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Theoretical Evaluation of Regional Economic Integration in Africa

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Abstract

The implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has made regional economic integration a central component of Africa's contemporary economic development agenda. Utilizing the systematic theoretical review, the article explores the short and long-term effects of economic integration on the continent through the lens of Vinerian customs union theory. The study further assesses the operational difficulties to integration such as some NTBs, and infrastructural deficiencies. The study finds that, although the static gains can be limited because of low levels of trade complementarity and tariff revenue losses, the potential in the dynamic effects can provide a blueprint for industrialization based on analysis of the local empirical evidence from Regional Economic Communities (RECs) like the Southern African Development Commission (SADC), Southern African Custom Union (SACU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and from international comparative frameworks. The study concludes that to gain the benefit of economic integration, African countries should not stop at tariff adjustments but go deep in terms of the engagements of the structural policies. However, if the continent can remove these non-tariff barriers and bridge some of the missing infrastructure, create and implement cooperative regional industrial systems, integration can be a good means to industrialization and sustainable economic growth. To strengthen regional economic integration in Africa, the paper suggest that policy makers should prioritize practical solutions over frameworks that are theoretical. Deliberate actions should focus on fast-tracking the AfCTA for borderless exchange of goods and services, harmonizing areas of regional economic overlap, reducing infrastructure gaps, and easing free labour movement and digital driven innovation within Africa.

Keywords: Regional Economic Integration, Static effects, Dynamic effects, Trade creation, AfCFTA, Africa.

Introduction

Economic integration in Africa is a strategy to address the limitations of small national markets, poor border integration and reliance on primary commodities (Balassa, 1961). Ever since the post-independent period, leaders and academics in Africa have viewed regionalism as being more than just an avenue for trade; regionalism is a vital process for structural change, for economic emancipation and world relevance (Tinbergen, 1954). This institutional objective of structure-building was enshrined in the 'Abuja Treaty' of 1991 and has led to the formation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Central Bank of Nigeria [CBN], 2025). The AfCFTA is one of the biggest free trade zones (with more participating nations than the World

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Trade Organization (WTO) which has 164 member countries) in the world, accounting for 54 countries, representing more than 1.3 billion people and a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of over $3.4 trillion.

The economic evaluation of any preferential trade agreement or regional integration agreement is based on the analysis of 'Static Effects' and 'Dynamic Effects' (Bose & Bristy, 2017). The method of analysis, based on classical trade theory, is static, which means that the time horizon is the short-term or once-and-for-all reallocation of resources due to the removal of internal tariff, while the protection afforded by external tariff is unchanged (Cooper & Massell, 1965). Conversely, the medium-long term tendencies in the structure of the production capacity, investment flows, market competition and technological diffusion are analyzed which drive the growth dynamics of the integrating economies (Bose & Bristy, 2017; El-Agraa, 1997), African States should recognize the interaction. The percentage of Intra-African trade has always been very low at about 15% as compared to intra-regional trade in North America, Asia, and Europe (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa [UNECA], 2023).

African regional economic integration is so to say, structurally limited by the lack of flexibility of different Regional Economic Communities (RECs) which hinders Africa's tangible static and dynamic trade benefits over the years despite the long series of political commitments (Geda & Kebret, 2007). According to the traditional perspective of the trade theory, when tariff restrictions are removed it should result in an instantaneous and welfare-enhancing static trade creation or Viner (1950). However, the important non-complementary nature of the African economies, lack of economic similarity in the African countries, and the dependence of most African countries on customs import duties, consistently defeats this mechanism on the African continent (African Development Bank Group [AfDB], 2021). When tariff policy is not coordinated properly, they tend to lead to trade diversion, and may result in significant national budget shocks, rather than being inducers of robust intra-regional trade (CBN, 2025).

Furthermore, the existing non-tariff barriers (NTBs), poor transport infrastructure and the "spaghetti bowl" syndrome of overlapping institutional jurisdictions are influencing the potential longer term dynamic benefits of integration, such as industrialization, economies of scale and expanding the regional value chain (Delev, 2022; Dyegula & Lwesya, 2018). Economic integration has consequences of unequal distribution of wealth that creates a number of dominant regional industrial centres that in turn, cause lack of implementable and consistent integration policies with the different states in trying to protect their internal regions (Geda & Kebret, 2007). Consequently, without the resolution of how short-term instruments can be balanced against long-term impacts of dynamic transformations, there is a risk of African economies continuing to be the main producers and exporters of commodities, vulnerable to exogenous shocks and uncompetitive in the new continental market (AfDB, 2021; Gammadigbe, 2021). The study is timely and relevant because it theoretically examines regional economic integration in Africa with particular emphasis on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The paper therefore, reviews the vinerian theory of economic integration and successfully links them to current African realities by distinguishing between the static and dynamic effects of regional integration. It further contextualizes these theoretical discussions using empirical evidence from African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS, SADC and SACU while drawing useful comparisons with experiences from the European Union (EU), ASEAN and MERCOSUR.

Literature Review

(i) Classical Static Effects of Trade Creation and Trade Diversion

The basic theory of economic integration based on Jacob Viner (1950), proposes that the elimination of tariffs in a trade bloc will have a trade creation as well as a trade diversion effect (Wrobel, 1998). Trade Creation is when a member country's tariff removal makes it possible to import a specific product that would otherwise not be imported because domestic production of this product would be more costly and less efficient (Ovádek & Willemyns, 2019). This helps to allocate resources to their best use, to lower the prices consumers must pay and to raise regional welfare.

On the other hand, trade diversion is when most cost- and efficiency exports from a non-member country are replaced by more costly and less efficient exports from a member country due to the preferential tariff that is afforded within the bloc

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(Hirsch, 2008). Trade diversion leads to a misallocation of resources on the global level, pushes prices up higher than on the international level, and can lead to net welfare losses (Viner 1950; Schiff and Winters 2003). The classical trade theory (which still is basically a static theory) suggests that if a regional integration agreement results in more trade creation than trade diversion, the net welfare of the regional integration agreement can be said to be improved. The arguments on classical static effects of trade creation and trade diversion with respect to the Vinerian custom union theory have been reviewed. Its therefore important we proceed to review the channels of dynamic effects.

(ii) Modern Dynamic Effects

Dynamic effects take place over the longer term after the initial price adjustments are observed in the static models, by changing the structure of economic growth and the rate of production (Bose & Bristy, 2017). Some of the channels dynamic integration primarily operates include:

1. **Market Extension and Economies of Scale:** If the small and isolated markets of individual nations were integrated together and efficient firms produced efficiently, they would be able to expand its volume of production and enjoy the benefits of economies of scale (Hirsch, 2008; Robson, 1998). This expansion reduces the LRAC and hence increases the competitiveness of domestic industries in the world.
2. **Internal Competition and Innovation Focus:** Domestic firms are directly facing competition from the region's firms (Bose & Bristy, 2017). This competitiveness results in the elimination of domestic monopolies, it forces some less efficient producers to restructure or exit the market and it stimulates the other businesses to increase their number of employees and train them, and enhance their processes and investment in technologies (Bose & Bristy, 2017; El-Agraa, 1997).
3. **Investment Attraction (Tariff-Jumping FDI):** This widens the economic space and establishes a very strong pull effect for foreign direct investment (FDI). Multinational corporations have an incentive to source countries that have signed the trade bloc agreement to do "base-seeking" or "tariff-jumping" FDI as factories can be invested in the country in question with access to the regional market without any internal trade barriers (Schiff & Winters, 2003).

The channels of dynamic effects have been rightly examined under market extension and economies of scale, internal competition and innovation, and investment attraction (tariff-jumping FDI). It is therefore necessary to look at some local empirical evidence on static effects.

(iii) Local Evidence on Static Effects

The Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), provide more detail on the static results of trade historically. The share of trade creation has often been found to be low in the empirical studies, primarily due to low trade complementarity (AfDB, 2021). Many of the African economies are commodity producers and their production profiles are parallel, for example, agriculture or crude minerals, which means that many of these commodity-producing economies are producing the same commodities instead of complementary inputs for regional value chains (AfDB, 2021).

The rules of origin have sometimes led to a phenomenon known as trade diversion in Southern and Eastern Africa, where imports from Europe/Asia, which are usually more competitive than imports from the region, are replaced with more costly imports from the region itself (Delev, 2022). In addition, the fiscal complications that arise due to static tariff elimination pose a problem for some states. In several sub-Saharan nations import tariffs are major components of tax revenues and their immediate removal may lead to a temporary revenue shortfall and thus pose a challenge when it comes to domestic revenue mobilization (Getachew et al., 2016). The 'spaghetti bowl' overlap of memberships adds to this (Dyegula & Lwesya, 2018). For example, countries like Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, which are under COMESA and are members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), are also members of the East African (EAC),

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resulting into a member state having a number of tariff structures and multiple customs administrative barriers that impact the potential for static trade creation (Dyegula & Lwesya, 2018). Empirically, the article has examined international evidence on static effects, there is need to consider some global evidence on static effects.

(iv) International Evidence on Static Effects

A variety of empirical estimates of static trade creation in models of international integration (EU, NAFTA/USMCA) exhibit very large values (Wrobel, 1998). High industrial diversification and number of products showed that after terminating the internal trade barriers member countries of the EU could easily import goods from neighbouring countries within the EU in cheaper and specialized than the high costs of their own production, almost immediately (Bose & Bristy, 2017).

International research shows that some initial conditions, like high pre-existing trade flows, broad industry capabilities and well-developed logistics infrastructure maximize the trade creation potential from integration (World Trade Organization (WTO), 2021), and are exactly the ones that the African integration frameworks are actively working to foster as initial conditions.

(v) Local Evidence on Dynamic Effects

While the immediate static benefits of the African Integration are limited, the longer time frame dynamic benefits of the African Integration are an opportunity for growth and industrialization (Karoro, 2023). Integration within Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has facilitated the development of regional value chains (RVCs) mainly in agro-processing, textiles and automotive assembly (Dyegula & Lwesya, 2018). For example, South Africa's automotive parts industry has benefited from its inclusion in Southern African Custom Union (SACU) and Southern African Development Community (SADC), with increased market access, resulting in an increase in manufacturing investment in the region (Ovádek & Willemyns, 2019; Dyegula & Lwesya, 2018).

Empirically, it has been shown that a higher TPDT in deep integration of deep regional trade is an economic growth-augmenting force through the spread of knowledge, resource mobilization and enhancement of total factor productivity (TFP) at the border (Gammadigbe 2021). Within the overall framework of the AfCFTA regime, dynamic integration is expected to offer an opportunity to boost industrial production, lessen inequality through the creation of job opportunities and lift millions out of extreme poverty (International Monetary Fund, 2019; Karoro, 2023). But such dynamic benefits do not always occur evenly as they are more likely to be concentrated in larger, industrially developed regions, thus giving rise to the need for flexible and inclusive trade remedies such Special and Differentiated Treatment (S&D) to protect vulnerable states (Karoro, 2023; Gammadigbe, 2021). This subsection considered local evidence on dynamic effects, next in turn is the case of international evidence on dynamic effects.

(vi) International Evidence on Dynamic Effects

The experiences in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) indicate that foreign direct investment (FDI) is also drawn when integration is dynamic (Balassa, 1961). Unified market, created by ASEAN, prompted multinationals corporations to set up production center to meet the demand of the entire ASEAN region (Robson 1998). This foreign capital generated a lot of dynamic spillovers, such as transfer of technical knowledge, managerial skills and adoption of automated production processes (Bose & Bristy, 2017). AfCFTA aims to create a large market that will mitigate against external economic vulnerabilities and create long-term investment opportunities for industry (IMF, 2019; Karoro, 2023). Having x-rayed the idea of dynamic effects at the global level, the next issue to address is the need for integration and development finance institutions targeted interventions in Africa.

(vii) The Need for Integration and Development Finance Institutions Targeted Interventions

The structural weaknesses of the African economies landscape make regional integration and DFI financial interventions a necessity rather than a noncompulsory foreign policy objective. DFI targeted interventions are needed in three key areas to bolster the Sub-African economies:

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Overcoming Extreme Market Fragmentation: Some of the most regional blocks like the ECOWAS, have highly fragmented national markets, and several small/landlocked economies that do not have enough domestic consumer base to support individual industrialization. Regional resource sharing and regional financing for transnational corridors is a way to help, guide and nurture local business to transcend the "geographical weight" and makes it commercially viable via the DFIs.

Harmonizing Trade Policy Transition: The implementation of sub-regional and continental trade agreements such as the Trade Policy of Nigeria 2023-2027, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (UNECA, 2025; Ekpete & Ekpete, 2025), represents a challenge on how to attract foreign direct investment that will promote value addition of non-oil exports. DFIs can have a unique role in the financing of the growth of domestic processing centres, agricultural packaging plants and manufacturing plants to allow the domestic industry to face competition as barriers are removed.

Creating Investor Friendly Environment: Empirical studies with regards to macroeconomic stability showed that capital inflows from abroad are subject to internal market risks, like inflation and exchange rate fluctuation (Ekpete et al., 2020). DFIs are anchor institutions, which are to stabilize the domestic investment environment. These underlying macro-economic fears are lessened by DFIs' presence for political risk as well as for partial credit guarantees, and make the sub-region an attractive place to locate external commercial asset managers.

(viii) **Policy Issues and Operational Challenges**

In order to achieve their full development potential, there are a number of entrenched regulatory and institutional issues that must be overcome by African governments and DFI managers:

(1) Trade Distortions and Dumping: With the growing process of trade liberalization, for example, West African markets are more likely to be affected by external trade distortions like subsidized foreign products dumped on the market. Without safeguarding industries in the region against these unfair practices, the region's manufacturing base will be at risk of stagnation (Ekpete & Ekpete, 2025). The need for good and legally sound tools of trade defence and policy co-ordination in allocation of DFI capital to protect domestic production is there.

(2) External Debt Sustainability: Foreign financial inflows are needed to finance the domestic savings-investment gap, but an unmanaged stockpile of external commercial debt induces a lot of fiscal volatility (Ekpete et al., 2020). Member states could end up facing debt distress if the DFIs' loans are used to fund economically unsound public investments instead of highly productive infrastructure investments that could be used to create capacity. The situation reduces the ability of the State to attract future developmental capital.

(3) Multiple overlapping institutional regulations across Africa: More than one region is overlapping, with a lot of friction with the regulations. Inconsistent definition and rules of origin for traders and financial intermediaries. Such an institutional overlap must be resolved by using a coordinated legal solution in order to create a harmonized framework for regional transactions.

Methodology

To maintain a rich analysis, the study employed a qualitative desk review of recent theoretical and empirical literature on African regional economic integration. Rather than making use of time series, the systematically classifies, make comparisons, and criticize the conceptual frameworks adopted in African regional integration literature. The method of study was implemented via the following structured stages namely identification of literature, inclusion and exclusion conditions and thematic synthesis.

Identification of literature was done through an all-round search of peer-reviewed databases such as Econ-Lit, scopus, and other online journals within African context. This was achieved by targeting both empirical and theoretical literature published from 1950 and 2025. The Search parameters were focused on the point of intersection between theoretical

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frameworks, economic integration, and the African economy.

In terms of inclusion and exclusion conditions, the review stringently included scholarly papers that clearly examine the Vinerian Theory in the framework of African Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Similarly, econometric based studies lacking theoretical foundation were omitted**.**

With respect to thematic synthesis, the theoretical arguments extracted were not subjected to statistical meta-analysis. Instead, the vinerian theory was qualitatively examined, thus forming the basis for the overall evaluation of static and dynamic effects of trade.

Conclusion

Economic integration of Africa (as at the RECs and AfCFTA) involves several and complicated short term static adjustment and long-term dynamic changes. Classical static analysis suggests that a variety of structural barriers, including but not limited to lower trade complementarity, dependent budgets on import tariffs and partial overlapping membership can hamper potential immediate trade creation. But the recent dynamic analysis has validated that integration is an important means of achieving sustainable growth, scale economies and regional value chain development. To gain this integration benefit, African countries should not stop at tariff adjustments but go deep in terms of the engagements of the structural policies. However, if the continent can remove these non-tariff barriers and bridge some of the missing infrastructure, create and implement cooperative regional industrial systems, integration can be a good means to industrialization and sustainable economic growth.

Proposals for Policy

African states can attain the maximum static balance, and dynamic gain of economic integration, by considering the following policy changes:

(i) To strengthen regional economic integration in Africa, there is need for policy makers to prioritization of practical solutions over frameworks that are theoretical. Strategic actions should focus on fast-tracking the AfCTA for borderless exchange of goods and services, harmonizing areas of regional economic overlap, reducing infrastructure gaps, and easing free labour movement and digital driven innovation within Africa.

(ii) Dynamic cost reduction is the strength of tariff reduction, but static trade creation is the requirement; non-tariff barriers such as too many checkpoints, customs cumbersomeness, and differences in the rules across the border are where the strength lies. Member states should make efforts to harmonize the cross-border trade documentation and use of digital trade solutions in the facilitation of regional logistics.

(iii) The domestic companies should receive investment that would result in economies of scale, including investments in transnational transport corridors, integrated rail, and a shared energy grid. A lower logistical cost can lower issues of low trade complementarities and improve cost competitiveness of the regional production.

(iv) In the absence of coordination of industrial policies by the regional blocs and, if needed, compensatory fiscal policies, it is likely that the benefits of both static and dynamic integration will be inequitably distributed. Adapt support and infrastructure investments to the needs of the less industrially advanced or smaller economies, to avoid economic divergence within the region, and to help maintain political backing for integration agreements.

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