pressure Europe and Canada experience as the crucial motivations for these players' support for the AfCFTA.

This point was illustrated in the following ways:

P18: "*Prior to Brexit, a lot of nationalist parties in France, Germany and of course the UK, were putting a lot of pressure on the governments and the EU to tackle the migration crisis. It was always about how the third world immigrants were coming in big numbers and changing the demographics of major European cities like Berlin, London and Paris. The EU feels that pressure".*

P22: "*It is estimated that over 30 million legal and illegal immigrants went to the EU between 2005 and 2015. At the same time, the birth rates are low in Europe. So, the EU, including the UK, were receiving so many migrants, mostly from outside Europe. Even Canada has been*

receiving millions of immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America. So, they look at integration in Africa as a way to deal with the issue".

These extracts suggest a shared view among participants that the tackling of the migration crisis underpins Europe and Canada's support for the AfCFTA.

6.4.1.5.3 Addressing Africa's Aid Dependency Problem

A recurring pattern from the interviews is the emphasis on external players' interest in addressing Africa's unsustainable aid dependency. Participants emphasised Europe and Canada's commitment to foreign aid for developmental needs (food, health, education and infrastructure) as an important rationale for their support for the AfCFTA.

The extracts below illustrate this view.

P7: "*The officials in Brussels know that Africa's dependency is not sustainable. The European Union spends hundreds of millions on foreign aid to Africa, addressing needs like food, education, climate, etc. African countries are struggling to meet these needs. There is not enough to address them"*.

P4: "*The European Union wants the AfCFTA to work because a prosperous Africa will be less dependent. They will not have to fund our Health programmes or Infrastructure programmes if Africa becomes more developed, achieving higher GDP growth. Also, the UK and Canada spend billions in aid to Africa, to take care of the health, nutrition and infrastructure needs".*

These extracts reflect participants' portrayal of Europe and Canada's support for the AfCFTA as driven by a commitment to international development aid and their long-term strategic goal of reducing Africa's aid dependency.

6.4.1.5.4 Strategic Partnership and Geopolitical Influence

Another emerging pattern across the interviews is the emphasis on the desire for Western and Chinese strategic partnerships and geopolitical influence as an important motivation for their backing of the AfCFTA. Participants portrayed the geopolitical rivalry between the West (EU and US) and China as a vital motive behind their support for African integration.

The extracts below reflect this view:

P4: "*One thing is clear, and that has given the West a reason to worry about the loss of its global dominance in both politics and the economy. Their funding for the AfCFTA and their funding to the AU have a lot to do with geopolitical ends. They think they have to*

counterbalance China and build a strategic partnership with the African Union and the regional communities, and the EU has done well to keep itself very relevant and influential in African politics".

P7: "*The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation has allowed China to increase its influence in African politics in a very big way. And by supporting the AfCFTA through that platform, China becomes an important player in African politics".*

The extracts illustrate participants' perceptions of the competition for strategic partnerships and geopolitical influence as underlying motivations for external support for the AfCFTA.

6.4.2 Show of Commitment and Momentum

6.4.2.1 Speed of Signing and Ratification as Evidence of Political Commitment

Across the interviews, participants consistently highlighted the speed at which the AfCFTA Agreement was signed and ratified by the majority of African states as a significant sign of commitment and momentum. Participants highlighted the quick signing and ratification, its unprecedented nature, and the number of countries that have signed and ratified as a most important sign of political will.

The extracts below illustrate this point:

P32: "*And as you are aware, 54 countries have signed the African Continental Free Trade Area. Fifty-four countries signed, and as we talk right now, over 40 countries have already submitted their instruments of ratification, which is a mammoth task because very few African trade agreements have achieved that much within a period of three years or so. Over 40 ratifications in a period of two or three years*".

P8: "*When you look at the speed with which we moved from the signing of the Treaty and ratification and entry into force, when you compare that to other AU conventions or treaties, it was done in record time. That sort of underscores the importance that Member States attach to it".*

The responses suggest that the participants perceive the historical pace at which countries signed and ratified, as well as the large number of countries that did so, as a strong political commitment to implementing the AfCFTA.

6.4.2.2 Concerns about the Depth of Commitment

Several participants indicated a lack of strong commitment to implementing the AfCFTA. They emphasised the lack of uniform commitment, the expression of fears of economic losses, the

prioritisation of short-term interests, and the lack of strong institutional capacity as signs of inadequate political commitment to the implementation of the AfCFTA.

This point was highlighted in the following ways:

P12: "*In principle, there is a commitment, and the rapid ratification proves that. But I do not see a uniform commitment everywhere, because the fear of revenue loss and other economic interests manifest themselves repeatedly in state behaviour. Those fears risk delaying the full operationalisation because they are real hurdles"*.

P5: "*So far, there have been mixed signs. There are still states that prioritise their short-term interests, and they also have very weak institutional capacity to make this happen. If these continue, the Agreement will remain largely aspirational, just like the ones that were over a decade ago"*.

These extracts indicate a perception that there is rhetorical support for the AfCFTA but inadequate political commitment to align domestic policies with it.

6.5 Identities and Their Influence on AfCFTA Development

6.5.2 The Role of Identities in Shaping the Development of the AfCFTA

6.5.2.1 Anti-Colonial and Postcolonial Identity as a Driver of African Integration

Participants frequently highlighted the constitutive role of the anticolonial and postcolonial identities in the emergence of the AfCFTA. This sub-theme captures the shared perception of anticolonial and postcolonial identities as forces that shaped the development of the AfCFTA to overcome dependency, colonial economic exploitation, Western hegemony, and imperial control, while promoting self-reliance, autonomy, and South-South cooperation.

This was expressed in the following ways:

P3: "*African integration is based on the anticolonial identity because there is an identity that says no to dependency, no to economic exploitation, no to the dominance of the West. That is an attitude or an identity that favours South-South cooperation… I am not surprised to see so much political will from so many countries that have signed the AfCFTA"*.

P24: "*Colonisation and the opposition to it have created a new identity in the Global South. In Africa, the independence era identity based on self-reliance and opposition to colonial and imperial control has been the driving force behind African integration since the founding of the OAU"*.

P18: "*We have shared postcolonial experiences as we try to put an end to dependency and reclaim agency over the African integration agenda. But the AfCFTA's reliance on external funding and expertise does not help us to have real autonomy"*.

The extracts highlight the influence of anticolonial and postcolonial identities on African integration and the extent to which they have enabled the establishment of the AfCFTA as a strategy for building African self-reliance and agency, and for tackling dependency and colonial legacies.

6.5.2.2 Pan-Africanism as a Shared Integration Identity

Across the interviews, participants consistently highlighted the influence of Pan-Africanism in African integration. Participants emphasised pan-African loyalty, African renaissance, self-sufficiency, and rejection of neocolonialism as the key influences behind the AfCFTA's establishment.

Participants articulated this view in the following ways:

P22: "*Pan-Africanism is now the lens through which the African Union makes important decisions. The AfCFTA Treaty clearly says it seeks to create a single market in line with the pan-African vision of Agenda 2063"*.

P24: "*The ratification of the AfCFTA by over 40 countries strongly shows a pan-African loyalty to Africa and the pan-African aspirations for African renaissance and self-sufficiency... The anticolonial struggles created an allegiance to Africa, and that is bigger than nationalism. And today, you see it in the East African Community that African leaders and citizens use that pan-African allegiance to support regional integration*".

P30: "*African leaders know that Africans have a common destiny, and they have to work together to get there. That attitude explains why the AfCFTA has been ratified by so many countries…In fact, the values of pan-Africanists and those who reject neocolonialism in Africa are the motivation for all the regional integration efforts"*.

These extracts suggest a shared perception of Pan-Africanism as a major constitutive force in the OAU/AU integration policy initiatives, including the AfCFTA.

6.5.2.3 African Norms of Cooperation, Unity and Collective Progress as a Socially Constructed Identity

A further recurring pattern in participants' discussions of identities shaping the AfCFTA was the highlighting of African norms. This encompasses the emphasis on neighbourliness, Ubuntu,

cooperation, unity, and collective progress as the driving forces behind the emergence of the AfCFTA.

This view is articulated in the following ways:

P24: "*The African identity based on neighbourliness and the popular notion of Ubuntu is the cornerstone of African integration, and that is something that is deeply entrenched among the people of East, West and Southern Africa, and I think it explains why the AfCFTA has faced no pushback from the ordinary people".*

P30: "*Africans have identities that promote cooperation in general and unity in society. That is what the AfCFTA is about…. That is an African identity that makes cooperation and collective progress important goals, and Article 3, Article 4, and Article 5 of the AfCFTA are shaped by this African identity of cooperation and collective progress".*

The extracts reflect the portrayal of African societal norms, human solidarity, and shared progress as underpinning rationales and sources of motivation for African integration.

6.5.2.4 Hybrid Liberal-Protectionist Economic Identity

Participants frequently highlighted the liberal economic models as important forces influencing African integration in an environment in which protectionist tendencies also persist. This pattern reflects participants' emphasis on liberal economic factors (free trade, private-sector investments, competition, and market integration) as crucial in shaping the AfCFTA's establishment in a trade environment affected by illiberal economic thinking as well.

This view is illustrated in the following extracts:

P3: "*Liberal economy has been an important part of our identity for the past 50 years. It's who we are. Look at every aspect of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. You see free trade, removal of barriers to trade, private-sector investment, competition. All of that is based on a liberal economic theory that Adam Smith wrote about".*

P20: "*There is a free-market identity that does affect the AfCFTA. Some countries prefer modern Western capitalism. Others prefer Nordic capitalism or the social market economy model. There are African governments that prefer protectionist measures to protect their industries. These differences of economic identity cause the differences in national policy choices… African countries supported the creation of AfCFTA because they believe in free trade. If they were closed economies, none of this would have been possible".*

These extracts illustrate the portrayal of liberal economic principles—free trade, private investment, and competition—as a socially constructed identity that shapes the creation of the AfCFTA and creates some differences in policy preferences in Africa, including a protectionist mindset that shapes African states' approach to trade integration.

6.5.2.5 Nationalism, Protectionism and Resistance to Deeper Integration

Several participants highlighted the role of nationalism and nationalistic orientations as a hindrance to African integration. This sub-theme captures the consistent emphasis on nationalism and related dynamics (xenophobia, foreign ownership restrictions, and protectionism) as potential impediments to the realisation of the AfCFTA objectives.

The following extracts illustrate this view:

P3: "*But if there are going to be discussions about the free movement of people, then nationalism could be a threat to the AfCFTA. The events of xenophobia and the groups that reject deeper integration in some countries, where citizens chase away foreigners who are there legally, show that there has not been any serious effort to create a common African identity... Then there is a deeply embedded protectionist identity in countries that depend on tariff or customs revenue. Accepting the risk of losing billions in national revenue is not going to be as easy as some people think"*.

P30: "*Nationalistic identities are not good for integration efforts. That is why the temptation to prevent foreigners from opening businesses in several sectors weakens the spirit of the AfCFTA. To invest in another country is to take a risk with your hard-earned money and hope that your fellow investors, your shareholders, will get profits. The uncertainty and fear of nationalism harm what the AfCFTA is about"*.

The extracts highlight participants' emphasis on nationalism and nationalistic tendencies as forces that can discourage foreign direct investment and lead to resistance (in some societies) to the AfCFTA's implementation.

6.5.2.6 Regional and Geo-Cultural Identities as Enablers and Constraints of African Integration

Another emerging pattern across the interviews was the highlighting of regional and geo-cultural identities as both catalysts and hindrances to African integration. This sub-theme captures participants' emphasis on common linguistic and cultural identity and common history as forces that enable sub-regional integration (in West and East Africa) and as forces that may undermine the realisation of the AfCFTA's goals.

The following extracts illustrate this point:

P3: "*In the case of the East African Community, especially between Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, there is a common colonial history, a long history of trade and the unifying KiSwahili language. The shared identity was an important mobilising force for regional integration and economic cooperation…. That is why they succeeded in establishing a customs union as the very first stage of their integration. That is why they have a functional common market".*

P19: "*The excitement businesses have about the AfCFTA is undeniable throughout the continent… But what you also notice is that people prefer to invest in their region or in countries with a culture they find familiar. So, there is a lot of enthusiasm in the SADC region for doing business in the EAC region. The influence of common histories, common language, and culture is positive in that respect. But you do not see the same enthusiasm for doing business in North Africa".*

P20: "*The former French colonies have a shared identity as former French colonies, and that makes cooperation between them easier. The downside of that is their reluctance to work with the Anglophones with the same level of motivation. That attitude does not help or support any form of continental integration. For example, Francophone countries initially feared domination by Nigeria and delayed the ECOWAS–AfCFTA alignment"*.

P24: "*There is a concern about North Africa as well. All the members of the Maghreb bloc have ratified the AfCFTA. However, historically, these countries preferred to work with Europe and the Arab World. The failures of the Arab Maghreb Union had a lot to do with its members' commitments to Europe and the Middle East. This raises questions about the extent to which they will align their domestic policies with the AfCFTA"*.

P4: "*Remember Morocco had planned to join the European Union, and it was only rejected because continentally you can't join the European Union when you're not a European country….North Africa identifies itself as more to the Middle East, it's more to the Arab world than actually to Africa, and that creates a very big challenge and has the capacity to limit the extent to which we are going to tap into the opportunities of the AfCFTA"*.

The extracts reflect varied perceptions of common regional identity as both a source of mobilisation for sub-regional integration and a disincentive to continental integration. These responses highlight a concern that identity-based divides could constrain full policy alignment and the realisation of the AfCFTA's benefits in North Africa.

6.5.2.7 Extra-Continental Partner Identities

Several participants highlighted the manifold identities that characterise the external players' involvement in the AfCFTA. This sub-theme captures the emphasis on how extra-continental partners perceive themselves—as exemplars of integration, global economic powers, development partners, or guardians of the existing international economic order—and how these self-understandings shape their contributions to the AfCFTA.

The participants highlighted this in the following ways:

P11: "*Because it has done the most successful political and economic integration in history, the EU believes it is an exemplar, and that motivates it to support what the AU is trying to do. The UK has historically been a global power; it's used to being an international player, and its Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office carry out that task… China understands the image its GDP size and manufacturing capacity depict. So, they are consciously doing what a major power does to protect its economic interests worldwide"*.

P18: "*The EU will always see itself as Africa's partner. One, they believe they have a duty to promote development in Africa due to the colonial past and contemporary development needs. They see themselves as the right partner for the African Union. They also realise that Africa sees them as the best success story of integration; when the European Economic Community was in place, the OAU wanted to build an African Economic Community. When the European Union was formed, the OAU became the African Union. Two, they have economic interests throughout the continent"*.

P3: "*Players like the EU, WTO, World Bank and IMF care about the economic order they have built, especially since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. They care about global economic stability, and so supporting the AfCFTA comes almost naturally to them. That makes them reliable partners to anyone trying to promote the principles of capitalism and free trade. China has become a champion of South-South cooperation, and it wears that mantle across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. They're everywhere"*.

P19: "*The interesting thing about the Western powers is that they have never stopped promoting their norms and standards all over the world. If they like democracy or free markets, they expect everyone in the world to follow suit. We are legitimising their ideas here, even if that was not the intention. We are doing exactly what they want us to do"*.

These extracts indicate that participants perceive extra-continental actors' engagement with the AfCFTA as shaped by distinct identity narratives, including perceptions of themselves as integration models, development partners, custodians of neoliberal economic systems, and major powers seeking to advance their positions in African politics.

6.5.2.8 Identity-Based Conflicts: Ethnic, Religious, and Cultural Divisions as Barriers to Integration

A prominent pattern emerging from participants' discussions of identity-based conflicts was the highlighting of violent conflict as an impediment to the realisation of market integration and economic prosperity. This sub-theme reflects a consistent emphasis on ethnic and religious-based violent conflicts and instability as obstacles to the implementation of the AfCFTA and the realisation of its trade benefits in conflict hotspots.

This view is expressed in the following extracts:

P24: "*If you think of the Dinka–Nuer conflict in South Sudan, or what the Arab government and Arab militias did to the black tribes in Sudan, or the security challenges in Nigeria, you get to understand why identity is such an important issue. The AfCFTA is designed for the entire continent. But there is no official at the AU, at the Secretariat, or at UNECA, who thinks that substantial foreign direct investments will go to any of these conflict hotspots…. The EAC and ECOWAS have successful free trade areas. But how many countries in those RECs are seeing the benefits of trade integration, while having internal conflicts? None. People in conflict hotspots will see the benefits of the AfCFTA in their neighbouring countries. Not in their society"*.

P3: "*We have had several conflicts that have a lot to do with unaddressed issues of ethnic grievance, religious intolerance, and ethnic bigotry. The AfCFTA will be implemented very strongly in economic environments that allow traders and businesses to make profits. We have not seen any sustained economic growth in South Sudan, in the DRC, in the Central African Republic, or in Mali, despite their participation in regional FTAs... The protracted conflicts prevented them from realising any real growth"*.

The participants' responses highlight the portrayal of conflicts based on ethnic, religious and cultural identities as inhibitors to the continent-wide implementation and success of the AfCFTA.

6.5.3 Measures and Interventions to Deal with Incongruent Identities and Interests

6.5.3.1 Lack of Strategies from the AU and RECs

Several participants highlighted the AU and the RECs' lack of strategic frameworks to mitigate incongruence and conflicting interests. This pattern reflects the emphasis on the belief that integration will forge a shared pan-African identity and on the absence of a structured framework.

This view is articulated in the following responses:

P24: "*The AU has not developed any strategy for promoting African unity. Its peacekeeping and conflict management strategies bear no fruit. But there is a belief that programmes like the AfCFTA and visions like Agenda 2063 will foster unity. In other words, they see integration as a factor leading to unity and pan-African identity"*.

P30: "*The AU and the RECs have engaged in symbolic gestures, but they do not have structured frameworks for building a common identity or African unity. There is no strategy for that. But that does not mean the AU does not understand that the implementation of the AfCFTA is going to be difficult if there is conflict or lack of commitment because of identities"*.

The extracts reflect participants' emphasis on the inaction of the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities in strategically building Pan-Africanism across sub-regions and the entire continent.

6.5.3.2 Limited Authority of the African Union

Several participants drew attention to the African Union's limited enforcement authority as a cause of its inaction in mitigating the incongruence between identities and interests. This sub-theme captures participants' emphasis on the AU's intergovernmental nature and its reliance on member states' goodwill, persuasion, and diplomatic methods.

The following extracts illustrate this pattern:

P8: "*So, when you look, for instance, at the African Union, where on the one hand, none of the decisions of the African Union has de facto binding power over any Member State. So that makes it always very difficult in the sense that the aspirations depend on the goodwill of Member States. But goodwill cannot be enforced"*.

P6: "*The AU is an intergovernmental organisation that has no legal powers. The AU's moral force is through persuasion, diplomatic means and engagement"*.

The extracts suggest a shared concern that the African Union's limited authority weakens its power to end identity divergence and effectively forge a common identity.

6.5.4 Ways to Ensure the Successful Implementation of the AfCFTA

6.5.4.1 Revitalising Pan-Africanism: Promoting Continental Unity and Self-Reliance

Several participants highlighted the importance of revitalising Pan-Africanism as a way to implement the AfCFTA more effectively. This sub-theme reflects the participants' highlighting of the reinvigoration of the pan-Africanist vision and the prioritisation of narratives that are supportive of pan-African ideals and self-reliance.

The following responses illustrate this perspective:

P23: "*I would argue that a pan-African appeal or something like that should be promoted. It's going to take a few leaders to bring that spirit of Pan-Africanism back in order to overcome implementation challenges and some of these pressures from the external markets"*.

P20: "*The implementation of the AfCFTA must be preceded by the promotion of narratives that foster Pan-Africanism and self-reliance. Regional integration and economic development are not just dreams in Africa. They are needs. The continent will accomplish the vision of the Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063 if Pan-Africanism and self-reliance are consistently promoted"*.

P33: "*Promoting narratives of African Renaissance and solidarity, especially through cultural initiatives, can gradually overshadow divisive interests or identities. The politicians must work to fulfil the promises of unity, peace, and prosperity outlined in Agenda 2063 to overcome the lack of commitment and other challenges"*.

The extracts suggest that the participants' conception of Pan-Africanism and commitment to self-reliance are seen as imperatives for the successful implementation of the AfCFTA and the achievement of the Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063.

6.5.4.2 Trust Building, Overcoming Divisions and Cementing Peace

Several participants emphasised the importance of trust-building and peacebuilding in ensuring the success of the AfCFTA. This sub-theme captures participants' emphasis on the primacy of inclusive consultation, promotion of mutual gains, tackling conflict and insecurity, and the bonds of trust and common purpose between Francophones and Anglophones and between the regions that constitute Africa.

Participants expressed this view in the following ways:

P23: "*I emphasise regular stakeholder forums that involve civil society, traders, young people, and everyone, so that diverse interests and identities can align with the AfCFTA"*.

P20: "*The AfCFTA team must promote mutual gains and make everyone feel they have a stake in this. That is how you get everyone to support the AfCFTA. Make the benefits more widely shared"*.

P5: "*There is the desire, and there is the need to build trust between Francophone and Anglophone Africa. There is a need to build trust within regions… These politicians have to promote an agenda back home, where this is for the greater good. This is for our benefit so that we can live a better life… The messaging is a combination of building trust and ceding power to achieve goals that are bigger than your electoral term. That is fundamental"*.

P12: "*So, my suggestion has always been let us start with security regionalism because the major problem most African countries are suffering now is crisis in different African countries, terrorism, separatism and all that, and under this kind of environment, it's very difficult for economic regionalism to be successful"*.

The extracts highlight participants' perceptions of fostering inclusivity, understanding, and unity of purpose among Africans across regions, and of making security cooperation a top priority as a way to ensure the AfCFTA is successful.

6.5.4.3 Good Governance and Strong Institutions as Prerequisites for the AfCFTA's Success

Several participants emphasised the importance of good governance and strong institutions as prerequisites for the success of the AfCFTA. This pattern reflects a shared perception of sound and accountable governance, justice systems and strong institutions as critical in the operation of the AfCFTA.

The following extracts illustrate this view:

P1: "*You could have the most beautiful trade agreement. It could be implemented, but if anything goes wrong, where is your redress? Your justice systems, quick redress, small claims courts, things like that. Maybe commercial courts. These things matter. These institutions, the strong institutions, are also part of making the AFCFTA a reality and a success"*.

P17: "*There should be a focus on good governance to assure the citizens that the governments mean well and avoid sporadic violence by citizens against immigrants into their country"*.

These extracts highlight the importance of a conducive political environment, with good governance and effective, efficient political institutions, in the implementation of the AfCFTA.

6.5.4.4 Providing Technical Assistance and Implementation Support to Countries

A notable pattern emerging from the interviews was the emphasis on supporting countries struggling to adapt to the AfCFTA. This sub-theme captures participants' highlighting of technical assistance and support mechanisms for preventing brain drain.

This perspective is expressed in the extracts below:

P5: "*So there needs to be a lot of mitigation measures put into place to make sure that there isn't a fallout. For example, for the countries that are heavily reliant on customs revenues. It is important to ensure that there isn't a fallout for countries that have less diversified economies; there should be implementation support. There should be support given to low-income, least developed countries. There should be support mechanisms in terms of mitigating against brain drain, even if it's within the continent".*

P6: "*The only thing the AfCFTA can do is through technical assistance. Right. They need to be able to provide technical assistance. So, for instance, those countries that are struggling with their customs procedures, AfCFTA and the AU can put money and try to support them to be able to overcome that challenge. To be able to take advantage of AfCFTA, you need one thing. Productive capacity and you need trade capacity. So AfCFTA should be an opportunity for that. Where they need technical assistance, the AU should help. Maybe AfCFTA can help".*

These extracts reflect participants' emphasis on the need for the AU to provide financial and technical support to weaker economies struggling to eliminate non-tariff barriers and implement the AfCFTA.

6.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented data obtained through the interviews. It illustrated thematic development, showcasing all the themes and their corresponding sub-themes. It presented findings regarding the rationale for the establishment of the AfCFTA, providing and analysing key findings covering the motivations for the AfCFTA's establishment, the AfCFTA's modelling, the AfCFTA's suitability for deeper integration, the mechanisms and strategies used in the AfCFTA's implementation, the AfCFTA's demerits, and the strategies used to mitigate the demerits. The chapter also presented findings on the major players in the AfCFTA's establishment, including states, regional intergovernmental organisations, the AU's continental

development partners, external actors, and the largest economies. It presented findings on the interests of the major players in the establishment of the AfCFTA. It presented findings on the impact of interests and identities on the AfCFTA's establishment, as well as on ways the AU and the RECs handle identity dynamics on the continent. The chapter also presented findings on the recommendations for ensuring the successful implementation of the AfCFTA. The following chapter focuses on data analysis and draws on both the theoretical framework and the existing literature to analyse the data.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DATA ANALYSIS

7.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses and discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter. It interprets and synthesises the key findings from Chapter Six in relation to the research objectives, the theoretical framework, and the existing literature. It uses the three theories selected for this study—namely, Nyerere's theory of regionalism, intergovernmentalism and social constructivism—to interpret the findings. The discussion is organised around the four main objectives of the study: i. To explore how the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area can be understood, ii. To interrogate the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area; iii. To evaluate the interests of the major players in the African Continental Free Trade Area, and iv. To examine how the interests and identities of different players shape the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area. Therefore, the four sections of this chapter are organised around these broad questions.

7.2 Discussion of Objective I: Rationale for the Establishment of the AfCFTA

7.2.1 Significance and Worth of the AfCFTA for Africa's Future

7.2.1.1 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Market Integration and Structural Economic Transformation

The findings presented in Chapter Six reveal that participants overwhelmingly view the AfCFTA's establishment as Africa's strategic response to its development and structural economic challenges, and as an endeavour to overcome these challenges through trade integration and more vigorous economic development. Collectively, participants framed the AfCFTA's establishment as a comprehensive developmental effort aimed at transforming African economies, enhancing continental integration, and repositioning Africa within the global political economy.

The findings indicate that the AfCFTA's establishment is underpinned by aspirations to foster trade, end economic fragmentation, promote integration, and propel structural economic transformation. Participants portrayed the AfCFTA Agreement as a tool for boosting intra-African trade by eliminating tariffs and non-tariff barriers, enabling small and medium-sized enterprises to participate meaningfully in the continental market, and building a unified, functional African market for goods and services. The participants consistently associate the AfCFTA with transforming Africa's extractive economies and advancing structural economic

transformation through industrial development, value addition, diversification, and the development of regional and continental value chains. This aligns with Julius Nyerere's theory of regional integration, which emphasises development-centred regionalism in which regional integration schemes focus on spurring economic development. It also validates the liberal intergovernmentalist proposition that economic interests and cost-benefit reasoning are the primary drivers of states' behaviour. While Nyerere's theory holds that the AfCFTA is a developmental project grounded in pan-African thinking, liberal intergovernmentalism holds that it is a strategic outcome of rational state calculations about economic benefits. This helps show that the AfCFTA is a hybrid integration project with developmental and market-driven aspects.

Also, the findings align with the existing literature on African integration, particularly the opportunities for substantial trade integration, the end of structural fragmentation, economic and social transformation, and the integration of African economies into regional value chains (de Melo and Solleder, 2025; Pasara and Dunga, 2020). However, some scholars argue that boosting intra-African trade is not a panacea because it cannot fully address Africa's structural challenges without a sound industrial policy that complements the FTA (Newman and Page, 2017). Therefore, the data suggest that while the AfCFTA is widely considered a vital tool for enabling landmark economic change, its transformative potential could be maximised if there is an AU-led industrial policy fuelling the AfCFTA and propelling structural transformation.

7.2.1.2 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Attracting FDI and Enhancing Innovation and Global Competitiveness

The findings indicate that the need for domestic and foreign direct investment, innovation and competitiveness in African economies is a vital motivation for the establishment of the AfCFTA. The AfCFTA's vast market size and the investment protections it guarantees are essential for attracting domestic and foreign investments to drive industrial development in African economies. Considering that the AfCFTA is about fostering innovation and competitiveness through investments, the building of soft and hard infrastructure, human capital, and competition, the findings suggest the AfCFTA is grounded in intergovernmental economic interests. This is consistent with previous studies highlighting the utility of African integration and the AfCFTA, and the positive economic effects the AfCFTA could yield (de Melo and Solleder, 2025; Ajewumi, Afolabi, and Joe-Akunne, 2024). Importantly, the findings demonstrate that African states' commitment to the AfCFTA is grounded more in pragmatic calculations about economies of scale, investment attraction, and competitive positioning in

the global economy than in abstract liberalisation ideals. Ultimately, this study shows how African policymakers internalise these expectations as crucial drivers of support for the AfCFTA Agreement rather than as anticipated secondary outcomes.

7.2.1.3 The AfCFTA as a Tool for Fostering African-Led Development and Ending Dependency

The findings reveal that the AfCFTA is the AU's and its members' strategy for fostering endogenous development and self-reliance. Participants associated the establishment of the AfCFTA with advancing home-driven development by building infrastructure, developing human capital, and fostering economic diversification, thereby enhancing competitiveness, ending foreign-dominated supply chains, and promoting competition. The findings indicate that the AfCFTA's establishment is a way to break Africa's dependency, increase economic growth, and tackle the socio-economic challenges that negatively affect people's livelihoods. This aligns with Nyerere's promulgation of anti-colonial African regionalism that prioritises people-centred endogenous development, eradicates colonial legacies and aid dependency, and promotes collective self-reliance to build the political leverage needed to challenge Africa's marginalisation in the global economy. Nyerere believed that independence was impossible in isolation, requiring African states to pool their resources to achieve sustainable, people-centred development grounded in shared historical experience and pan-African solidarity (Nyerere, 1991). These findings align with previous studies on African integration and the AfCFTA, which argue that the AfCFTA could promote Africa-led economic development and thus foster African states' strategic autonomy, bargaining power, and global repositioning (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022; de Melo and Solleder, 2025). This reflects that the AfCFTA is a pan-African endeavour with a dual purpose: economic change and building the voice, dignity and power of African states in the global environment.

7.2.2 Modelling and Emulation of External Regional Integration Schemes

7.2.2.1 Following the Example of the European Project

The findings reveal that lessons from European integration partially shape the AfCFTA's creation and composition. The makers of the AfCFTA drew on insights and lessons from European experiences, particularly the Single Market, in crafting the AfCFTA, while keeping in mind Africa's peculiar social, economic, and political contexts, such as infrastructure deficits, limited industrial capacity, and the protection of national sovereignty. Nyerere (1991) considered the experiences of Global North countries with successful and functional economic integration schemes to be useful sources of insight for developing countries pursuing economic

integration. From a constructivist lens, the AfCFTA's partial borrowing from European integration reflects a process of social learning and norm diffusion, whereby African policymakers internalised European integration norms because Europe has been socially constructed as a legitimate and successful model of regional integration.

Also, the existing literature on African integration suggests that the European experience has been the main source of lessons and models for African integration. The OAU developed integration programmes similar to those developed in Europe, and the African Union intentionally evolved into a replica of the EU in Africa, establishing institutions similar to those existing in the EU. Therefore, the findings indicating that the AfCFTA's foundation and design are based on European integration, especially the Single European Act, are widely supported by existing literature (Gottschalk, 2022; Bach, 2016; Nubong, 2020; Okafor and Aniche, 2017). This highlights the complexity of African integration, in which the former colonial powers serve as a model for advancing the AfCFTA and eradicating the colonial economic legacies they left behind. Scholars like Cuyvers and Ouma (2022) and Ngwenya (2011) critique this espousal of the European model, arguing that it promotes Eurocentric and colonial logics and shows that African integration is not rooted in African history and values, and in political, economic and social realities. This negates the perception of the EU project as a suitable model for African integration and reflects an appreciation of Africa's unique context and needs.

7.2.3 Alignment with Long-Term Continental Integration Goals

7.2.3.1 The AfCFTA as a Basis for Deeper Integration

The findings indicate that the AfCFTA's establishment is aligned with long-term continental integration goals. Participants consistently acknowledged that the AfCFTA provides a basis for deeper integration because it addresses rules of origin, promotes the free flow of production factors, builds on the progress of regional trading agreements created by the RECs—the building blocks—and substantially eliminates tariff and non-tariff trade barriers. These steps pave the way incrementally for a customs union, a common market, and an economic union. This approach validates Nyerere's step-by-step approach to integration. Nyerere (1963) argued that the best way to pursue continental integration in Africa was through a process characterised by sub-regional groupings, sectoral integration, and functional cooperation that lay the groundwork for continental integration as sovereign states pursue regionalism based on economic pragmatism, shared interests and gradualism. The AfCFTA's long-term relevance to African integration is affirmed by prior studies that situate it within a broader strategy for deepening economic integration across the continent. These studies regard the AfCFTA's

elimination of trade barriers, trade policy and regulatory harmonisation, rules of origin provisions, and the efforts made to ensure the RECs play a vital role in the AfCFTA's success as necessary for getting to other phases of economic integration (Debrah et al., 2024; Signé and Madden, 2021). In essence, Nyerere foresaw the role of regional communities as the building blocks of continental integration decades before the Abuja Treaty formally assigned that role to them. In this respect, it can be deduced that the AfCFTA and the Abuja Treaty's designation of the RECs as the building blocks of the African Economic Community validate Nyerere's theory of African regionalism and its pragmatic nature.

At the same time, the findings reveal possible barriers to deeper continental economic integration beyond what the AfCFTA Agreement currently allows. The data revealed that the Agreement's tariff compromises and exemptions, sensitive product exclusions, and the tactical application of NTBs undermine the progression towards the future continental customs union, common market, and economic union. Importantly, the data indicate that the remaining restrictions provide space for deviations or behaviours that could slow the achievement of the objectives of the Abuja Treaty, the Constitutive Act of the African Union, and Agenda 2063. This aligns with the existing literature on the flaws of the AfCFTA Agreement. This concern is consistent with existing analysis regarding the long list of sensitive industries, exemptions, and the potential for non-tariff barriers to undermine the AfCFTA's ability to facilitate the attainment of higher phases of integration required under the Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063 (Kiiza, 2025; Charalambides and Capon, 2022). These provisions lend credibility to the intergovernmentalist claim that a cost-benefit analysis characterises how states make policy choices. This finding indicates that the AfCFTA's ability to facilitate deeper continental integration could be hampered by flaws embedded in its design.

7.2.4 Mechanisms and Strategies for Ensuring the AfCFTA's Success

7.2.4.1 Institutional Mechanisms and Strategies for Implementing the AfCFTA

The findings indicate that the AU and the RECs have created essential strategies and tools to ensure the success of the AfCFTA. Participants highlighted that establishing key institutions and mechanisms enhances the likelihood of the AfCFTA's successful implementation. The AU and the RECs have laid the groundwork for the implementation through: the establishment of an autonomous AfCFTA Secretariat with a mandate to superintend the implementation, administration and the monitoring of the AfCFTA; the introduction of the Guided Trade Initiative, which has enabled the facilitation and operationalisation of commercially meaningful trade under the AfCFTA by testing how the AfCFTA works in practice; the

development of the Dispute Settlement Mechanism designed to ensure that all countries uphold the rules and operate in an environment of equity and fairness; and the creation of the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities designed to enhance effectiveness in AU-REC coordination and harmonisation processes. This suggests that critical tools have been developed to minimise risks and address implementation challenges, and that the AU and its AfCFTA Secretariat are well-positioned to champion the AfCFTA. These findings align with institutional analysis that regard institutions of this kind as critical governance innovations with the potential to effectively address Africa's longstanding implementation challenges (Lateef, 2025; Debrah et al., 2024; Akinkugbe, 2020). Nevertheless, there are also doubts about the enforcement capacity of these institutions and mechanisms, given the intergovernmental nature and lack of supranational authority of the AU and other regional bodies (De Melo and Twum, 2021; Byiers, Ismail, and Apiko, 2024; Walakira and Mushiri, 2023). This implies that the AfCFTA marks a critical transition in African integration—from a problem of institutional deficiency to a problem of political commitment—thereby reframing implementation failure as a question of agency rather than capacity.

On the other hand, findings also indicate flaws that could impede the successful implementation of the AfCFTA. The data suggests that the failure to fully implement and maximise the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities could potentially hinder the success of the AfCFTA by allowing the longstanding challenge of overlapping memberships in RECs to persist. It suggests that this is a sign of inadequate political will and points out that the unaddressed issues of poor coordination, lack of harmonisation, persistent fragmentation, and uneven implementation will continue to spoil the complex implementation process. Also, the lack of support for the AU's Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, which is supposed to complement the AfCFTA, is a significant constraint on the AfCFTA's success, as free movement of businesspersons is an indispensable part of trade integration. These findings mirror critiques of African integration, which identify the Spaghetti Bowl problem, ineffective coordination, and the lack of free movement as serious impediments to continental integration (Kiiza, 2025; Byiers, Ismail, Apiko, 2024). The AfCFTA's implementation risks stem not from policy design but from unresolved political and governance contradictions within Africa's integration processes, particularly the persistence of fragmented regionalism and the reluctance of states to deepen integration beyond trade.

7.2.5 Potential Demerits of the AfCFTA

7.2.5.1 Loss of Customs Revenue, Uneven Gains and Potential Backlash

The findings indicate that the AfCFTA's benefits will not be equally shared among African countries. Participants highlighted that customs revenue losses in tariff revenue-dependent economies, the uneven distribution of trade benefits between stronger and weaker economies, and trade deficits driven by differences in economic development and productive capacity could trigger a backlash against the AfCFTA. Disgruntled citizens in countries facing significant revenue losses, sectoral disruption, and other trade losses could express anti-AfCFTA sentiment, leading to demands for withdrawal from the AfCFTA. This reflects the potential negative effects of the AfCFTA and the longstanding risks and fears regarding economic integration, particularly the short- and long-term economic and social impacts on the economy and society. Viewed through the lens of intergovernmentalism, the perceived inevitability of substantial economic losses for weaker economies suggests that the AfCFTA has been developed in a way that prioritises and protects the interests of the major economies, which wield significant leverage in the intergovernmental bargaining process.

Mattli (1999) argues that small states do not fundamentally shape integration decisions and are usually forced to support decisions shaped by the economically powerful states. The less powerful states support integration because they see the benefits of intergovernmental programmes in addressing the challenges they face. This implies that African states that may face significant revenue losses are supporting the AfCFTA because they believe they are better off cooperating than disengaging. The findings regarding these disadvantages of the AfCFTA for weaker economies align with existing literature that highlights the AfCFTA is projected to produce uneven economic gains, with larger economies experiencing more gains and smaller economies like Malawi and Togo experiencing short-term tariff revenue losses, leading to possible anti-AfCFTA backlash from the general population (Enderwick and Buckley, 2020; Seti and Daw, 2022; Debrah et al., 2024). This highlights that the AfCFTA's long-term viability is not dependent solely on political will and institutional capacities, but, more importantly, on its ability to deliver tangible welfare gains and inspire buy-in from the ordinary people.

7.2.6 Measures for Mitigating Drawbacks

7.2.6.1 Adjustment Fund as a Support Mechanism and Sensitive Industry Protections

The findings highlight that the African Union has developed financial support and provided for sensitive industry protections. They indicate that the Adjustment Fund created by the AU and

the African Export-Import Bank to provide grants, technical assistance, trade financing, and other forms of support, as well as the provisions allowing countries to maintain limited tariffs on sensitive industries, are vital to making the AfCFTA work for all countries. The Adjustment Facility and these revenue-prioritising tariff exclusions help mitigate disastrous fiscal shocks for Africa's smallest economies (Oramah, 2021; World Bank, 2020). These safeguards are politically significant instruments that serve as confidence-building tools, reassuring more vulnerable economies of the promise of the AfCFTA. This suggests that the AfCFTA is developed in the spirit of a Nyerere-style Pan-Africanism and collective progress, and in line with the values of African unity, which reject zero-sum games, trade dominance, and disregard for weaker economies. This also reflects an intergovernmentalist calculation as parties worked to ensure that the Agreement protects the interests of all countries, and not just a group of strong economies. This finding aligns with existing analyses that acknowledge mechanisms for compensation and adjustment, as well as sensitive industry exceptions, as essential for mitigating economic losses and nurturing political support for continental trade integration (Edwards et al., 2024; UNECA, AUC and AfDB, 2025).

7.3 Discussion of Objective II: Major Players and Power Dynamics in the Establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

7.3.1 The Role of the African States, the AU and the RECs

The findings indicate that the African states and their intergovernmental organisations—the AU and the RECs—were not merely facilitators but were central architects of the AfCFTA. Participants portrayed the AU and its member states as the driving force in the conceptualisation, negotiation, finalisation and implementation of the AfCFTA, making the AfCFTA's establishment a members-driven process. The key players that deliberated on and worked on the finer details of the AfCFTA, including the CFTA Negotiating Forum, its Technical Working Groups, the African Ministers of Trade and the Senior Trade Officials, represented and fulfilled the mandate given by the AU and its member states. Also, participants indicated the foundational role of the regional economic communities, which, through their regional policy harmonisation and economic integration programmes, created the conditions for the AfCFTA to be successfully established (Signé and van der Ven, 2019; Kuhlmann and Agutu, 2019). These findings demonstrate that the African states and their intergovernmental organisations had the power and authority to enable or prevent the development of the AfCFTA. This corroborates the intergovernmentalist propositions regarding the primacy of national governments and the regional intergovernmental organisations in the creation of

regional integration initiatives. The role of the African Ministers of Trade and the AU's Senior Trade Officials in the creation of the AfCFTA aligns with the intergovernmentalist position that integration is propelled by intergovernmental bargaining based on common interests. This supports Moga's (2009) contention that collective state decision-making legitimises integration, while also demonstrating that, in the African context, intergovernmentalism is not a constraint on integration but its primary operational logic. These findings align with the existing literature, which emphasises the decisive and influential role of national governments in regional integration processes (Hooghe and Marks, 2019).

The findings also corroborate Nyerere's propositions regarding the importance of sub-regional communities as enablers of deeper continental integration, while simultaneously revealing how this logic is operationalised through intergovernmental decision-making. Indeed, the AfCFTA Treaty contains the words "ACKNOWLEDGING the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) Free Trade Areas as building blocs towards the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)" (African Union, 2018:2). This indicates the centrality of the sub-regional bodies promulgated in Nyerere's philosophy of African integration. However, the findings further demonstrate that the effectiveness of the RECs as building blocks depends on sustained intergovernmental coordination and political bargaining among member states, rather than on automatic spillovers from sub-regional integration. In this regard, the RECs function as intergovernmental arenas in which states test policy convergence, negotiate trade-offs and build confidence for broader continental integration. This also corroborates scholarly analysis indicating that Africa's RECs are the testing ground and the engines of continental integration (Vambe, 2024).

7.3.2 The Role of the Private Sector

The findings reveal that the AU and the African governments had to obtain buy-in and support from the private sector to create the AfCFTA. They suggest that negotiations could not be conducted and finalised without contributions and greenlight from private-sector groups (trade associations, business associations, and chambers of commerce). Therefore, the governments had to honour and champion the interests of the private sector as well. While this corroborates intergovernmentalist propositions that interest groups influence state preferences during interstate bargaining (Caporaso, 1998), the findings further demonstrate that, in the African context, private-sector actors functioned not merely as domestic lobbyists but as quasi-partners in continental rulemaking. This supports existing scholarship on the power and role of interest groups in the establishment of the AfCFTA, where they provided critical input during

negotiations and thus directly shaped its formation (Signé and van der Ven, 2019; Karingi and Aidi, 2022). The popular cases of the Nigeria Manufacturers' Association and the African Union-Private Sector Forum illustrate how organised business interests were able to shape the legitimacy and negotiability of the AfCFTA by influencing government positions and outcomes without displacing state leadership in integration planning.

7.3.3 The Role and Influence of Africa's Major Economies

The findings also reveal the influence of Africa's largest economies on the emergence of the AfCFTA. Participants highlighted that the major regional powers, such as South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria and Kenya, were best positioned to advocate for and facilitate the establishment of the AfCFTA due to their economic advantages. They bolstered the momentum for the AfCFTA's creation, as their market and industrial advantages are critical to its viability (Nwankwo and Ajibo, 2020; Formella, 2023). This position (role) of the largest economies aligns with the intergovernmentalist conceptions of the influence and strategic leverage of regional hegemons, which offer leadership and market credibility, in regional integration (Mattli, 1999). While the literature on regionalism in Europe reflects the preponderant influence and strategic leadership of Europe's major economies (Schramm and Krotz, 2024), the findings indicate that small economies like Niger, Cameroon, Rwanda, Togo and others played a vital role in the development of the AfCFTA before and after the agreement was signed. Also, the hesitancy of Africa's second-largest economy, Nigeria, did not weaken the collective momentum as smaller economies signed and ratified the treaty in record time. This reflects the unique dynamics shaping African integration, which intergovernmentalism does not fully capture.

7.3.4 The Supportive Role of UNECA, UNCTAD and AfDB

The findings reveal the essential contributions of the AU's continental partners in the development and implementation of the AfCFTA. Participants highlighted that the requisite support, including research support, technical assistance, analytical assistance, and capacity-building, provided by UNECA, UNCTAD, and AfDB before and during the planning, negotiation, and implementation stages contributed to the successful development of the AfCFTA Agreement. The findings suggest that without these players, the AU would have been unable to establish a continental free trade area. This aligns with scholarly analysis indicating that the support these institutions provide to the African Union spurs progress in AU initiatives, enabling the AU to accomplish some of its major policy objectives (Fofack and Mold, 2021; Oramah, 2021). In addition, UNECA (2012) and the African Union (2025) affirm that the AfDB and UNECA are longstanding partners in advocating for and advancing regional

integration and economic development, and played a key role in shaping the roadmap for establishing the Continental Free Trade Area. Working with the AUC and UNECA, in 2016, the AfDB helped establish the African Regional Integration Index (ARII) to provide research-driven support that guides the implementation of the continent's regional integration agenda (African Union, 2025). The AfDB's role in financing development and regional integration projects (UNECA, 2012), and the AfDB's and UNECA's roles in providing other forms of support, have become increasingly critical to the success of the AfCFTA. The fact that the AU and its members relied heavily on these institutions in creating the AfCFTA challenges the intergovernmentalist claim that they are mere technical facilitators, subsidiary to the will of states. It depicts them as the strategic architects and operational backbone of the AfCFTA.

7.3.5 The Supportive Role of the African Export–Import Bank

The findings also revealed the crucial role of the African Export-Import Bank in the implementation of the AfCFTA. Participants highlighted that the implementation of the AfCFTA is significantly enabled by payment systems, the Adjustment Fund, trade finance, and trade facilitation support provided by Afreximbank, a strategic partner of the AfCFTA Secretariat in its implementation of the AfCFTA. This reality is consistent with the existing literature on the role of financial institutions in advancing and implementing economic integration schemes (Oramah, 2021). Afreximbank has therefore placed the AU and its AfCFTA Secretariat in a much better position to advance and implement this FTA.

7.3.6 The Supportive Role of External Partners (EU, UK, China and Others)

The findings reveal that external development partners played a critical role in the emergence and establishment of the AfCFTA. Participants highlighted that external partners, especially the European Union, United Kingdom, China, IMF, World Bank and WTO, provided (at national and continental levels) the technical assistance, capacity-building and funding needed for the negotiations, establishment, and implementation of the AfCFTA. This finding aligns with scholarly analysis indicating that these players' support has always been central to the success of African integration and development (Stapel and Söderbaum, 2023; Yang, 2024). The perceived indispensability of the support these players provided to make the creation of the AfCFTA possible highlights their strategic enabling of the project. This runs counter to the intergovernmentalist propositions of states' primacy in regionalism and their absolute sovereignty. It also calls into question the relevance of intergovernmentalism, which is a theory primarily developed to analyse integration among colonial and former colonial powers, as a

lens for understanding regional integration among former colonies that depend heavily on foreign actors to advance their initiatives.

However, some scholars consider this reliance on external support as something that perpetuates Africa's dependency and a negation of the pan-African commitment to self-reliance (Pharatlhathe, 2025; Taylor, 2016). This suggests that the AU's excessive reliance on external support could undermine the achievement of the AfCFTA's goals. This also implies that the AU is showing a symbolic commitment to ending dependency and neocolonialism, rather than demonstrating a consistent and credible commitment. The significance of rational external actors, especially the EU, UK, and China, to the existence and progression of the AfCFTA weakens the idea that this FTA is designed to end neocolonialism and the exportation of African raw materials to Western or Asian markets.

7.4 Discussion of Objective III: Interests of the Major Players in the African Continental Free Trade Area

7.4.1 Interests of the African Union, its Member States and the RECs

7.4.1.1 Trade Expansion, Growth, Structural Economic Transformation and Better Quality of Life

The findings reveal that the African states, the AU and the RECs seek economic transformation and development. They pursue the establishment of the AfCFTA to increase intra-African trade, boost economic growth, support private-sector development, promote structural economic transformation, and improve people's lives. Beyond material gains, players strive to restore the dignity of Africa and Africans and to eradicate the colonial economic legacies that persist in the form of neocolonialism, extractive and primitive economies, and the exportation of raw materials. This underscores that the AfCFTA is simultaneously an economic and normative project concerned with development, historical redress and Africa's repositioning in world affairs. This supports the liberal intergovernmentalist proposition advanced by Hooghe and Marks (2019), namely that states pursue regional integration programmes for economic interests and to address societal needs. This also aligns with Nyerere's view that regionalism should promote people-centred development and the pan-Africanist cause of erasing the colonial economic legacies and repositioning Africa in the global economy (Nyerere, 1991).

7.4.1.2 Fostering Collective Bargaining Power, Collective Self-Reliance and Strategic Autonomy

The findings indicate that African states seek to strengthen their position and role in the global economic environment. Through the AfCFTA, they aim to strengthen collective bargaining

power, collective self-reliance, and the strategic autonomy of African states in the global economy, making Africa an influential player on the world stage and reducing African states' vulnerability to global economic shocks. This aligns with Nyerere's position that African unity, anti-colonial solidarity and regional cooperation are cornerstones of achieving collective self-reliance and reducing dependence on external powers (Nyerere, 1968; Nyerere, 1991). These findings align with the body of existing literature highlighting that the AfCFTA is Africa's pursuit of strategic autonomy, collective bargaining power and agency in the global political economy (Wapmuk and Ali, 2022; Fofack and Mold, 2021). This indicates that dignity and respect among nations are vital interests for African Union members.

7.4.2 Interests of the Major Economies

7.4.2.1 Market Access and Trade Dominance

The findings indicate that the major economies in Africa are driven by market-access and trade-dominance agendas. The largest economies are best positioned to benefit more from the AfCFTA because they have higher levels of economic development—they are more economically diversified, have stronger manufacturing bases, greater productive capacity, better infrastructure, and stronger services sectors. These countries seek to leverage their levels of economic and technological advantages to lead regional and continental commerce. The consistent emphasis on economic interests provides validation for liberal intergovernmentalism, which, according to Hooghe and Marks (2019), holds that integration is primarily driven by member states' economic interests rather than by geopolitical or ideological imperatives. This indicates that economic advantages enable dominant economies to leverage the AfCFTA as a platform to consolidate leadership in regional and continental commerce rather than merely to participate on a level playing field (Saygili, Peters and Knebel, 2018; Maliszewska et al., 2020).

7.4.3 Interests of the External Players (European Union, Britain and China)

7.4.3.1 Market Access, Investment Protection and Access to Natural Resources

The findings reveal that external players support the AfCFTA to protect and advance their economic interests in Africa. External players such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, and China provide technical assistance, capacity-building support, and funding to the African Union in order to secure preferential market access, protect their investments, and ensure that their companies operating in Africa thrive under the AfCFTA. The findings suggest that these players understand that structural economic transformation in Africa would represent an economic loss for them. Therefore, they want the colonial economic legacy, in which

African economies are primarily resource-dependent and raw-material-exporting, to continue so that manufacturing and value addition occur within their economies, not in Africa. This is corroborated in existing literature on the AfCFTA (Joseph, 2024; Gambino, 2025). From an intergovernmentalist lens, European support for the AfCFTA can be interpreted as a strategic effort to safeguard national economic interests by shaping the institutional and regulatory environment of African integration in ways that protect these interests. This interest runs counter to the African agenda of African-led economic development and structural transformation, suggesting an agenda to perpetuate the neocolonial relationship that Africa has had with more developed countries for decades.

7.4.3.2 Migration Management

The findings indicate that the European Union and the United Kingdom support the AfCFTA in order to address the migration crisis and Africa's dependency. The participants emphasised that these players seek to reduce the illegal migration crisis they face, specifically restricting the influx of economic migrants from developing countries into their societies. They reveal that, because European governments face political pressure from nationalist parties and groups disgruntled with demographic changes in Europe's biggest cities, they see the AfCFTA as a possible solution to address the problem. From an intergovernmentalist perspective, the EU and UK's support for the AfCFTA can be understood as a strategic effort to externalise the domestic political pressures associated with informal migration. While this motive aligns with scholarly analysis, including studies by Diallo (2023) and Castillejo (2019), it is underemphasised in the scholarly analysis of European support for the AfCFTA, as much of that analysis focuses on the economic and geopolitical interests Europeans have in Africa.

7.4.3.3 Addressing Africa's Aid Dependency Problem

The findings also reveal that the European Union recognises the unsustainable nature of Africa's aid dependency and sees the AfCFTA as a solution. They reveal that European countries spend hundreds of millions of Euros every year providing aid to address developmental needs in Africa, including food, health, education, and infrastructure. The European governments want to minimise fiscal outflows from Europe by providing the AU with support to achieve the economic growth and socio-economic objectives it seeks, thereby reducing Africa's unsustainable aid dependency. This illustrates that their support for the AfCFTA is about ensuring that, in the long run, they do not have to continue spending money to help fulfil developmental needs in Africa. This aligns with contemporary analysis of the thinking of European leaders as they support development initiatives in Africa (Govender and

Pillay, 2023; European Commission, 2025). This European desire to reduce Africa's aid dependency, a tool most scholars and analysts consider vital to the protection and advancement of European interests in Africa, challenges the liberal intergovernmentalist assumption that economic interests are the ultimate determinants of states' behaviour.

7.4.3.4 Strategic Partnership and Geopolitical Influence

The findings also indicate that external players, such as the EU and China, support the AfCFTA to advance their geopolitical ambitions in Africa. Participants indicate that the West, in general, is displeased with China's rise as an influential economic and geopolitical player in Africa and wants to counterbalance it. They highlighted that China uses the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation to build and demonstrate its influence in African politics. This is consistent with a growing body of literature showing that both the EU and China support African integration to accomplish geopolitical leverage in Africa (Bature, 2025; Tay, 2023). From an intergovernmentalist perspective, their support for the AfCFTA can be understood as a strategic way of defending and advancing their economic and geopolitical interests in Africa. From a constructivist perspective, the EU and China's support for the AfCFTA and their competition for geopolitical dominance in Africa can be understood as a defence of their self-perceived roles as global power centres and Africa's most important strategic partners. Engagement with the AfCFTA thus becomes a means of affirming status, recognition, and normative relevance in Africa's political economy.

7.4.4 Show of Political Commitment

7.4.4.1 Speed of Signing and Ratification, and Concerns about the Depth of Commitment

The findings indicate that African governments' rapid signing and ratification of the AfCFTA demonstrated a strong political commitment to the Agreement. Participants highlighted that the pace at which the AfCFTA Agreement was signed and ratified, and the fact that it was signed and ratified by an overwhelming majority of African states in record time, were unprecedented in the history of the AU's conventions and treaties. This demonstrates a pan-African commitment among African governments to African integration and to advancing structural economic transformation and economic development in Africa. This aligns with existing literature showing that this high speed was a deliberate signal of high-level political commitment (Abrego et al, 2019). This also aligns with the intergovernmentalist view that the nature and speed of regional integration depend on national interests and the ability of national governments to use their influence to drive integration (Bolaños, 2016).

Nevertheless, other participants indicated that the commitment is neither solid nor widely shared. They indicated that deep concerns about economic losses, including revenue losses, could hamper implementation. They indicated that the desire to put short-term considerations above the long-term benefits of the AfCFTA and the inadequacies in institutional capacities are a display of weak political commitment to implement the AfCFTA. This affirms the intergovernmentalist view that the prospects of regional integration depend on state interests and on states' ability to exert influence (Bolaños, 2016). The impact of collective support for the AfCFTA on its timely establishment affirms Moravcsik's (1991) intergovernmentalist proposition that regional agreements are made possible by the convergence of national interests. This finding aligns with the existing literature on the adverse effects of economic losses on weaker economies and the lack of institutional capacity to address these and other dynamics of African integration (Nubong, 2020; Bach, 2016). Taken together, these findings and the literature show that the AfCFTA's record-breaking ratification reflected converging national interests, while simultaneously revealing a paradox in which rapid treaty adoption coexisted with fragile and uneven political will for implementation.

7.5 Discussion of Objective IV: How Interests and Identities Shape the Development of the African Continental Free Trade Area

7.5.1 The Role of Identities in Shaping the Development of the AfCFTA

7.5.1.1 Anti-Colonial and Postcolonial Identity as a Driver of African Integration

The findings reveal that the anti-colonial and postcolonial identities are important factors shaping the thinking of Africans and are thus the driving forces behind the establishment of the AfCFTA. These identities are not merely background ideational influences, but active frames through which African states interpret the purpose and urgency of the AfCFTA. The anticolonial identity mobilises African states to reject dependency, economic exploitation and the dominance of the West. This identity promotes cooperation among developing countries, the elimination of colonial and imperial influence, and the pursuit of self-reliance. The influence of the anticolonial identity in mobilising African states to pursue the AfCFTA with the unprecedented momentum affirms the constructivist proposition that identities shape interests and behaviour by constituting what actors perceive as appropriate and necessary action (Taylor, 2016; Wendt, 1999). This finding establishes that African states are not just integrating for GDP growth, but because they see integration as a moral and historical imperative to complete decolonisation. This finding aligns with existing analysis suggesting the AfCFTA is not just a programme for boosting intra-African trade, but also an anti-colonial

project designed to break the structural colonial economic legacies and foster self-reliance (Odeh and Yemisi, 2025; Odhiambo and Milej, 2023). At the same time, the findings also reveal that the African Union's continued dependence on foreign funding and expertise constrains the full realisation of African autonomy and agency. Ultimately, findings reveal how policy actors invoke anti-colonial identity narratives to sustain the momentum for the establishment and implementation of the AfCFTA.

7.5.1.2 Pan-Africanism as a Shared Integration Identity

Similarly, the findings reveal that the African Union and its member states share a pan-African identity, which impels them to pursue regionalism and joint programmes. The pan-Africanist commitment to the economic development of Africa and the allegiance to the cause of African renaissance, self-sufficiency, and eradication of neocolonialism have also served as a mobilising force in favour of continental integration through the AfCFTA. This pan-African allegiance is prominently featured in the AfCFTA Treaty, which references the pan-African vision of Agenda 2063 as a guiding principle in its efforts to create a single market. The findings also indicate that the pan-African spirit has shaped the momentum for endorsement and ratification, enabling the AfCFTA to avoid being undermined by nationalistic sentiments.

This aligns with Nyerere's (1963) view that Pan-Africanism is a vital and guiding tool in the pursuit of African integration. Also, the influence of the pan-Africanist beliefs and norms in driving the development of the AfCFTA corroborates the constructivist claim that identities determine interests and behaviour and that identities are products of history, culture and politics. This also aligns with existing literature on the influence of Pan-Africanism in promoting African integration, demonstrating that self-determination, solidarity and resistance to marginalisation remain embedded in AU-led initiatives (Oloruntoba, 2023; Witt, 2023; Eiguedo-Okoeguale, 2020; Malisa and Nhengeze, 2018). Therefore, the findings demonstrate how Pan-Africanism functions not merely as a rhetorical ideal but as an operative integration identity that actively sustained AfCFTA ratification momentum and mitigated nationalist resistance during its formation.

7.5.1.3 African Norms of Cooperation, Unity and Collective Progress as a Socially Constructed Identity

The findings reveal that the emergence of the AfCFTA has been propelled by the deeply embedded African norms of cooperation, neighbourliness, unity and collective progress, often articulated through concepts such as Ubuntu. This socially constructed identity creates an environment in which the AfCFTA is developed with good momentum and without any

resistance or backlash from the peoples of Africa, as they see it as a common good. The findings suggest that articles 3, 4 and 5 of the AfCFTA Treaty are rooted in this identity. This suggests that the AfCFTA is a manifestation of the value systems and socio-cultural orientations of the peoples and societies of Africa. This aligns with the constructivist proposition that shared ideas, norms and values shape the behaviour of state actors and that common agendas among states are pursued in light of the mobilising power of shared identity (Mansbach and Taylor, 2012; Wendt, 1999), while extending it by illustrating how indigenous African identities—rather than imported Western models—mobilise consensus and overcome historical integration barriers. Importantly, however, this study extends existing constructivist interpretations by demonstrating how African norms are translated into specific institutional provisions within the AfCFTA. This reveals a direct link between socio-cultural identity and treaty design rather than treating identity as a symbolic influence. These findings are reflected only minimally in the existing literature, which highlights that the AfCFTA is a social structure grounded in shared African identities and norms of cooperation, rather than simply an economic and legal agreement (Sanni, 2020; Chisugi, 2022). Thus, these findings highlight that shared cultural norms translated into political support for the AfCFTA, nurtured broad acceptance and effectively constrained nationalistic backlash.

7.5.1.4 Hybrid Liberal-Protectionist Economic Identity

The findings reveal that the development of the AfCFTA is shaped by the prevailing belief in and preference for the liberal economic model of development, as well as by policymakers' protectionist orientations. The participants indicated that the ideas and values of free trade, private enterprise, competition, and economic integration are widely supported among Africans and therefore form the foundation for the establishment of the AfCFTA. The findings indicate that African states' decision to create the AfCFTA reflects a common belief in liberal economic principles among state elites and policymakers, and that, if these ideas were unpopular among these actors, there would have been no impetus to create the AfCFTA. Nevertheless, some African governments prefer protectionism to safeguard their industries, leading to policy preferences that are unfavourable to free trade and economic integration. This study offers insights by framing the espousal of liberal economy and protectionism not merely as policy choices but as a hybrid pragmatic identity that influences African integration, thereby directly supporting Wendt's (1992:398) assertion that "identities are the basis of interests". Therefore, the commitment of African governments to the emergence of the AfCFTA and the inclusion of provisions for protecting sensitive and excluded goods and mitigating tariff revenue losses

was a dual display of liberal economic identity and protectionist norms, characteristic of 21st-century African economic policy decision-making. The liberal economic basis of the AfCFTA and the protectionist impulses that coexist with it are corroborated by existing analysis that associates the AfCFTA with the liberalisation project and the liberal economic principles promoted by the AU and Agenda 2063, as well as with the industry-safeguarding preferences shared by some policymakers (Adenuga, Amusan, and Oyewole, 2024; Nwankwo and Ajibo, 2020; World Bank, 2020; Kiiza, 2025). Importantly, this study extends existing accounts by illustrating that liberal economic norms operate alongside, rather than in the absence of, protectionist impulses, highlighting a hybrid ideational landscape in which integration is pursued pragmatically rather than ideologically.

7.5.1.5 Nationalism, Protectionism and Resistance to Deeper Integration

The findings indicate that nationalistic orientations have the potential to stifle the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement. The participants highlighted that the cumulative effect of nationalism and protectionism will be to derail the realisation of the AfCFTA goals, as nationalistic tendencies such as trade protectionism, xenophobia, and restrictions against businesses run by foreigners undermine investor confidence and thus drive investments away. This is consistent with scholarly analysis highlighting issues of nationalism, import restrictions, and excessive guarding of sovereignty as potential hindrances to policy certainty, investor confidence, and the realisation of the AfCFTA's goals (Adenuga, Amusan, and Oyewole, 2024; Mlambo et al., 2022).

From a constructivist lens, the entrenched nationalistic identities observed in these findings are the product of ongoing intersubjective practices and historical discourses that make African states perceive each other as rivals rather than partners, thereby perpetuating competition and protectionism and undermining the norms of cooperation needed for the AfCFTA's success (Wendt, 1992). Also, the observation of the damaging effect of nationalistic orientations aligns with Nyerere's position that narrow nationalism would undercut pan-African unity and impede African integration (Nyerere, 1966). This finding is supported by previous studies on African integration that explain the negative role of nationalism and trade protectionism on regionalism (Enderwick and Buckley, 2020; O'Reilly, 2023). Together, these findings suggest that the success of the AfCFTA depends not only on institutional and economic reforms, but also on the reconstitution of political identities in ways that prioritise continental solidarity over parochial national interests.

7.5.1.6 Regional and Geo-Cultural Identities as Enablers and Constraints of African Integration

The findings also reveal the influence of regional and geo-cultural identities on African integration, in general, and on the AfCFTA in particular. The findings indicate that identity-based mobilisation has boosted regional integration in the past, as nations within some sub-regions recognise their common historical and cultural ties and find inspiration to pursue regional integration to advance economic development. Participants indicated that the tremendous progression of regional economic integration in the EAC region, where people have ethnic ties, a common colonial and commercial history and linguistic ties, and Francophone West Africa, where people have similar commonalities as well as a common colonial language, was symptomatic of the constitutive influence of common regional and geo-cultural ties on regional integration and cooperation. These geo-cultural regional identities cultivated norms and values of regional unity, leading to regional economic arrangements such as the FTAs, customs unions and common markets. From a constructivist lens, this finding suggests that repeated interaction and shared historical and linguistic identities create common identities among states, largely promoting cooperation, though they can also sometimes promote rivalry. While previous studies acknowledged the roles of historical, cultural and social ties in regional integration in East and West Africa (Asimwe and Scovia, 2024; Bala, 2017; Neuvonen, 2019), this study goes further to demonstrate how such geo-cultural identities function as constitutive forces that lower political resistance and normalise cooperation among member states.

At the same time, the findings indicate that these regional and geo-cultural identities negatively affect continental integration, even as they facilitate cooperation at sub-regional levels. They show that strong regional identities can discourage cooperation and integration that transcends their sub-regions. The findings indicate that the dichotomy between the Francophone and Anglophone African countries could limit the potential of the AfCFTA. They suggest that there is a widespread unwillingness among the Francophone countries to work with Anglophones, and vice versa. The same dichotomy exists between North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, as the Maghreb countries have always preferred and prioritised closer economic ties with the European Union and the rest of the Arab World, while engaging less with Sub-Saharan Africa. These identity-based orientations were linked to delays in ECOWAS-AfCFTA alignment and to uncertainty about the Maghreb countries' commitment to implementing the AfCFTA domestically.

This illustrates that regional and geo-cultural identities have been used or handled in ways that militate against the advancement of the AfCFTA. This finding aligns with the constructivist view that entrenched regional and geo-cultural identities are constituted through historical interactions and colonial legacies, creating a dichotomy among various sub-regions. This perpetuates rivalries and a lack of trust, negating the norms of cooperation required for the AfCFTA to work. Previous studies on regionalism in Africa also acknowledge the damaging effects of narrow or conflicting regional identities, including the Francophone-Anglophone divide and the North Africa-Sub-Saharan divide, which restrict cooperation and integration beyond a sub-region (Salem, 2011; Hassan, 2011). Ultimately, this study demonstrates how these identity divides translate into differentiated levels of commitment and implementation within the AfCFTA itself.

7.5.1.7 Extra-Continental Partner Identities as a Force Shaping African Integration

The findings reveal that the extra-continental partner identities have profoundly impacted the emergence of the AfCFTA. The African Union's development partners, including the EU, UK, China, and the WTO, IMF and World Bank, have supported the development of the AfCFTA because of their self-perceptions and the longstanding norms they espouse. The data indicate that the Western players and the major international economic institutions see themselves as the legitimate advocates of pro-capitalist economic models; the EU perceives itself as an integration 'role model' and as Africa's longstanding development partner; the UK sees itself as a global player and supporter of international development; the IMF and World Bank see themselves as the promoters of global economic stability; and China sees itself as both an economic superpower and leader in the promotion of South-South Cooperation. The self-perception of the European Union as a model for African integration is linked to Africa's efforts to follow the European model, a claim corroborated by the existing literature (Nubong, 2020; Bach, 2016). These self-perceptions have prompted these players to provide resources to the AU in support of the AfCFTA. This aligns with the constructivist view that socially constructed identities and an actor's self-identity shape their preferences and how they define their interests (Griffiths and O'Callaghan, 2002). Importantly, however, this study extends existing constructivist accounts by showing that extra-continental actors' identities interact with African integration projects in ways that reproduce asymmetrical influence, even when support is framed as partnership or solidarity. In this context, these players have supported the development of the AfCFTA for distinct reasons that inform how they understand their roles and the appropriate ways they should support it in world politics.

7.5.1.8 Identity-Based Conflicts: Ethnic, Religious, and Cultural Divisions as Barriers to Integration

The findings also revealed that identity-based conflicts are possibly the biggest threat to the AfCFTA. The environment of tension, conflict and instability that identity-based disagreements have created in several African states discourages financial risk-taking, long-term investments and commercial transactions. The findings reveal that historically, countries with serious violent conflicts have not benefited considerably from the regional integration schemes they are part of because their societies are not conducive to economic opportunities. This implies that the several African countries with internal instability and conflict, which have embraced the AfCFTA, will only see the economic benefits of the AfCFTA when their political and social situation is normalised, something that is widely supported in existing scholarship (Raji and Babatunde, 2023; Joseph, 2024; Bah and Tapsoba, 2010). This finding aligns with the constructivist view that identity-based conflicts persist because intersubjective meanings of enmity and exclusion become entrenched. This entrenched cycle of insecurity constrains the emergence of more cooperative identities or shared norms and, ultimately, impedes the effective implementation of the AfCFTA (Wendt, 1992). Importantly, this study frames identity-based conflict not merely as an external obstacle to integration, but as a constitutive condition that—through entrenched intersubjective meanings of enmity and exclusion—perpetuates instability, discourages investment and cross-border trade in conflict hotspots, and enables stable countries to capture most of the AfCFTA benefits like FDI, thereby shaping the uneven distributional effects of the AfCFTA across the continent.

7.5.2 Measures and Interventions to Deal with Incongruent Identities and Interests

7.5.2.1 Lack of Strategies from the AU and RECs, and the Limited Authority of the African Union

The findings reveal that there is no serious intervention or structured framework for addressing identity-related dynamics that could undermine the implementation and success of the AfCFTA. Despite its awareness of the challenges posed by negative identities, the African Union lacks a comprehensive strategic framework to address them. Also, the AU lacks the authority of a supranational institution and depends on member states' goodwill and cooperativeness. This affirms the intergovernmentalist position, as explained by Sweet and Sandholtz (1997), that intergovernmental institutions do not make binding decisions and play only a facilitative role in regional integration processes. There is, however, the notion that the AU's policy initiatives, including the AfCFTA and Agenda 2063, will help forge a shared African identity. While this is possible, the flaw in this thinking is that identity is not perceived

as the mobilising force for integration, as it was in post-WW2 Europe and in African sub-regions such as the EAC and ECOWAS.

7.5.3 Ways to Ensure the Successful Implementation of the AfCFTA

7.5.3.1 Revitalising Pan-Africanism: Promoting Continental Unity and Self-Reliance

The findings indicate the primacy of instilling a pan-African allegiance and ideals to ensure the AfCFTA becomes a pathway to achieving the Abuja Treaty and Agenda 2063. This could foster Pan-Africanism and commitment to self-reliance and promote African renaissance and solidarity through cultural initiatives. This recommendation aligns with constructivism's logic of consequences because strong pan-African norms would make the political cost of noncompliance too high. Therefore, sustaining the momentum for the AfCFTA can be fuelled by incubating pan-Africanist thinking across the continent.

7.5.3.2 Trust Building, Overcoming Divisions and Cementing Peace

The findings indicate the need for trust-building and peacebuilding to create a suitable environment for the AfCFTA to yield positive results. Participants highlighted the importance of inclusive consultations, emphasising opportunities for shared prosperity and strengthening bonds of trust among Africans. The findings also emphasised the importance of promoting security regionalism to vanquish conflicts, insecurity, and separatism, and to ensure the healing of the divides between the Francophones and Anglophones, and other geo-cultural regions in Africa. From the lens of constructivism, inclusive consultations, narratives of shared prosperity, and security regionalism operate as mechanisms of normative persuasion that can foster a pro-AfCFTA identity. By mitigating geo-cultural divisions, such steps can help nurture the cooperative practices upon which the success of the AfCFTA depends (Risse, 2000).

7.5.3.3 Good Governance and Strong Institutions are Prerequisites for the AfCFTA's Success

The findings also underscore the imperative of good governance and strong institutions for advancing African integration and creating a conducive environment for the AfCFTA to achieve its objectives. The findings highlighted the indispensability of strong institutions and sound, people-centred governance to give everyone the opportunity to express concerns, and of a fair system of justice to address grievances. From a constructivist perspective, the need for good governance and strong institutions shows how socially shared norms and rules can enable people to voice concerns, resolve disputes justly, and foster the trust and collaboration required for the AfCFTA to succeed. Therefore, the study underscores the importance of good governance and strong institutions as pillars of integration.

7.5.3.4 Providing Technical Assistance and Implementation Support to Countries

The findings also highlighted the importance of providing technical assistance and implementation support to African countries. Participants underlined the need for implementation support for the least developed countries, technical assistance for countries that find it difficult to align their customs procedures with the AfCFTA, financial support for countries that depend heavily on customs revenues, and efforts to reduce brain drain. From Nyerere's integration perspective, the provision of technical, financial, and implementation support is essential to prevent integration from reproducing inequality and to realise collective self-reliance through practical solidarity. Indeed, without such support, integration risks reproducing domination and even dependency within Africa.

7.6. Conceptual Map Showing How Identities and Interests Interact and Shape the Development of the AfCFTA

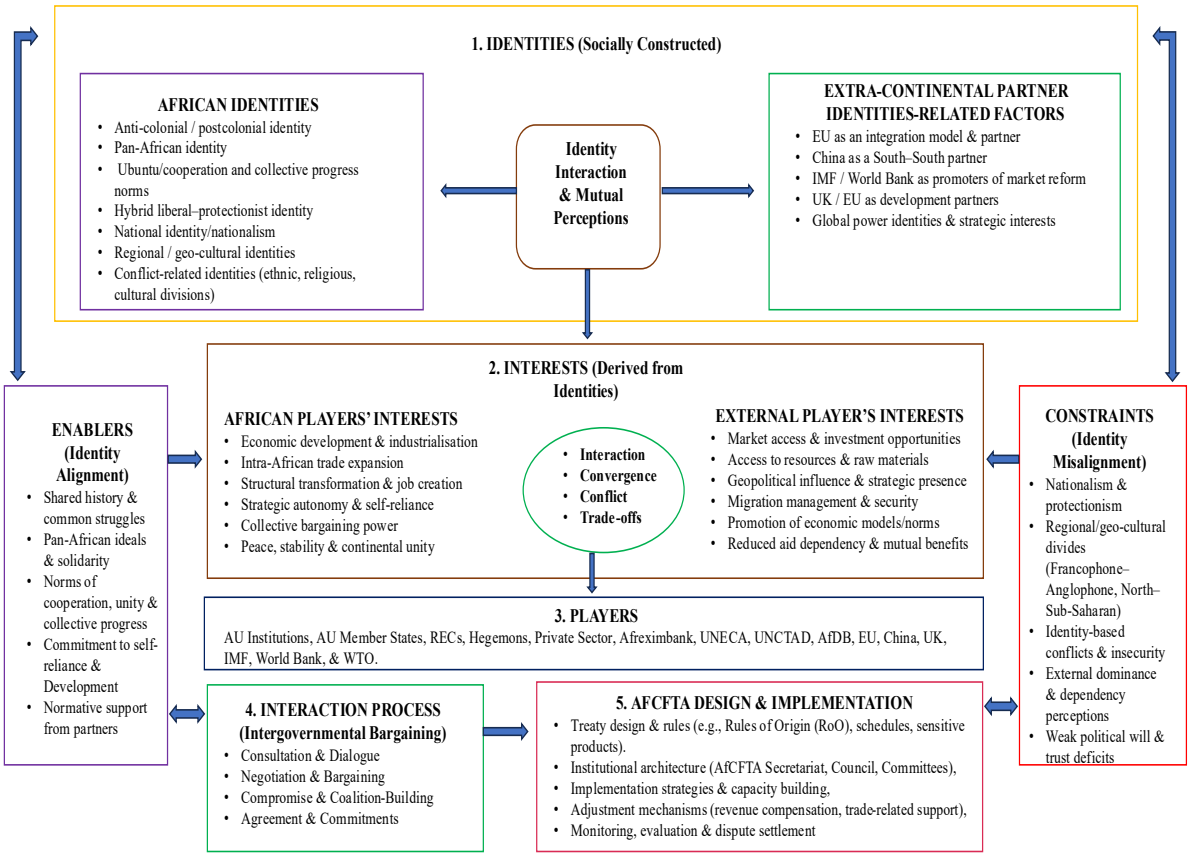


Figure 7.6 Conceptual Map of how identities and interests interact to shape the development of the AfCFTA.

The diagram above provides a conceptual synthesis of the analysis and discussion contained in this chapter. It shows how historically and socially constructed identities and interests interact and, consequently, shape the interests and behaviour of African and extra-continental players

in the planning, negotiation, orientation, and implementation of the AfCFTA. The diagram illustrates the interactions among identities, interests, African and external actors, intergovernmental bargaining, institutional processes, and development outcomes. It also shows the enabling and constraining effects of these identities and identity-related factors on the development of the AfCFTA.

7.7 Chapter Summary

In the first section, the chapter has discussed the findings presented in Chapter Six using Nyerere's theory of integration, intergovernmentalism and social constructivism. The findings regarding the rationale for the AfCFTA's establishment were discussed with a focus on the developmental benefits of the AfCFTA, the relevance of the European experience, the extent to which the AfCFTA facilitates deeper economic integration, the institutional strategies and mechanisms devised to advance implementation, the demerits of the AfCFTA, and the measures used to mitigate the demerits. In the second section, the chapter discussed findings on the major players in establishing the AfCFTA, including African states, the AU, RECs, the private sector, UNECA, UNCTAD, AfDB, Afreximbank, the biggest African economies, and external players. In the third section, the chapter discussed findings related to the interests of the major players, focusing on their economic, social, political, and geopolitical interests. In the fourth section, the chapter discussed findings related to the role of identities and interests in shaping the development of the AfCFTA, focusing on anticolonial, pan-African, Afrocentric, hybrid liberal-protectionist, nationalistic, regional/geo-cultural, conflict-related, and external partner identities. The fourth section discussed findings related to the AU's strategies for addressing identity-related challenges, as well as the steps and measures the AU and the AfCFTA Secretariat can take to ensure the successful realisation of the AfCFTA goals.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION, SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONTRIBUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Introduction

This chapter is the conclusion of the study. It synthesises key findings, highlights the study's theoretical and empirical contributions, and outlines its limitations and recommendations. The study's focus was on identities, interests, regional integration and economic development in the context of the AfCFTA. The study sought to explore how the rationale (and perceived utility) of the AfCFTA is understood, identify the major players and their interests in its creation, and examine the role of interests and identities in its development. It used a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 experts from the AfCFTA Secretariat, AUDA-NEPAD, UNECA, UNCTAD, and SAIIA, as well as 10 scholars and independent analysts. The study used thematic analysis to present and analyse data. The study observed that, despite extensive scholarship on the AfCFTA's economic, institutional, and technical dimensions, there is a critical gap in understanding how socially constructed identities and competing or divergent interests shape its emergence and trajectory. This is a gap that prevailing Eurocentric theories cannot and do not adequately explain without an African-centred theoretical synthesis grounded in African political thought, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism.

8.2 Summary of the Study

8.2.1 Restatement of the Research Problem

The central research problem identified in this study is that the existing body of AfCFTA-specific literature focuses primarily on economic, technical, and institutional aspects, and less on how interests and socially constructed identities influence the agreement's emergence and development. This leads to less scrutiny of the role of competing, converging, and conflicting identities and interests in enabling or constraining the AfCFTA's creation and prospects. Furthermore, the commonly used mainstream theories of IR and regionalism do not fully capture the distinctive ideational dimensions of the AfCFTA. Consequently, there is a deficiency that necessitates the use of a theoretical synthesis comprising Nyerere's pan-Africanist, development-centred, and gradualist theory, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism.

8.2.2 The Central Research Objectives

The summary and conclusions were made based on the research objectives restated below:

i. To explore how the underlying rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area can be understood.

ii. To interrogate the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

iii. To evaluate the interests of the major players in the African Continental Free Trade Area.

iv. To examine how the interests and identities of different players shape the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

8.2.3 Theoretical Synthesis

This study employed a combination of three theoretical traditions to ensure that its multidimensionality aligns with apt theoretical insights and analysis. The use of Nyerere's pan-Africanist, development-centred, and gradualist theory enabled the study to examine and explain the rationale and utility of the AfCFTA as a form of developmental regionalism and as part of the pan-African and anticolonial economic agenda. It enabled the study to examine and explain the centrality of the RECs to African integration, particularly the development of the AfCFTA. It also allowed the study to examine and explain the influence of interests and some ideational identities—including Pan-Africanism, anticolonial identities, and African norms of cooperation—on the pursuit, design, and establishment of the AfCFTA. The use of intergovernmentalism enabled the study to examine and explain the roles and interests of the major national and intergovernmental players—including African states, the AU, the RECs, and the largest economies—in the creation of the AfCFTA. The use of social constructivism empowered the study to examine and explain the agendas underpinning the AfCFTA, the interests of the major players, and the role of normative and ascriptive identities—including anticolonial, pan-Africanist, African cooperative norms, hybrid liberal-protectionist economic, geo-cultural, extra-continental, and cultural identities—in the emergence and realisation of the AfCFTA. This synthesis helped the study examine and explain the AfCFTA's interest-identity-integration-developmental character, highlighting its hybrid nature.

8.2.4 Synthesis of Key Findings

8.2.4.1 Rationale and the Establishment of the AfCFTA

8.2.4.1.1 The AfCFTA as a Development-Centred Integration Project

The study finds that the AfCFTA is firmly rooted in Africa's economic transformation and development agenda. The project has been developed to boost intra-African trade, tackle

economic fragmentation, supercharge the development of regional and continental value chains, and ensure rapid industrialisation. The scheme is designed to advance an economic development agenda through the promotion of an FDI-friendly economic landscape, fostering of technical know-how and innovation, and advancement of product competitiveness. The erasure of structural economic challenges, the facilitation of Africa-led development and the breaking of Africa's persistent economic dependency are also key imperatives for the creation of the AfCFTA. The study established that these aims are rooted in pan-Africanist, anticolonial, and development-centred goals, as well as in the anticipation of the economic benefits that African states can obtain from trade integration.

8.2.4.1.2 Difference between African Regionalism and European Regionalism and the AfCFTA as a Pathway to Deeper Integration

The study finds that regional integration in postcolonial Africa is a bottom-up (RECs-driven) process and that it has always followed the European model. The AfCFTA's trade integration is a stage in a long, step-by-step process of continental integration—geared towards achieving the African Economic Community—envisioned in the Abuja Treaty, as it paves the way for a future customs union, common market, and economic union. At the same time, its configuration closely resembles the Single European Act, which serves as the legal and political foundation for the EU's Single Market. African integration, as pursued over the last forty years, is a development-centred, state-centric, and RECs-driven form of regionalism. The study found that the AfCFTA may not be a significant turning point in African continental integration and the pursuit of the AEC, because the Agreement does not radically remove all trade barriers and provides countries with trade remedies, including both tariff and non-tariff barriers, to protect their infant and sunset industries. These safety valves could be used for trade protectionism and to undermine full trade liberalisation by countries that fear sectoral destruction or the loss of customs revenues.

8.2.4.1.3 Mechanisms and Strategies for Ensuring the AfCFTA's Success, Potential Demerits of the AfCFTA, and Measures for Mitigating Drawbacks

The study finds that various institutional mechanisms and strategies support the implementation of the AfCFTA. The establishment of the AfCFTA Secretariat, the Guided Trade Initiative, the Dispute Settlement Mechanism, and the Protocol on Relations between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities is an affirmation that the lack of implementation in African integration has much to do with agency and political will rather than a shortage of institutions. The partial implementation of the aforementioned protocol and African states' disinclination to support and ratify the AU Protocol on Free Movement of

Persons reveal this lack of agency and political commitment, and also point to the institutional limitations that characterise the AfCFTA.

The study finds that the AU recognises that the AfCFTA could lead to economic losses that it has to mitigate. The AfCFTA will not yield even economic benefits, as countries are at different levels of economic development and GDP sizes, ensuring that the more economically advanced countries enjoy most of the trade gains. Many countries that generate a large share of their national revenues through tariffs will lose a substantial source of revenue, leading to economic and social hardship. The devastation caused by this adverse economic adjustment could fuel public pushback against the AfCFTA, possibly leading to governments' hesitation to align their national legislation and policies with the AfCFTA, calls for disengagement, or undermining the AfCFTA's implementation momentum.

The severity of this possible reality has prompted the architects of the AfCFTA to develop tools and interventions to support adaptation and transition, thereby mitigating the damaging economic consequences of the AfCFTA for countries. In this connection, the AfCFTA designers created exemptions that allow countries to protect the most vulnerable industries through limited, temporary tariffs. The AfCFTA Secretariat and the African Export-Import Bank have also established a financial mechanism, the Adjustment Facility, to provide trade financing, technical assistance, and other kinds of support to countries experiencing significant economic and financial losses. The pursuit of shared economic prosperity and the availability of assistance for countries facing economic devastation show that trade under the AfCFTA is complemented by deliberate efforts to ensure that no country is left behind and that the AfCFTA becomes a developmental and economic success for all members.

8.2.4.2 Major Players in the Establishment of the AfCFTA

8.2.4.2.1 National, Regional, Continental and External Players

The study finds that the AfCFTA is a composite created by several key players with distinct contributions. The indispensable work done by national governments, the African Union, the Regional Economic Communities, the private sector, the largest African economies, research and economic think tanks, and foreign powers was a manifestation of converging economic and political interests and agendas that the AfCFTA will serve. The demonstration of African agency and leadership in the creation of the AfCFTA is a signification of the intergovernmentalist proposition that states, the national players within states and the intergovernmental bodies serving as arenas in which states negotiate and harmonise their

agendas, are the fountainhead of regional integration. The catalytic influence of sovereign states and the RECs position these players as the legitimate and most suitable facilitators of functional cooperation and developmental regionalism.

8.2.4.2.2 Continental and International Technical and Financial Institutions

The study also finds that several actors, including those that are (or part of) international organisations, were central to the creation of the AfCFTA. Organisations such as UNECA, UNCTAD, AfDB, IMF, World Bank, and the African Export-Import Bank were vital enablers of the AfCFTA, providing the resources and tools needed by the AU and its member states to establish it. Their contributions, in the form of technical assistance, capacity-building, research, funding, and payment systems, catalysed the creation and operation of the AfCFTA, making it a reality. Their roles as the strategic enablers of African integration reveal the unique nature of integration among less developed countries that lack the tools and resources necessary to achieve their goals.

8.2.4.3 Interests of the Major Players in the Establishment of the AfCFTA

8.2.4.3.1 Interests of African States, Intergovernmental Bodies, Regional Economic Hegemons, and Foreign Powers

The study finds that a multiplicity of agendas characterises the AfCFTA as several players have varied interests. Predictably, players such as states, intergovernmental bodies, regional economic hegemons, and foreign powers embrace the project to realise optimal or preferential market access, trade creation, investment protection, etc., which directly lead to better economic performance. Despite this convergence of economic interests, these players also seek clashing economic outcomes. While African states seek economic development-related outcomes, the European and Asian foreign powers, acting as rational actors, seek to preserve the neocolonial economic relations, defined by Africa's economic dependency and extractive economies, that have been the case for centuries. This agenda could militate against the pursuit of structural economic transformation, the dismantling of colonial economic legacies, the advancement of home-driven people-centred development, and the repositioning of Africa in the global economy. It could also undermine the AU and African states' desire for endogenous development, greater collective bargaining power, collective self-reliance and strategic autonomy, as the perpetuation of Africa's economic underdevelopment constrains the realisation of these interests. Also, the desire of the largest economies for trade dominance undermines the vision of shared economic development proposed in the Abuja treaty and the principle of collective progress.

The study reveals that the external players have other political and geopolitical interests as they back the AfCFTA. Their support for the AfCFTA is also tied to their difficulty in managing and preventing illegal migration from developing countries, the unsustainability of Africa's heavy reliance on foreign aid, and the pursuit of geopolitical power and rivalry. While the EU cares more about all three (migration management, reducing aid dependency, and geopolitical leverage), China is more concerned with strategic geopolitical leverage. In essence, these interests indicate that external players have significant stakes in African integration and will therefore always seek to shape its trajectory.

8.2.4.3.2 Political Commitment for Implementing the AfCFTA

The study finds that, while there is shared political will to create the AfCFTA, there is inadequate political commitment among the states to implement it. The rapidity with which a vast majority of African countries signed and ratified the Treaty Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area was a vivid sign of a shared desire to form a single market for goods and services and to increase intra-African trade volumes. The rapid endorsement displayed the convergence of national interests among states, which propels regional integration. However, the political will is more symbolic than pragmatic, as concerns over economic losses, the prioritisation of short-term economic gains over long-term ones, and the persistence of institutional capacity constraints demonstrate a weak political commitment to implementing the AfCFTA. This lack of strong commitment due to economic fears proved that economic considerations play the most cardinal role in states' engagement in regional integration. Taken together, these observations show that support for the AfCFTA among countries remains largely aspirational and lacks a tangible commitment to advancing its realisation.

8.2.4.4 The Role of Interests and Identities in the Development of the AfCFTA

8.2.4.4.1 Identities, Norms and the Social Foundations of the AfCFTA

The study found that normative identities that promote African unity mobilise tremendous support for African integration and the AfCFTA. The existence and power of anticolonial, postcolonial, and pan-African identities have generated interests such as opposition to dependency, neocolonialism, and the economic primitiveness that have defined Africa for centuries, as well as the desire for an African economic renaissance, structural transformation, and self-sufficiency. The African norms of cooperation and collective progress also cultivate interests in trade integration, economic cooperation, and shared economic prosperity, as they

mobilise Africans to support, rather than resist, integrative programmes and inspire African states to pursue continental integration.

The study finds that a hybrid liberal-protectionist economic identity fuels the AfCFTA. Espousing liberal economic norms engenders support for free trade, whereas economic nationalism undermines it. The pervasive support for the AfCFTA among the state elite and African policymakers is rooted in continental norms and preferences for free-market economic models that prioritise free trade, investment protections, entrepreneurship, and competition. This prevailing liberal economic orientation fosters a desire and commitment among African governments for the free flow of goods, services, and production factors that undergird the AfCFTA. On the other hand, some tend to prefer measures that perpetuate trade protectionism, which goes counter to the AfCFTA's aim of boosting trade, due to fears of losing to foreign businesses and the possibility of customs revenue losses.

The study finds that nationalism and ascriptive identities militate against the progression of continental integration and the creation of the AfCFTA. Nationalism elevates nationalistic imperatives at the expense of African integration, as nationalistic phenomena, such as the rejection of deeper integration and the expression of xenophobic and prohibitive measures against immigrants' participation in the economy, discourage FDI, business confidence, and investments in intra-African trade. Ascriptive identities such as the ethnic, linguistic and racial identities have been used to create social conflict, political instability and security crises in several African states. This makes it almost impossible for traders and investors to take their money or business operations to such conflict hotspots, thereby preventing these countries from enjoying the AfCFTA's trade and economic growth benefits. The AfCFTA's positive distributional effects will be experienced in peaceful, stable countries.

The study finds that regional and geo-cultural identities promote sub-regional integration and constrain continental integration. The shared geo-cultural identities amongst the peoples of East Africa and Francophone West Africa have always promoted mutual interests and successful negotiations in advancing regional integration within the geographical areas where these identities are shared. Hence, the EAC and ECOWAS have achieved integration milestones such as FTAs, customs unions and common markets (in the case of the EAC). Nevertheless, these regional identities disfavour integration at the continental scale, as they engender Francophone-Anglophone and North African-Sub-Saharan African divides that promote disunity, discord, and disinterest in aligning domestic and RECs' policies with the

AfCFTA within these geo-cultural blocs. These identities undermine African unity and cooperation norms, and trigger perceptions of other blocs as rivals rather than partners. Therefore, while regional loyalties and geo-cultural identities inspire dynamism in sub-regional integration projects, they undermine the AfCFTA's progression and African integration in general.

8.2.4.4.2 External Actors and Extra-Continental Identities

The study finds that extra-continental partner identities imbue external players with the desire and determination to support the AfCFTA and regionalism in Africa. The EU, UK, WTO, IMF, and World Bank's self-perception as embodiments of liberal economic norms and their commitment to free-market economics drive their support for enabling the AfCFTA's emergence and fruition. China's self-perception as a global economic leader and champion of cooperation in the Global South leads it to view the facilitation of the AfCFTA's creation as its responsibility. Therefore, the study found that extra-continental actors' engagement with the AfCFTA is guided by identity-based role perceptions, which shape how they offer support and, in practice, ensure asymmetrical influence within Africa's integration process.

8.2.4.4.3 The AU and RECs' Identity-Related Interventions and Strategies to Ensure the AfCFTA's Implementation

The study finds that the African Union and the RECs lack a structured framework for managing identity dynamics. Developing a shared pro-integration identity is not seen as an imperative in the AU and RECs, and there is no strong indication of serious consideration of the role of identities on continental economic integration. Consequently, they lack strategies to mitigate the identity-specific dynamics that undermine the creation and implementation of the AfCFTA. This leaves the AfCFTA-shaping landscape entirely focused on technical, financial, and policy enablers, allowing ideological or ideational constraints to persist and negatively impact the evolution and implementation of the AfCFTA.

Also, the AU and the RECs have an intergovernmental character rather than supranational power. African states have not ceded or conferred substantive policy-making power to the AU or to many regional institutions, creating an environment in which regional integration initiatives are seen as lower-level policy imperatives. Consequently, these institutions operate on the basis of states' voluntary cooperation, without any binding authority over member states. This undermines certainty, predictability, and speed in the implementation of the AfCFTA and other regional integration initiatives.

The study finds that several critical steps are needed to ensure the AfCFTA's viability. The successful implementation of the AfCFTA depends on revitalising Pan-Africanism, strengthening trust and peace, and consolidating good governance and institutional capacity to foster cooperative norms and political commitment across the continent. Equally important is the provision of technical, financial, and implementation support—particularly for weaker economies—to ensure that integration advances collective self-reliance instead of reproducing inequality or dependency within Africa.

8.3 Contributions

8.3.1 Theoretical Contributions of the Study

8.3.1.1 Contribution to African Integration Theory

The study demonstrates that African actors frame the AfCFTA as a project characterised by strong development-centredness. The development imperatives such as economic growth, developing regional value chains, diversification, beneficiation, FDI flows, improvements in livelihoods, innovation, competitiveness and collective self-reliance constitute the central agenda pursued under the AfCFTA. This provides empirical support for the theory of developmental regionalism, showing that African integration and intra-African trade serve as policy instruments rather than as a neoliberal or market-led process aimed solely at tariff elimination and efficiency gains.

The study finds that African integration aligns strongly with Julius Nyerere's integration theory. It showed that, as with other watershed integration policy frameworks, including the LPA, FAL, and the Abuja Treaty, the AfCFTA is designed in a way that espouses Nyerere's gradualist, development-centred, and pan-African model of integration. This is evidenced by the AfCFTA's recognition of state sovereignty, consensus-building, RECs-driven (bottom-up) integration and primacy of home-driven economic development. Therefore, the study strengthens African integration theory by reinforcing the continuity of African developmental regionalism rather than a move towards the more orthodox liberal regionalism. The findings thus validate and extend Julius Nyerere's theory by showing that gradualism, developmental priorities, Pan-Africanism and REC-led integration remain the organising principles of continental integration.

The study also reveals the unique logic of African integration, something that is under-theorised. It challenges the pervasive tendency to analyse African integration through European experiences by showing that the underlying logic of African integration is historically rooted

in postcolonial governance, developmental agendas and pan-African political thought, rather than functional economic integration alone.

8.3.1.2 Contribution to Intergovernmentalism

The study finds that African integration is state-driven and consensus-based. While European integration, identified as a model for African states to follow, is driven by functional spillovers, top-down approaches, and supranational and legalistic approaches, African integration is driven by intergovernmental bargaining, consultation, and consensus-building. The AfCFTA shows that meaningful integration does not depend on a supranational authority and can be done through coordination, common commitments, and negotiated rules. This runs counter to the Eurocentric propositions that deep integration requires supranational leadership.

The findings show that Eurocentric intergovernmentalist propositions are insufficient for understanding African integration. Intergovernmentalism was developed to explain integration in states that enjoy real de jure and de facto sovereignty. But former colonies and less developed countries in Africa are not fully sovereign and depend heavily on external development partners for aid and expertise needed to create the AfCFTA. Therefore, the study shows that these external actors are not auxiliary players, but the co-architects. This shatters longstanding assumptions by showing that African states actually navigate compromised sovereignty due to persistent structural dependencies. This demonstrates that a version of intergovernmentalism that takes these realities into account is needed to understand integration among former colonies still trapped in dependency and colonial legacies.

8.3.1.3 Contribution to Constructivist Scholarship

This study demonstrates that identities can simultaneously enable or constrain integration. It shows that normative or ideational identities, such as anticolonial identity, pan-African identity, African norms of cooperation, unity and collective progress, hybrid liberal-protectionist economic identity, and extra-continental partner identities, are integration identities because they create preferences, interests, and momentum that enable continental economic integration. It also shows that regional and geo-cultural identities constrain African integration and consequently undermine the continent-wide realisation of the AfCFTA. In this regard, the findings distinguish between integration-enabling identities (such as pan-African, anticolonial, cooperative, and liberal economic identities) and integration-constraining identities (such as nationalism, geo-cultural and some ascriptive identities), thereby showing a more distinct conceptual understanding of identity dynamics in regional integration.

The study establishes that African norms of cooperation, unity and collective progress are operationalised and formalised in the AfCFTA treaty. They are institutionalised within the AfCFTA's legal and governance framework. This demonstrates that, in the context of African integration, norms not only shape preferences but also the institutional architecture. These norms operate as constitutive forces for continental integration.

The study highlights that in African integration, liberal economic preferences and protectionist impulses are internalised identities shaping integration, and they are not mere policy choices. The policymakers' espousal of free-market principles, such as free trade and capital mobility, alongside protectionist policies, creates a shared hybrid identity that shapes what states and intergovernmental organisations perceive as the best way to advance economic development. The AfCFTA and the widespread support it enjoys reflect this hybrid identity.

8.3.1.4 Importance of Theoretical Synthesis

This study finds that the distinctiveness of African integration necessitates the utilisation of theoretical triangulation to understand it. The AfCFTA cannot be explained by a single theoretical framework, nor by Eurocentric theories alone. Therefore, the theoretical synthesis comprising Nyerere's theory, intergovernmentalism, and social constructivism fully captures the complexity of African integration, demonstrating that a collage of rational economic considerations, intergovernmental bargaining, historical legacies, and social meanings shapes the AfCFTA's creation.

Also, the theoretical synthesis underpinning this study demonstrates that African integration is characterised by a dynamic interplay among identities, interests, and developmental goals. The AfCFTA is a product of interactions between identities (such as anticolonial identities, Pan-Africanism, African norms of cooperation and collective progress, hybrid liberal-protectionist economic identities, external partner identities), political and economic interests (such as collective bargaining power, geopolitical ambitions, trade, investment, migration concerns, aid dependency concerns), and development-related imperatives (such as endogenous development, structural economic transformation, and collective self-reliance). Without any of these components, the emergence and establishment of the AfCFTA would not have happened.

8.3.2 Empirical Contributions of the Study

The findings of this study demonstrate that intergovernmental processes, rather than supranational authority, are the primary operational logic in African integration. African governments are decisive gatekeepers, and without their approval or coordination, the AfCFTA

would have never been created. Also, even though the RECs are the building blocks, they do not naturally lead to continental integration on their own because they depend greatly on continuous intergovernmental bargaining. This shows that sub-regional integration is a preparatory mechanism and not an automatic pathway to deeper integration. In addition, private-sector actors directly shaped states' negotiating positions and participated alongside states in designing the AfCFTA Agreement. This is the distinctive characteristic of intergovernmentalism in African integration.

Also, the study shows that the hegemon-led model that characterises European integration is not always applicable to African integration. In the planning, negotiation, and establishment of the AfCFTA, Africa's smallest economies were active players and not passive followers. In fact, even the lack of early commitment from Nigeria did not stall progress, as small states also showed agency and championed the realisation of the AfCFTA. This differs from the longstanding assumptions made regarding the centrality of regional hegemons in integration.

The findings show that external players (the EU, UK, China, and international economic institutions) and continental technical institutions such as UNECA, UNCTAD, and AfDB were not auxiliary players in the creation of the AfCFTA. These players were indispensable to the AfCFTA's design and implementation because their funding, resources, and expertise were critically needed. They made the AfCFTA operational and viable as a project. Their status as co-architects and strategic enablers of the AfCFTA reveals that African integration has several principal actors with varied but critical contributions.

The study highlights the existing underemphasis of key agendas that encourage the EU and the UK to support African integration. Most studies focus on economic rationality and geopolitical ambitions, while under-theorising the extent to which the desire to address the illegal migration crisis and the pressure to reduce Africa's aid dependency drive the EU and UK's support for the AfCFTA and, more broadly, African integration.

The findings reveal that identities enable and constrain integration. Regional and geo-cultural identities, such as Francophone and Anglophone, are facilitators of sub-regional integration spearheaded by the RECs. At the same time, they are barriers to continental integration spearheaded by the AU. Also, nationalism and trade protectionism undermine the cause of the AfCFTA and could make some African states show reluctance to align their domestic legislation and policies with the AfCFTA.

The study shows that extra-continental partner identities influence African integration. The self-identities of the EU, the UK, China, and international economic institutions have fuelled the emergence and operation of the AfCFTA, revealing that African identities are not the only ones shaping integration. While these identities are diverse, they jointly shape external players' involvement in African integration.

The study establishes that the AU lacks a structured framework to address identity-related dynamics that derail African integration. This is a critical implementation gap given that several identities directly affect the creation and prospects of the AfCFTA. Because of this absence of a comprehensive framework, the AU is not well-positioned to deter or deftly handle the challenges emanating from conflict, divergence or the negative impact of identities.

8.4 Limitations of the study

The AfCFTA is still evolving, and therefore, its dynamics may continue to change in ways researchers and scholars may not foresee. Since it is still at an early implementation stage, these findings capture a snapshot in time. Several factors could change during implementation. The identities, interests and power dynamics this study analyses are still being negotiated. The implementation-related issues, including tariff schedules, dispute settlement mechanisms and rules of origin, are incomplete, and thus their long-term effect cannot be verified. Also, the negotiations remain confidential, and some players' positions are not publicly communicated. Therefore, access to all the information related to the bargaining process is inadequate. This study thus focuses primarily on the ideational conditions shaping the AfCFTA, rather than the final outcomes.

A qualitative case study design offers depth but limited breadth. The study's findings provided a strong contextual explanation of how identities and interests shape the AfCFTA, revealing its strong ideational landscape. However, the findings may not be statistically generalisable to all regional integration initiatives in Africa or to all actors involved in sub-regional and continental integration, as the AfCFTA is the sole centrepiece. Therefore, there may be several questions that require a quantitative method, which this study may not address.

The findings reflect the insights and experiences of AfCFTA, regionalism, and policy experts and do not reflect those of the non-elite stakeholders that the AfCFTA will ultimately impact. Since the study focused on seeking the views of experts directly engaged in or highly knowledgeable about African regionalism and the AfCFTA, including AU officials, AfCFTA practitioners, UNECA officials, AUDA-NEPAD officials, UNCTAD officials, SAIIA

researchers, and academics, it does not fully capture the lived experiences of traders, SMEs, labour unions, and ordinary citizens whose views may be different from those of the experts.

8.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter offered a synthesis of the findings, explained the study's theoretical and empirical contributions, and briefly outlined its limitations. The findings of the study demonstrated that the AfCFTA is not a product of material economic interests alone, but of historically embedded identities that influence what African states and intergovernmental bodies perceive as desirable and legitimate forms of integration. The chapter showed that a theoretical synthesis of Eurocentric theories and African political thought is highly beneficial for explaining the AfCFTA and African integration more generally, as Eurocentric perspectives do not fully capture the complexity of African integration. The chapter highlighted that the roles and statuses of continental technical institutions and the external players are more integral to the AfCFTA than most people realise. This chapter highlighted the AfCFTA's identity-interest-integration-development orientation. The chapter also includes policy and future research recommendations, which follow below.

8.6 Recommendations

8.6.1 Policy and Practice Recommendations

The study finds that the success of the AfCFTA relies on a sound AU-led industrial policy. The coordination of industrial policy between the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities should be enhanced. A strong, institutionalised AU-REC industrial policy coordination mechanism should be made more effective through greater monitoring and more vigorous enforcement. This regime should ensure even alignment across RECs, robust coordination and industrial policy convergence.

The study finds that there is no continent-wide free movement of businesspersons to deepen economic integration. The AU and its member states should make the free movement of businesspersons easier. The importance of free movement for trade is recognised as an imperative by African policymakers and scholars. The reluctance of African states to sign and ratify the AU Protocol on Free Movement, which would facilitate trade and the mobility of businesspersons, militates against economic integration. The AU and the African states should therefore address the issues in the current version of the protocol that have made it unacceptable to the overwhelming majority of African states.

The study finds that identity-related conflicts are barriers to the AfCFTA. Since the countries facing internal crisis and conflicts may never enjoy the AfCFTA's benefits, conflict management should be vigorously pursued by the AU and the RECs. There should be greater focus on addressing the identity-related root causes of these conflicts and on deliberate efforts to forge a shared pro-unity identity that enables people of different ethnicities, language backgrounds, religions, etc., to coexist, cultivate a common purpose, and build strong bonds of friendship. This should be complemented by strong information dissemination initiatives that negate and discourage bigotry, extremism and supremacism.

The study finds that the AfCFTA is largely externally funded. The AU's reliance on external funding for the creation and operation of the AfCFTA must be addressed by African states. If the AfCFTA's creation could hurt some of the economic interests and agendas of neocolonial players and countries that benefit immensely from Africa's lack of economic diversification, regional value chains, and industrialisation, then African states should strive to fund the AfCFTA themselves to avoid having distorted priorities. Given the potential of the AfCFTA to bring about a new dawn in Africa's economic reality, financing its creation is a worthwhile investment. The AU and the Secretariat should encourage the largest economies in Africa to lead from the front on funding the AfCFTA, to ensure African agency continues to characterise the operation of the scheme.

The study finds that identities and identity-related factors have positive and negative effects on African integration. To ensure that nationalism, trade protectionism, regional and geo-cultural identities, and ascriptive identity-related factors do not stall the AfCFTA, the AU and the RECs should systematically promote a shared pan-African identity and free market identity across the continent through a structured framework. To operationalise this framework, the AU should establish a dedicated task force on identity and integration, tasked with contributing to the development of regional public diplomacy campaigns, ensuring that school curricula highlight pan-African history, and creating a continent-wide cultural exchange programme. The implementation of this framework should be championed by AU and RECs officials, prominent pan-Africanists on the continent, and revered Africans in various fields of endeavour, including artists, media and television personalities, and athletes, among others.

Also, identity-related conflicts should be addressed more vigorously to foster unity and a shared identity rooted in solidarity, mutual trust, and a commitment to social justice. The AU and the RECs should ensure that the grievances and aspirations of disgruntled groups within

states are addressed to prevent political crises, social tensions, and instability that cripple development and integration. In essence, tackling identity-related discords and crises should be acknowledged and treated as an economic integration and development imperative.

The study finds that domestic implementation is central to the success of the AfCFTA and that some countries may face difficulties aligning their policies with it. The AU, the Secretariat, and the RECs should improve the enforcement of implementation mechanisms by ensuring regular actions to address challenges to domestic implementation. The success of the AfCFTA depends on member states' alignment of national policies and legislation with the AfCFTA, and the AfCFTA cannot achieve any headway or have any impact without domestic implementation. Therefore, the AU and the RECs should provide regular and adequate assistance to countries struggling with aligning their domestic policies with the AfCFTA. This should include policy advice, technical assistance, and capacity-building support at the national level.

The study finds that the ongoing challenge of fragmentation and overlapping RECs membership makes integration cumbersome. The AU and the RECs should improve the implementation of the 2008 Protocol on Relations between the African Union (AU) and the Regional Economic Communities by addressing the challenges that have hindered its implementation. The AfCFTA treaty should be leveraged to bring together all AU-recognised RECs and to ensure greater interactivity and policy alignment between the AfCFTA Secretariat and the RECs. The AU should develop interventions to assist RECs with poor records of implementing regional integration programmes, such as AMU and IGAD, and ensure they are well-positioned to facilitate member states' domestic policy alignment with the AfCFTA.

8.6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Further research should be conducted on several AfCFTA-related areas. First, since this study focuses on the pre-implementation and early implementation periods in the life of the AfCFTA, longitudinal studies examining the ideational forces shaping the AfCFTA's implementation over a long period could be undertaken to understand how these forces change or reshape the AfCFTA over time. While this study examined the role of identities shaping the AfCFTA's creation, it did not give adequate focus on those that are affecting or manifesting during the various phases of implementation. Therefore, studying the extent to which certain identities manifest across the different stages of implementation could help explore and explain the

unique or complex nature of continental integration and the best practices for managing such complexity.

The study established that some sectors will be disrupted during the implementation of the AfCFTA. Therefore, sectoral studies can be conducted to probe and examine the impact of the AfCFTA on them, especially in the smallest economies. Also, given the importance of the Adjustment Facility in supporting countries in realising gains from the AfCFTA and avoiding disastrous economic events, the extent to which this mechanism fosters continued support for the AfCFTA among various sections of society could be studied to identify ways to cultivate popular support for the scheme.

Future studies could benefit greatly from insights from external actors. Conducting research that probes the opinions and experiences of external actors, such as EU officials, UK diplomats, Chinese diplomats, and others, to understand their perspectives on the support they offer to the AU and the AfCFTA Secretariat could help reveal more underlying motives for their engagement with the AfCFTA. Also, employing a quantitative approach to statistically assess the extent to which ascriptive and normative identities affect trade and FDI flows under the AfCFTA could better illustrate their impact.

At the theoretical level, a synthesis of Bela Balassa's Eurocentric integration theory and Nyerere's gradualist, pan-Africanist integration theory could provide a strong foundation for understanding the dynamic interplay between market-driven and development-centred integration. Such studies could explain the applicability of Balassa's theory of economic integration among former colonies, while revealing the relevance of African political thought in understanding integration in postcolonial settings. Also, given intergovernmentalism's limitations in explaining integration among former colonies that continue to struggle with colonial economic legacies, investigating a more suitable version of intergovernmentalism that appreciates the realities of postcolonial societies could expand the existing body of literature on the character and trajectories of African integration.

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Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Letter

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

13 September 2024

Sizwe Sidaza (213529217)
School of Social Sciences
Pietermaritzburg Campus

Dear S Sidaza,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002206/2020
Project title: Identities, Interests, Regional Integration and Economic Development: The case of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Approval Notification – Recertification Application

Your request for Recertification dated 12 September 2024 was received.

This letter confirms that you have been granted Recertification Approval for a period of one year from the date of this letter. This approval is based strictly on the research protocol submitted and approved in 2020.

Any alteration s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid for one year: 13 September 2025.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair) /nng

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/
Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix B: Permission to Conduct Research with African Union Officials

AFRICAN UNION
الاتحاد الأفريقي



UNION AFRICAINE
UNIÃO AFRICANA

P. O. Box 3243, Addis Ababa, ETHIOPIA Tel.: (251-11) 5517700 Website: www.au.int

Reference TI/AfCFTA/9/09.20
Date: **September 14th 2020**

To Whom It May Concern

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Approval to interview the African Union AfCFTA Negotiations Support Unit officials for the doctoral study

The AfCFTA Negotiations Support Unit embedded in the Department of Trade and Industry of the African Union Commission has been requested by Mr Sizwe Sidaza to partake through interviews with relevant and available officials in his doctoral research entitled "**Interests, Identities, regional integration and economic development: The case of the African Continental Free Trade Area**". The AU encourages and supports academic research into any area of Africa's economic development, and the AfCFTA NSU recognises the essence of cutting-edge research for the advancement of the continent's commercial prosperity.

Having considered Mr Sizwe Sidaza's call for the participation of its members in his research project, the AfCFTA NSU, therefore, confirms that it grants Mr Sidaza the greenlight to access and utilise the unit's professional expertise required to enrich and fulfil his project goals.

Sincerely

[redacted]

Mr. Prudence SEBAHIZI

Chief Technical Advisor & Head of AfCFTA Unit

Trade and Industry Department, African Union Commission

Tel: +251-11-5517700 | Fax: | E-mail: SebahiziP@africa-union.org | Web: www.au.int

Appendix C: Permission to Conduct Research with UNECA Officials

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA
COMMISSION ECONOMIQUE POUR L'AFRIQUE

Addis Ababa, 13 August 2020

To Whom it May Concern (Facilitating access to knowledge resources and interviews with relevant experts in support to Mr. Sizwe Sidaza's doctoral research)

I wish to acknowledge that **Mr. Sizwe Sidaza**, a PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in South Africa has reached out to the Regional Integration and Trade Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to support his doctoral research project by providing him access to the Commission's knowledge resources, as well as facilitating interviews with relevant staff with expertise in the areas of focus of his doctoral research. His doctoral research is on the theme "**Identities, interests, regional integration and economic development: The case of the African Continental Free Trade Area**".

As a leading think tank on the African continent, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa takes pride in encouraging and supporting research on various dimensions of Africa's development, particularly research by the youth. Moreover, Mr. Sidaza's doctoral research theme is in some of the areas of focus of ECA's work. It is therefore my pleasure to confirm that UNECA, through its Regional Integration and Trade Division will facilitate Mr. Sizwe Sadaza's access to the Commission's knowledge resources, and also provide him contacts for interviews with staff with expertise in the area of focus of his doctoral thesis.

It is our hope and believe that this above assistance would contribute in enriching his research. I trust this note would serve the purposes for which it is intended.

[redacted]

Francis Ikome

Francis Nguendi Ikome. PhD.
Chief, Regional Integration Section,
Regional Integration and Trade Division,
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa,
P.O. Box 3001,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
Tel: +251-11-544-3425
Email: ikome@un.org

Appendix D: Permission to Conduct Research with AUDA-NEPAD Officials

AUDA-NEPAD
AFRICAN UNION DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Date: 31 August 2020
Ref: AUDA/2020/0365/JA

To Whom It May Concern

Re: Permission to conduct interviews with the AUDA-NEPAD staff members for the doctoral research entitled "**Interests, Identities, regional integration and economic development: The case of the African Continental Free Trade Area**".

The AUDA-NEPAD, having been approached by Mr. Sizwe Sidaza for participation in his research project through interviews with relevant officials, hereby approves his request and confirms that it will help him access available knowledge resources and expertise suitable for advancing the fruition of his research project.

The AUDA-NEPAD, being a strong advocate of the African continent's economic development processes, supports and encourages academic and scholarly research into Africa's development. Mr Sidaza's study on the African Continental Free Trade Area is, therefore, an academic effort whose success the AUDA-NEPAD is willing to facilitate through its available.

Should you need further support or have any enquiries, please contact my Special Assistant : Jessica Annor jessicaa@nepad.org

[redacted]

Dr. Ibrahim Assane Mayaki
Chief Executive Officer

Appendix E: Permission to Conduct Research with an SAIIA Official

SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

African perspectives. Global insights.

Head Office: PO Box 31596, Braamfontein, Johannesburg, 2017, South Africa • T: +27 11 339 2021 • F: +27 11 339 2154
Cape Town Office: PO Box 15610, Vlaeberg 8012, South Africa • T: +27 21 422 0717 • F: +27 21 426 1455
www.saiia.org.za • e-mail: info@saiia.org.za

20 February 2020

Dear Mr Sizwe Sidaza,

Re: Permission to conduct an interview with the SAIIA for the doctoral research entitled "***Interests, Identities, regional integration and economic development: The case of the African Continental Free Trade Area***".

I, , have considered your letter and have approved your request for an interview.

I, within my parameters, intend to give any appropriate support you may need in the course of your doctoral study.

Should you need further support or have any enquiries, please contact me:

Sincerely

National Office Bearers
Chairman: Fred Phaswana • Deputy Chairman: Moeletsi Mbeki • Chief Executive: Elizabeth Sidiropoulos
NPO-058-556 • PBO-930-009-831

Appendix F: Permission to Conduct Research with an UNCTAD Official

From: Ralf Peters <ralf.peters@unctad.org>
Sent: Monday, 17 August 2020 18:10
To: Sizwe Sidaza (213529217); UNCTAD-DitcInfo
Cc: Miho Shirotori; Carlos Razo; Graham Mott; Tamar Van Straten

Subject: RE: Request for the UNCTAD's participation in a doctoral research

Dear Mr. Sidaza,

Thank you very much for your interest in UNCTAD's support and view of Africa's regional integration.

I designate as your interview partner from UNCTAD. is a very experienced UNCTAD officer

Can you please use this email as proof that we grant you a green light to engage with as an official from UNCTAD for the interview. You can use the material from the interview for your Ph.D. as you will please agree with . The findings, interpretations and conclusions expressed by are and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials or Member States. Please be aware of this disclaimer that I ask you to include also in your thesis. It is a usual disclaimer that you find in most UNCTAD publications.

I wish you all the best for your Ph.D.

Best regards,
Ralf

Dr. Ralf Peters
Chief, Trade Information Section, and OIC, Trade Analysis Branch
Division on International Trade and Commodities
Tel : +41 22 917 5680
email: ralf.peters@un.org
Website : https://unctad.org/ntm

UNCTAD 15 BARBADOS 25-30 APRIL 2021

From: Sizwe Sidaza (213529217) <213529217@stu.ukzn.ac.za>
Sent: 17 August 2020 14:16
To: UNCTAD-DitcInfo <DitcInfo@unctad.org>
Cc: Miho Shirotori <miho.shirotori@unctad.org>; Ralf Peters <ralf.peters@unctad.org>; Carlos Razo <carlos.razo@unctad.org>; Graham Mott <graham.mott@unctad.org>; Tamar Van Straten <Tamar.VanStraten@unctad.org>
Subject: Re: Request for the UNCTAD's participation in a doctoral research

Dear Ms Straten,

Appendix G: Informed Consent Form

Appendices



Informed Consent Document

Dear Participant,

My name is Sizwe Sidaza (213529217). I am a PhD candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus. The title of my research is:

Identities, interests, regional integration and economic development: The case of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

The study aims to investigate and elucidate how the underlying interests of the major players in Africa's regional integration influence the orientation and fruition of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

I am interested in interviewing you so that you can share your experiences and observations on the subject matter.

Please note that:

- The information that you provide will be used for scholarly research only.
- Your participation is entirely voluntary. You have a choice to participate, not to participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalised for taking such an action.
- Your views in this interview will be presented anonymously. Neither your name nor identity will be disclosed in any form in the study.
- The interview will take about 30 min.
- The record as well as other items associated with the interview will be held in a password-protected file accessible only to myself and my supervisors. After a period of 5 years, in line with the rules of the university, it will be disposed by shredding and burning.
- If you agree to participate, please sign the declaration attached to this statement (a separate sheet will be provided for signatures)

I can be contacted at: School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus, Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg.
Email: 213529217@stu.ukzn.ac.za;
Cell: +[redacted]

1

My supervisor is Prof. Khondlo Mtshali, who is located at the School of Social Sciences, Pietermaritzburg Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.
Contact details: email Mtshalik@ukzn.ac.za
Phone number: +27332605892

The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee contact details are as follows: Ms Phumelele Ximba, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Research Office, Email: ximbap@ukzn.ac.za, Phone number +27312603587.

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

DECLARATION

I…… *(full names of participant*) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire. I understand the intention of the research. I hereby agree to participate.

I consent / do not consent to have this interview recorded (if applicable)

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT DATE

……

Appendix H: Interview Schedule: AU Officials

Questions for one-on-one interviews with AU officials

A. Questions on the rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: From the African Union's point of view, what are the social, political and economic bases for the African Continental Free Trade Area and what makes it a worthwhile continental initiative?

Q2: Is the AfCFTA modelled on any successful free trade scheme in any other region of the world? If so, is that emulation suitable in the context of Africa?

Q3: Given the AU's intent to accomplish economic integration in accordance with the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (Abuja Treaty), the Constitutive Act of the African Union and Agenda 2063, would you say that the AfCFTA programme, as currently designed, is best suited to spur progress in that agenda? If so, how? If not, why?

Q4: Mindful of the long history of the underachievement of regional and continental commitment and plans, to the best of your knowledge, have the AU and RECs developed adequate preparatory mechanisms and strategies (action plans) to propel the AfCFTA initiative towards the realisation of its most fundamental objectives?

Q5: What are the social, economic and political demerits that may stem from undertaking this initiative? To what extent could such demerits militate against the legitimacy and desirability of the AfCFTA?

Q6: How does the AU plan to mitigate such demerits and contain their damage?

B. Questions on the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Who are the major national, regional and continental players in the establishment of the AfCFTA, and how have they demonstrated a great deal of influence and determination in driving economic integration through the establishment of AfCFTA?

Q2: What leverage do these players possess in Africa's undertaking of the AfCFTA initiative?

Q3: Does the (preponderant) influence of these players make it more or less likely for AfCFTA to achieve some of its fundamental objectives in the interest of all the stakeholders? How?

C. Questions on the interests of the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Based on your experience, analysis and observation, what social, political and economic interests (stakes) do these players have in the AfCFTA scheme?

Q2: Are there any (possible) detrimental effects of these interests and agendas to the prospects and utility of the AfCFTA? If so, how is the (possible) damage stemming from such interests mitigated?

Q3: How and to what extent have these interests played a role in previous market integration arrangements at regional and sub-regional levels? Do you think the AUC and the RECs deal with them with deft handling?

Q4: Based on your observation and experience, do you think there is a solid commitment on the part of AU member states and RECs to make the AfCFTA viable and successful? If not, what are the causes and potential impact of this attitude on the implementation and viability of AfCFTA?

D. Questions on the role of interests and identities in shaping the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: What are the social, cultural, political and economic national and regional identities impacting the development and realisation of the AfCFTA? How do they enhance or undermine the legitimacy and/or viability of this initiative?

Q2: How have such identities had a considerable impact on the development and prospects of previous economic integration endeavours?

Q3: Would you say that the AU institutions and RECs have the necessary measures and/or interventions for the containment and deterrence of damage emanating from incongruence of or negative identities and interests? What are these measures and mechanisms?

Q4: Mindful of these interests and identities, how best can the AfCFTA initiative advance and accomplish the fundamental goals envisioned in the Abuja Treaty, the Constitutive Act of the African Union and Agenda 2063?

Appendix I: Interview Schedule: Officials in Trade and Economic Development Research Institutions

Questions for one-on-one interviews with officials in trade and economic development research institutions

A. Questions on the rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Based on your research, observation and experience, do you consider the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area a significant moment for Africa's economic reinvigoration and reorganisation? What makes this endeavour worthwhile?

Q2: Based on your research and analysis of Africa's economic integration imperatives, does this effort best advance Africa's gradual move towards a single market and economic and monetary union visualised in the Abuja Treaty? If so, how? If not, why?

Q3: Mindful of the long history of the underachievement of regional and continental commitment and plans, to the best of your knowledge, have the AU and RECs developed adequate preparatory mechanisms and strategies (action plans) to propel the AfCFTA initiative towards the realisation of its most fundamental objectives? What distinguishes the implementation of AfCFTA from the implementation of past initiatives that have underachieved?

Q4: What are the social, economic and political demerits that may stem from this initiative? To what extent do such demerits militate against the legitimacy and desirability of the AfCFTA?

Q5: To the best of your knowledge, have the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities devised and put in place appropriate measures and mechanisms to deter perceptible impediments to the efficient and effective advancement of the AfCFTA?

B. Questions on the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Who are the major national, regional and continental players in the establishment of the AfCFTA, and how have they demonstrated a great deal of influence and determination in driving economic integration through the establishment of AfCFTA?

Q2: What leverage do these players possess in Africa's undertaking of the AfCFTA initiative?

Q3: Does the (preponderant) influence of these players make it more or less likely for AfCFTA to achieve some of its fundamental objectives in the interest of all stakeholders? How?

C. Questions on the interests of the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Based on your experience, analysis and observation, what social, political and economic interests (stakes) do these players have in the AfCFTA?

Q2: Are there any (possible) detrimental effects of these interests and agendas to the prospects and utility of the AfCFTA? If so, how is the (possible) damage stemming from such interests mitigated?

Q3: How and to what extent have these interests played a role in previous market integration arrangements at regional and sub-regional levels? Do you think the AUC and the RECs deal with them with deft handling?

Q4: Based on your observation and experience, do you think there is a solid commitment on the part of AU member states and RECs to make the AfCFTA viable and successful? If not, what are the causes and potential impact of this attitude on the implementation and viability of AfCFTA?

D. Questions on the role of interests and identities in shaping the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: What are the social, cultural, political and economic national and regional identities impacting the development and realisation of the AfCFTA? How do they enhance or undermine the legitimacy and/or viability of the initiative?

Q2: How have such identities had a considerable impact on the development and prospects of previous economic integration endeavours?

Q3: Would you say that the AU institutions and RECs have the necessary measures and/or interventions for the containment and deterrence of damage emanating from incongruence of or negative identities and interests? What are these measures and mechanisms?

Q4: Mindful of these interests and identities, how best can the AfCFTA initiative advance and accomplish the fundamental goals envisioned in the Abuja Treaty, the Constitutive Act of the African Union and Agenda 2063?

Appendix J: Interview Schedule: Relevant Independent Analysts

Questions for one-on-one interviews with relevant independent analysts

A. Questions on the rationale for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Based on your research, observation and/or analysis, do you consider the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area a significant moment for Africa's economic reinvigoration and reorganisation? What makes this endeavour worthwhile?

Q2: Based on your research and analysis of Africa's economic integration imperatives, does this effort best advance Africa's gradual move towards an economic and monetary union visualised in the Abuja Treaty? If so, how? If not, why?

Q3: Mindful of the long history of the underachievement of regional and continental commitment and plans, to the best of your knowledge, have the AU and RECs developed adequate preparatory mechanisms and strategies (action plans) to propel the AfCFTA initiative towards the realisation of its most fundamental objectives? What distinguishes the implementation of AfCFTA from the implementation of past initiatives that have underachieved?

Q4: What are the social, economic and political demerits that may stem from this initiative? Do you think such demerits militate against the legitimacy and desirability of the AfCFTA?

Q5: To the best of your knowledge, have the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities devised and put in place appropriate measures and mechanisms to deter perceptible impediments to the efficient and effective advancement of the AfCFTA?

B. Questions on the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Who are the major national, regional and continental players in the establishment of the AfCFTA, and how have they demonstrated a great deal of influence and determination, driving economic integration through the establishment of AfCFTA?

Q2: What leverage do these players possess in Africa's undertaking of the AfCFTA initiative?

Q3: Does the (preponderant) influence of these players make it more or less likely for AfCFTA to achieve some of its fundamental objectives in the interest of all stakeholders? How?

C. Questions on the interests of the major players in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: Based on your experience, analysis and observation, what social, political and economic interests (stake) do these players have in the AfCFTA?

Q2: Are there any (possible) detrimental effects of these interests and agendas to the prospects and viability of the AfCFTA? If so, how is the (possible) damage stemming from such interests mitigated?

Q3: How and to what extent have these interests played a role in previous market integration arrangements at regional and sub-regional levels? Do you think the AUC and the RECs deal with them with deft handling?

Q4: Based on your observation and experience, do you think there is a solid commitment on the part of AU member states and RECs to make the AfCFTA viable and successful? If not, what are the causes and potential impact of this attitude on the implementation and viability of AfCFTA?

D. Questions on the role of interests and identities in shaping the development of the African Continental Free Trade Area

Q1: What are the social, cultural, political and economic national and regional identities impacting the development and realisation of the AfCFTA? How do they enhance or undermine the legitimacy, utility or success of the initiative?

Q2: How have such identities had a considerable impact on the development and prospects of previous economic integration endeavours?

Q3: Would you say that the AU institutions and RECs have the necessary measures and mechanisms for the containment and deterrence of damage emanating from the incongruence of identities and interests? What are these measures and mechanisms?

Q4: Mindful of these interests and identities, how best can the AfCFTA initiative advance and accomplish the fundamental goals envisioned in the Abuja Treaty, the Constitutive Act of the African Union and Agenda 2063?

Appendix K: Editor's Letter

LANGUAGE EDITOR'S LETTER

NYAWOSE'S ACADEMIC HUB

Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

Email: [redacted]

Contact: [redacted]

Date: 09 July 2026

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This letter serves to confirm that I have professionally edited and proofread the research thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy qualification in the College of Humanities at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, titled:

Identities, Interests, Regional Integration and Economic Development: The Case of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

by Sizwe Sidaza

Student number: 213529217

The editing process included language refinement, grammatical correction, academic formatting, sentence restructuring, coherence enhancement, and overall improvement of academic readability while preserving the author's original arguments and intended meaning.

As the founder of Nyawose's Academic Hub, I specialise in academic writing support, research assistance, editing, proofreading, and academic mentorship services for university and college students. My academic background includes advanced studies in Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science, Ethics, and Psychology, complemented by extensive experience in academic tutoring, research development, and student mentorship within higher education institutions.

Over the years, I have assisted numerous undergraduate and postgraduate students with dissertations, research proposals, assignments, mini-theses, and academic editing services across various disciplines. My work focuses on ensuring academic excellence, professional presentation, and adherence to institutional standards.

Should further information or verification regarding this editing service be required, please feel free to contact me using the details provided above.

Yours faithfully,

Mr. N. Nyawose

Founder of Nyawose's Academic Hub