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Consolidating African Regional Integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area: Lessons from the ASEAN Free Trade Area

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) – covering 54 member states with a combined 1.2 billion people (expected to reach 2.5 billion by 2050) and making up US\$2.5 trillion gross domestic product (GDP) – is estimated to increase the value of intra-African trade by between 15% (US\$50 billion) and 25% (US\$70 billion) in 2040. On the other hand, the Association of South-East

Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area has an almost similar socio-economic and political foundation as that of the AfCFTA, having been established in 1992 (and entered into force in 1993) to boost intra-ASEAN trade, industrialisation and attract investments. The ASEAN bloc – which has a population of 600 million people – is forecasted to become the world’s fourth-largest economy by 2030, comprising a consumer market of over US\$4 trillion. Notwithstanding the reality that the AfCFTA and the ASEAN FTA are in two different environments and contexts with peculiar socio-economic and political dynamics, the ASEAN FTA journey presents valuable lessons for the consolidation of African regional integration through the AfCFTA as the two FTAs also share pertinent similarities and commonalities. This article, therefore, sought to examine the prospects of the AfCFTA in consolidating African regional integration, drawing practical lessons from the ASEAN FTA trajectory, specifically the successes, challenges, complexities and emerging issues that have been confronting the ASEAN FTA since 1992. Methodologically, the article utilised secondary data from various sources for analysis and quantitative data analysis from ASEANStats, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), African Union and other datasets. The concept of *regional economic integration* provided a conceptual framework of analysis for the study. Findings from the study were key in identifying lessons (technical, coordinatory, institutional, macro-economic, political, etc.) that the AfCFTA member states may draw on to ensure its successful implementation.

Keywords: *African Continental Free Trade Area, ASEAN FTA, Regional integration.*

Introduction

Regional integration across the globe has been a product of drawing lessons from the experiences, successes and challenges faced by other regional integration schemes elsewhere. However, regional integration schemes of the Global South such as ASEAN, MERCUSOR and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are often discountenanced and deprecated while the European Union (EU) and North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) continue to be eulogised and panegyrised. Several narratives that make reference to the Global South regional integration schemes often do so contemptuously with derision, spurned and punctuated with footnotes and annotations that often depict apparent denigration and disdain. This is despite the fact that these regional integration schemes present valuable and instructive regional integration lessons to their counterparts as they share almost common socio-economic and political background, structural features and attributes. Since its adoption in 1992,

the ASEAN FTA has deepened market liberalisation for both trade and investment; and this ultimately resulted in the realisation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in 2015 while also making great strides towards eliminating both tariff and non-tariff barriers, harmonising customs procedures, and increasing competitiveness of the region as a production base and regional cooperation on matters of economic interests (ASEAN, 2021; ASEAN, 2021b). The AfCFTA will benefit immensely from the practical experiences of the ASEAN FTA given the pertinent similarities, commonalities and parallelism that exist between the two regional integration arrangements. This article critically examines the prospects of the AfCFTA in consolidating regional integration in Africa, drawing lessons from the trajectory of the ASEAN FTA, specifically the successes, challenges, complexities and emerging issues that have confronted the ASEAN FTA since 1992. However, in extracting lessons from ASEAN FTA experiences, pertinent similarities and dissimilarities, as well as contextual specificities, peculiarities, variabilities and contradistinctions between ASEAN FTA and the AfCFTA are taken into consideration to avoid impetuously plunging headlong into the common scholarly trap of false equivalence or fallacy of faulty comparison. This article utilises secondary data sources in the form of books, journal articles, analytical pieces, policy briefs, reports from the AU and ASEAN, reports from other regional and international institutions on regional integration as well as trade statistics and other regional integration-related statistics from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and other sources.

Background to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

The establishment of the AfCFTA in March 2018 and commencement of trade under the AfCFTA on January 1, 2021 have been considered to be a milestone towards the consolidation of regional integration in Africa as the continent ultimately seeks to establish a continental customs union, an African common market and an African economic and monetary union as agreed in the treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC)/Abuja Treaty of 1991. The AfCFTA – which covers 54 member states with a combined 1.2 billion people (expected to reach 2.5 billion by 2050) and making up US\$2.5 trillion gross domestic product (GDP) – is estimated to increase the value of intra-African trade by between 15% (US\$50 billion) and 25% (US\$70 billion) in 2040 (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019).

In terms of aims and objectives, the AfCFTA seeks to create an integrated continental market for goods and services while also facilitating the free movement of people, labour and capital (African Union, 2018; Vhumbunu & Rudigi, 2020). It is also envisaged that the AfCFTA will expand intra-African trade through harmonising and further liberalising trade and trade facilitation regimes across the different RECs in Africa and enhance the competitiveness of African industries and enterprises (African Union, 2018). Eventually, the AfCFTA would pave the way for the establishment of the Continental Customs Union in which Africa states would further remove all trade barriers and deepen economic cooperation and adopt uniform external policies and tariffs on goods and services traded with outside countries.

As of May 2022, all African countries had signed the AfCFTA except Eritrea, and a total of 43 out of the 54 signatories (80%) had ratified the AfCFTA (Trade Law Centre, 2022). Notwithstanding the fact that the AfCFTA negotiations in their entirety are still work in progress, and that commercially meaningful trade is yet to commence under the AfCFTA, it is worthwhile to draw lessons from the ASEAN FTA established in 1992.

Conceptual Perspectives on Regional Integration

The concept and practice of *regional economic integration* generally continue to be viewed as a process whereby countries in geographically contiguous regions are brought together by the common interests of liberalising or reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade in goods, services and factors of production between and among states. As of March 1, 2022, there were 354 regional trade agreements in force compared to 97 in 2000 and only 2 in 1960 (World Trade Organisation, 2022).

The economic rationality of regional economic integration, as justified by international trade theories, has for long been advanced since the classical writings of Adam Smith (*The Wealth of Nations*, 1776), David Ricardo (*Essay on Profits*, 1815), Gottfried Haberler (*The Theory of International Trade*, 1936), Jacob Viner (*The Customs Union Issue*, 1950), Ernst Haas (*Uniting of Europe: Political, Social and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*), etc. Whereas several theories (such as mercantilism, absolute cost advantage, comparative cost advantage, Hecksher Ohlin Theory, national competitive theory, new trade theory, etc.) remain critical in explaining the underlying assumptions, manifestations and operational utility of the concept of international trade and regional economic integration, it is

Jacob Viner's articulation of trade creation and trade diversion concepts that continue to be a point of departure in the building, advancement and critic of arguments for creating FTAs. Perhaps, what still stands out even in contemporary regional economic integration debates and discourse is Jacob Viner's arguments around the concepts of trade creation and trade diversion. As in the case of the AfCFTA, the actualisation of trade creation is when more efficient African states export more merchandise to less efficient member states which results in better resource allocation, while the danger of trade diversion arises as and when efficient non-FTA members export their goods and services to FTA member countries due to external tariffs (Viner, 2014).

In *Trade Creation and Trade Diversion in African RECs: Drawing Lessons for AfCFTA*, the World Bank (2021) reveals that there is more trade creation than trade diversion in African RECs, especially in EAC and SADC, a trend that can be replicated within the AfCFTA to boost intra-AfCFTA trade if African states invest in trade facilitation, synergise national and regional goals, intensify the density of economic activity in member states, and improve the quality of regional infrastructure on the continent. Similarly, empirical studies by Geda and Yimer (2019) suggest that the trade creation effects of the AfCFTA can be more solidified through the collective implementation of the continental industrialisation strategy and protection of infant industries in tandem with trade liberalisation due to the existence of very weak trade complementarity and competitiveness in intra-African trade.

What may need to be emphasised, however, is the reality that the success of regional economic integration is dependent on the existence of critical and fundamental conditions that are essential for regional trade, economic cooperation and attainment of regional economic integration objectives. A number of scholars (Straubhaar, 1987; Efirid & Genna, 2002; Mattli, 1999; Schmitter, 1970; Vhumbunu, 2019) agree that some of the preconditions necessary, although not sufficient, for successful regional economic integration include the existence of political will and political energy; civic commitment and mutual trust among member states; availability of enabling hard and soft cross-sector infrastructure; peace, security and stability; macro-economic economic stability; institutional capacity and capabilities; effective cross-border cooperation between and among all private and public sector stakeholders; sustainable mechanisms for allowing the fair distribution and sharing of regional economic integrations gains, benefits and losses which considers economic heterogeneity of member states; existence of

effective structures, systems and mechanisms for conflict resolution; willingness and readiness of member states to adopt progressive policies that stimulate industrial production, industrialisation and regional value chains; and prioritising transformative regional economic integration through regional collaboration instead of retrogressive competition. Achieving all these preconditions for successful regional economic integration within member states, especially in Africa, is compounded by various political, economic and technical challenges. Perhaps, it explains a disturbing paradox and enigma that, despite having the highest concentration of RECs¹ in the world, Africa continues to be the least integrated continent. This thus calls for pragmatic and dynamic technical expertise complemented by strategic political leadership at national and REC levels considering the emerging headwinds and tailwinds that continue to threaten regional economic integration efforts. As Mistry (200:566) notes, “African governments need to be less ambitious and more realistic and pragmatic” and take into account “the constraints and capacities of national governments”.

In considering the challenges and complexities faced in actuating the concept and practice of regional economic integration, it has to be acknowledged that, in recent years, there have been subtle tendencies and forces against globalisation and regional integration as manifested through sequestered, seclusive and reclusive policy tendencies within regional configurations. The world has witnessed apparent protectionist inclinations, trade restrictiveness, openness aversion and imposition of barriers to free trade by economies that have been traditional pillars and champions of economic liberalisation, open markets, globalisation and open market integration such as the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) Brexit. However, in analysis, one has to understand that such developments may not be simplistically considered as clear cases of de-globalisation or de-integration. Rather, these can pass as typical cases of ‘selective strategic disengagement’ as states, pressured by domestic political currents and political economy considerations, are forced to adopt populist positions to advance and pursue their national interests. For example, after Brexit, the UK entered 37 FTAs with over 90 countries including FTAs with Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Republic of Korea and Japan, among others, and applied to join the CPTPP in February 2021, with negotiations expected to be concluded by

¹ Africa is home to over 15 RECs although the AU officially recognises eight RECs, namely AMU, COMESA, CEN-SAD, EAC, ECCAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and SADC.

the end of 2022 (United Kingdom Parliament, 2022; Government of the United Kingdom, 2022).

Reflecting on the ASEAN FTA Trajectory: Experiences and Lessons

Comparative regional integration remains fundamental in shaping, re-shaping and refining regional economic integration empirical models, paths, processes and agendas. The existence of differences and variations in contexts that define the success of regional integration outcomes is, in itself, a source of strength and inspiration that challenges regional integration schemes and RECs to re-think approaches, frameworks, strategies, methodologies, instruments and structures that optimally deliver in relevant circumstances and conditions. What makes ASEAN a useful case of comparison and source of inspiration for the AfCFTA is that both grand schemes comprise Global South developing countries which share an almost similar economic history and post-colonial disjuncture. Both ASEAN FTA and AfCFTA are built on the inherent desire to ultimately break their heavy dependence on Western economies for trade, investments and development support. Further, the ASEAN FTA and AfCFTA seek to substantially transform and diversify their economies from being primary exporters of raw materials and semi-processed goods to competitive exporters of value-added products and services as they integrate into, and meaningfully participate in, global value chains.

While the ASEAN (comprising 10 member states of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) was formed in August 1967 as a successor organisation to the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA)² to promote regional cooperation and integration between its member states and other Asian countries, the ASEAN FTA was established through the signing of the ASEAN FTA Agreement on January 28, 1992. According to the Agreement, the ASEAN FTA's primary goal was to enhance the competitiveness of the regional bloc as a production base through eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers through the ASEAN Common

² ASA had been formed on 31 July 1961 and it was made up of three countries, namely Thailand, Philippines and the Federation of Malaya. Singapore and Indonesia joined when ASA transformed to ASEAN on 8 August 1967. The other ASEAN members joined later: Brunei Darussalam (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997) and Cambodia (1999).

Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT), and attracting more foreign direct investment to ASEAN. Since the formation of the FTA, ASEAN has been improving continually in terms of regional economic development and regional trade performance as shown in Figure 1. With a current market size of US\$2.3 trillion and a population of 600 million, ASEAN FTA has progressed with its vision now set at achieving an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) as a single integrated market by the year 2025 as part of the ‘ASEAN Community Vision 2025’ anchored on the three solid pillars of political and security cooperation, economic cooperation and socio-cultural cooperation (ASEAN, 2021; ASEAN, 2021b).

	2018	2019	2020
Population (million)	649.1	655.9	661.8
GDP (US\$ billion)	2,999	3,170	2,998
Real GDP growth (%)	5.3	4.7	-3.3
GDP per capita (US\$)	4,540	4,833	4,533
Exports of goods (US\$ billion)	1,436	1,424	1,357
Imports of goods (US\$ billion)	1,372	1,393	1,234
Exports of services (US\$ billion)	433	464	316
Imports of services (US\$ billion)	394	408	321
FDI inflows into ASEAN (US\$ million)	149 466	182 006,2	137 331,5
Total tourist visitors into ASEAN (in millions)	135,2	143,5	26,1

Figure 1: ASEAN Economic Indicators as of February 2022

Source: Hong Kong Trade Development Council (2022)

Progress and State of Integration in ASEAN FTA: Lessons for the AfCFTA

Against the background of a dynamic and turbulent global economic and political environment, and intensifying global economic competition for markets, trade and investments mostly from the traditional fortresses and bastions of regional integration and economic production (i.e., the EU and NAFTA), the ASEAN FTA has managed to record progress and notable success in pursuit of its core objectives related to the objectives of the AfCFTA. From the ASEAN FTA experience, the AfCFTA may borrow and draw useful lessons with respect to the adopted integration model, the ASEAN institutional and regional integration policy culture, the substance of ASEAN substantive policy design and implementation, the efficacy of the regional bloc’s policy coordination mechanism, the political attitudes of ASEAN FTA member states, and ASEAN FTA’s

trade relations and strategic cooperation with other FTAs and trade partners.

Commitment to trade liberalisation agenda

The CEPT Scheme was established in January 1992 (through the Agreement on the CEPT Scheme for the ASEAN FTA) as a primary mechanism to achieve the ASEAN FTA goals, mostly through the gradual and phased elimination of intra-regional tariffs as well as the removal of tariff and NTBs to trade (ASEAN, 1992). Consideration has been taken on the level of sensitivity of the products covered under the CEPT Scheme, via the Protocol on Special Arrangements on Sensitive and Highly Sensitive Products of 1999, Protocol Regarding the Implementation of the CEPT Scheme Temporary Exclusion List of 2000, and the Protocol to Provide Special Consideration for Rice and Sugar of 2007. The CEPT Scheme was also operationalised through other several protocols and legal instruments, namely the Framework Agreement on Enhancing ASEAN Economic Cooperation of 1992, Protocol on Notification Procedures of 1998, and the ASEAN Framework Agreement on the Facilitation of Goods in Transit of 1998. It is adherence to the liberalisation commitments and state obligations contained in these legal instruments by the ASEAN FTA state parties that facilitated progress in the achievement of trade liberalisation targets set out within the FTA, especially targets relating to tariff reduction milestones (under Article 4 of the Agreement on the CEPT Scheme for the ASEAN FTA) and elimination of quantitative restrictions and NTBs (under Article 5 of the Agreement).

The strength of institutional arrangements overseeing the successful implementation and coordination of the CEPT (as set out in Article 7 of the Agreement) and the ability of the ASEAN FTA member states to consult and cooperate in good faith in instances of violations or misapplication of trade rules (as set out under Article 8 of the Agreement) were key in facilitating the timely attainment of the ASEAN FTA objectives and targets. This should be a valuable lesson for the AfCFTA. The ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), signed in February 2009 and subsequently entered into force in May 2010, effectively replaced the CEPT as it sought to liberalise ASEAN trade in goods and services, deepen economic linkages among member states, remove tariff and NTBs to trade, reduce the costs of doing business in

the regional bloc, widen market access, enhance intra-regional trade and create a competitive investment area.

The ASEAN FTA applied the principle of variable geometry to allow for recent members of the FTA to flexibly adjust as they implement their ATIGA commitments. Thus, while goods originating from the ASEAN FTA members apply the tariff rate of 0 to 5 percent, the other members who joined the FTA later (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) were accorded longer time to implement the FTA tariff regime. The initial vision and target was to attain a single market and production base by the year 2015. By September 2019, the ASEAN FTA was completed when the liberalisation rate for the FTA was 98.6%. The liberalisation rate for the ASEAN-6 countries (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) was 99.3% while that of the CLMV (Cambodia-Lao People's Democratic Republic-Myanmar-Vietnam) was 97.7% (World Trade Organisation, 2021: 4).

Granted, the AfCFTA also has a similar provision that applies the principle of special and differential treatment in the agreement establishing the AfCFTA. The fact that the ASEAN FTA fully liberalised by 2020, having established theCEPT Scheme for the ASEAN FTA in January 1992, reflects the complexities and intricacies of trade liberalisation, especially considering the intra-regional disparities in economic and infrastructure development within the ASEAN configuration. For instance, Singapore is ranked 11th in the world on the Human Development Index (HDI) with an HDI value score of 0.938 while Myanmar is ranked 147th in the world with an HDI value score of 0.583 (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Even in the GDP terms and quantum of FDI inflows, Indonesia, for instance, had a GDP per capita of US\$3 928 and received US\$18.6 billion in FDI inflows for the year 2020 compared to Cambodia's GDP per capita of US\$1 529 and total FDI inflows of US\$3.6 billion for the same year (ASEAN, 2021b: 8). The AfCFTA has similar economic disparities among its member states, with Africa's economic powerhouses such as Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt and Kenya far much advanced economically than small economies such as Burundi, Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Malawi and Chad among others. Thus, the AfCFTA may need to manage and address to ensure the successful realisation and implementation of the FTA's trade liberalisation scheme.

The special and differential treatment extended to CLMV states, coupled with accompanying special technical assistance as provided for under the Ha Noi Declaration on Narrowing Development Gap for

Closer ASEAN Integration in 2001 and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan I (2002-2008), IAI Work Plan II (2009-2015), IAI Work Plan III (2016-2020), and the current IAI Work Plan IV (2021-2025), was all critical for the collective attainment of full liberalisation under the ASEAN FTA. The AfCFTA may need to engage in robust resource mobilisation and deploy strategic technical support towards assisting LDCs to manage transitional adjustment costs and losses as well as trade-related technical assistance and capacity building. Additionally, the ASEAN FTA LDCs complemented this support through the aid for trade that they received from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to support their trade-related programmes and projects that were meant to build their trade capacity and infrastructure for trade competitiveness. For instance, for the four years between 2014 and 2017 alone, Cambodia received a total of US\$596.8 million in Aid for Trade from the ADB and OECD countries. Nevertheless, Lao PDR received US\$377.2 million, Myanmar received US\$850.7 million and Viet Nam received US\$4.19 billion during the same period (OECD/World Trade Organisation, 2019: 282-453) which has all assisted the CMLV countries to embark on economic diversification, support industrialisation initiatives, build trade-related infrastructure, and facilitate digital trade.

The Influence of the ASEAN Regional Integration Model

One of the success factors behind the ASEAN FTA is the role of the ASEAN regional integration model which has a heavy bearing on the regional bloc's policy implementation record. A number of scholars have lamented how African regional integration continues to be state-driven and politically driven which is contradistinction with the ASEAN model that is largely market-initiated and places emphasis on market mechanisms (Coulibaly, 2020; Hartzenberg, 2011; Chen, 2008). For a successful AfCFTA, there may be a need for a paradigm shift from a regional integration culture and political attitudes characterised by ambitious summit pronouncements, declarations and communiqués that are hardly implemented, to a more result-oriented approach that accentuates and underscores the prominence and urgency of policy execution and robust follow-up mechanisms on the implementation of regional commitments by member states. Thus, while political institutions and political pronouncements are indispensable and salient in

the regional integration puzzle as vision-setting authorities, these should be complemented by less politicised technical structures, systems and mechanisms that facilitate the translation of broad visions and policy outlines into concrete and practically actionable deliverables to ensure the successful implementation of the AfCFTA agenda.

Value Addition in Manufacturing, Trade and Industrial Competitiveness

The success of the ASEAN, as has been the case with other FTAs in NAFTA, EU and others, has been its ability to design regional trade and industrialisation policy instruments that are effectively cascaded to member states for them to invest and innovate in high-end manufacturing and high-tech industries, and promote intra-ASEAN trade as well as integrate into RVCs and GVCs. For example, the ASEAN FTA designed its rules of origin in such a way that goods that are manufactured and transformed within the ASEAN member states through substantial value addition while excluding goods that are merely transhipped without any substantial processing or transformation. Thus, the ASEAN FTA only extends preferential treatment to goods that are wholly obtained or produced in the ASEAN FTA states and those goods not wholly obtained in the ASEAN FTA states but would have attained the regional value content (RVC) of 40%, or would have been transformed such that they qualify under the Change in Tariff Classification (CTC) criterion, that is, change in tariff heading (CTH), change in chapter (CC) or change in tariff sub-heading (CTSH). There are also product specific rules (PSRs) that apply within the ASEAN FTA, such as textiles and textile products.

Creating a conducive environment for the growth and expansion of the SMEs sector has been one of the key strategies to unlock manufacturing value capabilities in the ASEAN through frameworks such as the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan on SME Development (2016-2025) given the reality that SMEs make up to 70 to 90% of the ASEAN's manufacturing firms (AT Kearney, 2018: 1). Based on the current regional trends in manufacturing and technology within the ASEAN FTA, there are estimates that ASEAN manufacturing output could increase to US\$600 billion annually by 2030 and increase annual FDI inflows into the manufacturing sector up to US\$22 billion, which will create up to 140 000 new jobs every year (Meyer, Tan, Vohra, McAdoo, & Lim, 2021). Manufacturing remains the core driver of economic

growth, contributing around US\$670 billion – or 21% – towards ASEAN’s GDP, and this is estimated to increase to US\$1.4 trillion by 2028 (AT Kearney, 2018: 1), especially if the regional bloc strategically harnesses opportunities presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) through the Consolidated Strategy on the Fourth Industrial Revolution for ASEAN of 2021 to become the global manufacturing hub. This dynamic created trade complementarity and intra-ASEAN that presents lessons for the AfCFTA. Due to all these efforts, intra-ASEAN trade stands at 59%, which is closer to intra-EU trade (69%) but way higher than intra-NFTA trade (31%) and intra-African trade which stands at a mere 17% (Songwe, 2019). The ASEAN bloc’s GDP projected to grow to US\$10 trillion by 2030 and its digital economy is estimated to reach US\$ trillion by 2030 (CARI ASEAN Research and Advocacy, 2019). Through BIAT, all African countries may need to deploy the use of sophisticated technology in high-end industrial production and manufacturing to diversify and boost intra-African trade at a time when 62% of Africa’s total imports are manufactured goods and the continent’s share of global manufacturing remains at around 1.9% (AfDB, 2022).

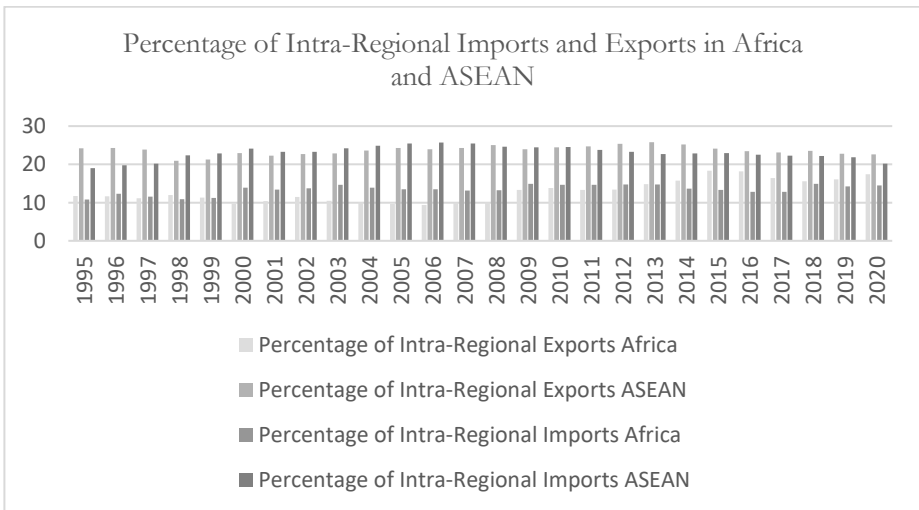


Figure 2: Intra-regional exports and imports in ASEAN and Africa (1995-2020)

Source: Author’s construction using data from UNCTAD. <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/wds/ReportFolders/reportFolders.aspx>

The Role of Seamless Trade Facilitation in the ASEAN FTA

The AfCFTA may also draw lessons from the manner in which the ASEAN has designed and implemented its trade facilitation programmes and projects. By December 2017, all the ASEAN FTA member states had ratified the World Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) which entered into force in February 2017. The agreement contains state obligations to expedite the movement, release and clearance of goods, including transit cargo while fostering effective customs cooperation in implementing trade facilitation measures. The ASEAN FTA member states are, therefore, in the process of implementing technical measures espoused in the WTO TFA which are meant to enhance the cross-border movement of goods, increase transparency, improve governance in cross-border trade (through improved import, export and transit formalities and documentation), customs cooperation and border agency cooperation, and streamline and modernise border procedures and border controls (World Trade Organisation Agreement on Trade Facilitation, 2017). Member states of ASEAN implemented a raft of trade facilitation measures embedded in the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community (2009-2015) and in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blue Print 2025. These trade facilitation initiatives include the ASEAN Self-Certification Scheme; ASEAN Customs Transit Systems; ASEAN Trade Repository; ASEAN Solutions for Investments, Services and Trade (ASSIST); and the ASEAN Single Window.

Collectively, these initiatives have assisted to enhance access to trade and transit information and expedite the clearance of goods, transparency in trade, harmonisation of standards and conformance procedures and simplified intra-ASEAN trade, and trade between the ASEAN FTA member states and the outside world. The ASEAN Trade Repository (ATR), for instance, which was provided for under Article 13 of the ATIGA, is being supported by the EU under the ASEAN Regional Integration Support (ARISE Plus) Programme. It is a freely accessible electronic database of trade-related information (such as tariff nomenclature, rules of origin, NTMs, list of authorised traders, etc.) and national trade and customs laws, rules and procedures for all the ASEAN member states. This boosts regional trade and exchange of best practices in trade facilitation and trade governance among the ASEAN FTA members and the prospective trade partners. However, ASSIST – also supported by the EU and is linked to the ATR – has always presented a consultative electronic-based platform for the resolution of trade-related

operational challenges faced by the ASEAN enterprises through consultations since August 2016. The merits, challenges and limitations of the ATR may assist the AfCFTA in building the African Trade Observatory (ATO) whose objective is to provide a trade information platform for the continent that can assist in the identification of markets and trade opportunities in the various AfCFTA member states.

The ASEAN FTA member states have been able to implement an integrated online customs system (the ASEAN Customs Transit System, ACTS) which facilitates the use of a single, digital customs declaration for the movement of goods across the ASEAN region (ASEAN, 2020). Given the fact that trucks can travel across the ASEAN FTA member states with duties and taxes covered in a single guarantee for all transit countries through the use of ACTS, customs declaration processes are therefore simplified through this harmonisation which reduces paperwork, bureaucratic red tape, and truck idling time for all traders, thereby improving the efficiency and reliability of road freight movements within the ASEAN FTA (ASEAN, 2020) just as is the case with the EU's Common and Community Transit System and the New Computerised Transit System (NCTS). This is complemented by the ASEAN Framework Agreement on the Facilitation of Inter-State Transport (FAIST) of 1998 which encourages and facilitates the movement of transit transport across the ASEAN member states' borders with a view to establishing an efficient, effective, harmonised and integrated transit transport system within ASEAN. The existence of an effective and transformative institutional framework to drive the trade facilitation agenda in ASEAN, in the form of the ASEAN Trade Facilitation Joint Consultative Committee (ATF-JCC) made up of both public sector and private sector representatives and National Coordinating Committees (NCCs), has been critical. This is despite the wide criticism of the ASEAN decision-making architecture and processes by a number of scholars, due to the excesses of consensus-centred decision-making and the attendant bureaucracy and political dynamics (Ahmad, 1986; Feraru, 2016; Jones & Smith, 2007; Nischalke, 2000; Suzuki, 2021).

The success of trade facilitation initiatives is reflected in the ASEAN's superiority over Africa on metrics and indices relating to the ease of doing business and logistical performance which facilitate more trade (see Figure 3 below).

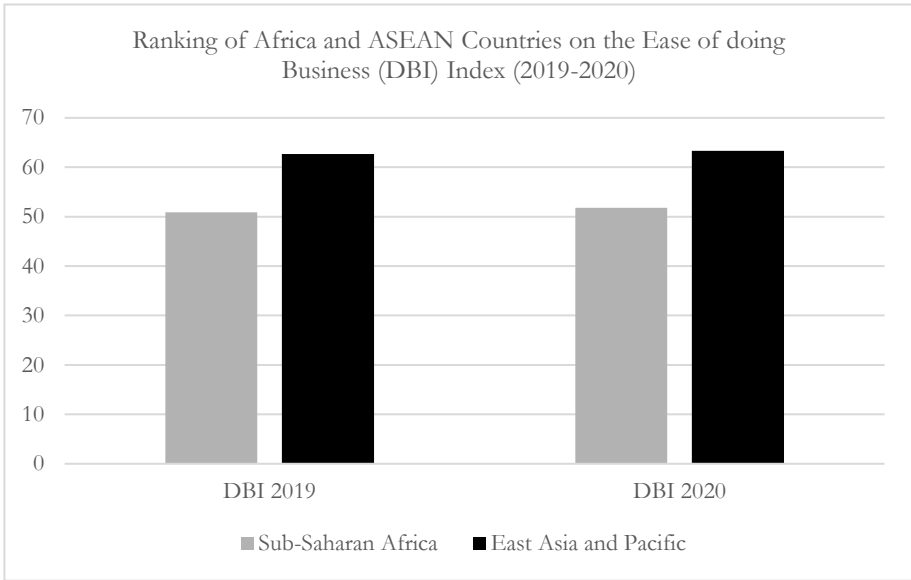


Figure 3: Ranking of Africa and ASEAN on the World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index (2019-2020)

Source: Author’s construction using data from the World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/business-enabling-environment>

The World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business Index (EoDBI) focuses on trading across borders, specifically the number of documents, cost and time taken by traders to import and export. Nevertheless, the Logistics Performance Index (LPI) identifies the challenges and opportunities in trade logistics, focusing on the efficiency, speed, simplicity and predictability of customs clearance and border control processes; quality of trade and transport-related infrastructure; ease of arranging competitively priced shipments; competence and quality of logistics services; ability to track and trace consignments of goods; and timelessness of shipments in reaching their intended destinations. As shown in Figure 3 above, the ASEAN FTA member states (clustered under the East Asia and Pacific Region) score more competitively than African countries. With the UNCTAD (2016) having estimated that the improvement of trade facilitation within the AfCFTA could add US\$85 billion to intra-African trade, translating to a 128.4% increase by the year 2020, it is germane for Africa to borrow lessons from the ASEAN FTA by developing and implementing the AfCFTA trade facilitation programmes and projects while prioritising resource mobilisation for the

implementation of trade facilitation initiatives as envisioned in the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods. Further, the majority of African countries have ratified the WTO TFA and these should be encouraged to implement their trade facilitation commitments.

Trade-enabling Infrastructure Development in ASEAN: Programmes, Projects and Approaches

Given the understanding that a well-coordinated, efficient and quality infrastructure network is an enabler of trade and regional integration, the ASEAN has managed to develop a multi-modal transportation system covering all modes of transport infrastructure (land, maritime, and air transport) through its ASEAN Transport Cooperation Framework (1999-2004), ASEAN Transport Action Plan (ATAP, 2005-2010), ASEAN Strategic Transport Plan (ASTP, 2011-2015), ASEAN Strategic Transport Plan (2016-2025), ASEAN Regional Strategy on Sustainable Framework Plan (2019), and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC, 2025). The regional bloc has invested heavily in transport and energy projects along the ASEAN Highway Network (AHN) which has over 23 routes, the Asian Highway Network/Great Asian Highway, the Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) Network, the ASEAN Power Grid (APG), and the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline (TAGP).

Substantial progress has been made in upgrading, expanding and modernising the trans-ASEAN cross-border transport infrastructure development network, thereby facilitating an enlarged market, reduced transport and trade costs and greater physical integration of the ASEAN member states with RVCs and GVCs. For instance, there has been an 80% increase in the total road length in the ASEAN, from 1.4 million kilometres in 2010 to over 2.5 million kilometres in 2020, translating to an annual average growth of 6.7% (ASEAN, 2021:55). Nonetheless, the ASEAN has had long-term plans to establish an ASEAN Single Aviation Market (ASAM) to integrate and improve the regional air transport system through addressing airline ownership and control, market access, market regulation and harmonisation of safety and technical regulation. The initial target for establishing the ASAM was 2015, as agreed by the ASEAN member states in the ASEAN Multilateral Agreement for the Full Liberalisation of Air Services of November 2010. Plans are underway for the ASEAN to agree on a framework to establish an ASEAN Single Telecommunications Market based on the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement of November 2000, with feasibility studies

having been completed in 2017 (Mendoza, 2020). In addition, the regional bloc has substantively worked on the Implementation Framework of the ASEAN Single Shipping Market.

Likewise, the AfCFTA can also develop strong project institutional frameworks that can effectively drive the continental infrastructure projects and programmes that can facilitate trade. Already existing priority projects under the Agenda 2063 such as the Integrated High-Speed Train Network, Grand Inga Dam Project, the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM), and the Pan-African e-Network together with regional cross-sector projects being implemented under RECs and the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) should be prioritised by the AfCFTA.

The roles of the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Asian Development Fund (ADF) have been key in funding the development of the ASEAN regional infrastructure network. Over and above the Pan-African Infrastructure Development Fund (PAIDF), African RECs have to invest in capacitating regional infrastructure development funds at REC level and continent-wide infrastructure development funds to bridge the existing infrastructure investment gap estimated at over US\$100 billion per year (AfDB, 2022b).

ASEAN FTA's Trade Relations and Strategic Cooperation with other FTAs and Trade Partners

In light of globalisation trends and the value presented by effective integration of states and regions into RVCs and GVCs, the ASEAN has engaged in progressive partnerships with other global economic players through FTAs. Till date, the ASEAN has entered into over six FTAs, namely the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between ASEAN member states with Australia, China, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand; ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA (AANZFTA) of February 2009; ASEAN-China FTA (ACFTA) of January 2010; ASEAN-India FTA (AIFTA) of January 2010; ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP) of December 2008; China-ASEAN FTA of August 2009, ASEAN-Korea FTA (AKFTA) of January 2010, and negotiations for the ASEAN-Canada FTA were launched in November 2021. Additionally, the ASEAN has several memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on technical cooperation and support with a number of institutions such as the Mekong River Commission Secretariat, OECD Secretariat, Asian

Development Bank (ADB), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), World Institute for Nuclear Security (WINS), Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (ACTO), Korea Joint Research and Development (R&D), and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). The strategic relations and mutually beneficial dialogues and partnerships developed and maintained by the ASEAN with other countries outside the ASEAN FTA are critical in creating opportunities for sustainable economic, political and technical cooperation. This presents a learning opportunity for the development and expansion of the AfCFTA. Thinking through the possibility of entering into FTAs with other economies complemented by MoUs and progressive partnerships with strategic institutions and entities may assist to strengthen the impact, status and competitiveness of the AfCFTA in global trade and commerce.

Creating and Sustaining a Conducive Environment for Regional Integration and Development

The ASEAN FTA has continued to acknowledge and recognise the gravitas and solemnity of peace, security and stability both as a foundation and outcome of regional integration and trade cooperation. The ASEAN FTA builds on the strength of the 'ASEAN Community Vision 2025', which rests on the three pillars of the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The APSC, targeted for 2025, seeks to promote regional peace, security and stability by promoting the principles of democracy, rule of law, good governance, human rights, shared values and norms, and pacific settlement of disputes mainly through regional instruments such as the Declaration on Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) of 1971, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in South East Asia (TAC) of 1976, and the ASEAN Convention on Counter-Terrorism (ACCT) of 2007 (ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, 2009).

Notwithstanding the existence of the above instruments, however, the ASEAN traditional challenges of peace and security have been experienced in the ASEAN FTA member states such as Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia. For instance, recently, there was a coup d'état in Myanmar in February 2021, killing of over 1 600 civilians and displacement of over 44 000 citizens by security forces as a result of

crackdowns on protests against military establishment (UN News, 2022); human rights and election-related conflicts in Cambodia (Human Rights Watch, 2022); social unrest and mass pro-democracy protests in Thailand since the second half of 2020 (Insight, 2021), and the rising cases of attacks and killings of left-wing political activists, journalists and lawyers in the Philippines (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Decisive action has been taken on the ASEAN FTA member states that have violated the ASEAN Charter such as the recent 'exclusion' of Myanmar coup leaders at the ASEAN Meeting of Foreign Affairs following its non-implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus Peace Plan in February 2022 (Strangio, 2022). ASEAN and the African Union share almost similar approaches, which are often criticised as being lethargic, phlegmatic and long-drawn-out in managing and resolving intra-state conflicts within member states. The AfCFTA may need to effectively utilise the AU peace and security architecture to ensure peace, security and stability that facilitate a conducive environment for intra-African trade and economic cooperation. Since 2021, the AU has already witnessed military seizures and unconstitutional change of governments in Chad, Guinea, Mali, Sudan and Burkina Faso. This frustrates regional integration initiatives.

Conclusion

The ASEAN FTA is definitely not the best performing FTA in the world. However, based on the regional integration path and trajectory that the ASEAN FTA has travestied so far since 1992, and the attendant successes, challenges, complexities faced thereof, it offers very useful and valuable lessons to the AfCFTA. As articulated in the analysis, the ASEAN FTA story presents lessons on the importance and value of regional commitment to trade liberalisation agendas; the value of a suitable and appropriate regional integration model; value addition in manufacturing and industrial competitiveness; the role of seamless trade facilitation and trade-enabling infrastructure development, strategic trade relations and cooperation with other FTA partners, and creating a conducive political and security environment. The impact, value and success of these lessons are dependent on how the AfCFTA member states manage to adopt, adjust and adapt these to the African economic, political, social, cultural and institutional context.

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