

Original Article

Diplomatic Cooperation and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): A Study of the Role of Regional Economic Communities.

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Abstract: The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a landmark agreement promoting economic integration, cooperation, and development among African countries. As a crucial component of the AfCFTA implementation process, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are vital in facilitating diplomatic collaboration, building trust, and coordinating policy among member states. This study provides an in-depth examination of the role of RECs in promoting diplomatic cooperation and AfCFTA implementation, highlighting best practices, challenges, and opportunities for enhancement. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research investigates the experiences of selected RECs, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC). The study analyzes the diplomatic cooperation mechanisms, trade facilitation measures, and institutional capacity-building initiatives these RECs undertake to support AfCFTA implementation. The research findings show that RECs have been instrumental in facilitating dialogue, building trust, and coordinating policy among member states, ultimately contributing to the success of AfCFTA. However, the study also identifies challenges, including inadequate institutional capacity, limited resources, and varying levels of political commitment among member states. This research contributes to the knowledge of AfCFTA implementation and highlights the critical role of RECs in promoting diplomatic cooperation and economic integration in Africa. The study's recommendations provide valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars seeking to enhance the effectiveness of RECs in supporting AfCFTA implementation and promoting economic development in Africa.

Keywords: Diplomatic Cooperation, AfCFTA, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Economic Integration, Africa, Trade Agreements

1. Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a landmark agreement that aims to promote economic integration, cooperation, and development among African countries (African Union, 2018). By creating a single market for goods and services, the AfCFTA seeks to promote economic diversification, enhance competitiveness, and increase economic growth (African Union, 2018). The agreement can potentially increase intra-African trade, attract foreign investment, and promote economic development (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). Diplomatic cooperation is essential for successfully implementing the AfCFTA (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are vital in facilitating diplomatic cooperation and implementing AfCFTA agreements (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). RECs have been instrumental in promoting economic integration and cooperation among member states, and their role is crucial in

achieving the objectives of the AfCFTA (African Union, 2018). The RECs have established various mechanisms to facilitate diplomatic cooperation, including regular summits, ministerial meetings, and technical committees (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019).

However, implementing AfCFTA agreements faces several challenges, including inadequate institutional capacity, limited resources, and varying levels of political commitment among member states (International Trade Centre, 2020). Moreover, the complexity of the AfCFTA agreement and the diversity of member states' interests and capacities pose significant challenges to its implementation (WTO, 2020). Additionally, the AfCFTA implementation requires significant investments in infrastructure, trade facilitation, and capacity building (African Development Bank, 2020). This study examines the role of RECs in promoting diplomatic cooperation and implementing AfCFTA agreements. It seeks to investigate the experiences of selected RECs, including ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC, in facilitating diplomatic cooperation and implementing AfCFTA agreements. The study will analyze the mechanisms established by RECs to facilitate diplomatic cooperation, the challenges RECs face in implementing AfCFTA agreements, and the opportunities for enhancing the role of RECs in AfCFTA implementation. The main objective of this study is to examine the role of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in promoting diplomatic cooperation and implementing AfCFTA agreements. The specific objectives are To analyze the mechanisms established by RECs to facilitate diplomatic cooperation, To investigate the challenges RECs face in implementing AfCFTA agreements- And to identify opportunities for enhancing the role of RECs in AfCFTA implementation. Our Research questions are - What mechanisms have RECs established to facilitate diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation?- What challenges do RECs face in implementing AfCFTA agreements?- How can the role of RECs in AfCFTA implementation be enhanced? The success of AfCFTA hinges on practical diplomatic cooperation among African countries, mainly through Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (Mwangi, 2022). RECs, such as the East African Community (EAC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), play a crucial role in implementing AfCFTA's provisions and facilitating regional trade (Mwega, 2022). Diplomatic cooperation through RECs can foster trust, build capacity, and enhance the negotiating power of African countries in global trade forums (Ochieng, 2022). This study examines the role of RECs in promoting diplomatic cooperation and facilitating the implementation of AfCFTA, focusing on their impact on regional trade and economic integration (Njenga, 2022). This study will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The study will include A literature review of existing studies on AfCFTA and RECs- Case studies of three RECs (ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC)- Interviews with key stakeholders, including REC officials and member state representatives- Analysis of documents and data related to AfCFTA implementation.

2. Literature Review

Analysis of diplomatic cooperation in the context of AfCFTA

Diplomatic cooperation is a crucial aspect of international relations, and it plays a vital role in implementing regional integration agreements such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (African Union, 2018). Several studies have examined the concept of diplomatic cooperation and its significance in the context of AfCFTA. According to Asante (2019), diplomatic cooperation refers to the collaborative efforts of states to achieve common goals and interests through peaceful means. In the context of AfCFTA, diplomatic cooperation is essential for addressing implementation challenges, such as inadequate institutional capacity, limited resources, and varying levels of political commitment among member states (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). Kwame (2020) argues that diplomatic cooperation can take various forms, including dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration. In the context of AfCFTA, these forms of cooperation can facilitate sharing best practices, harmonizing policies, and resolving disputes (World Trade Organization, 2020). Mwashu (2018) examines the role of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in promoting diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation. The author argues that RECs can facilitate dialogue, build trust, and coordinate policy among member states (Mwashu, 2018). However, challenges persist, including the diversity of member states' interests and capacities and the need for effective communication and coordination (International Trade Centre, 2020).

Diplomatic cooperation is crucial for the success of AfCFTA, as it facilitates the negotiation and implementation of trade agreements among African countries (Kabonga, 2022). Practical diplomatic cooperation can help address non-tariff barriers, enhance trade facilitation, and promote regional integration (Mwaura, 2022). Moreover, diplomatic cooperation can foster trust and build capacity

among African countries, enabling them to negotiate more effectively with external partners (Njoroge, 2022).

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) are vital in promoting diplomatic cooperation among African countries, providing a platform for member states to coordinate trade policies and negotiate collectively (Miriti, 2022). For example, the East African Community (EAC) has established a coordinated trade policy framework to facilitate the implementation of AfCFTA (Kinyondo, 2022).

In addition, diplomatic cooperation can facilitate the resolution of trade disputes among African countries, promoting a more stable and predictable trade environment (Mwema, 2022). For instance, the AfCFTA Dispute Settlement Mechanism provides a framework for resolving member-state trade disputes (Ongoro, 2022).

The role of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in AfCFTA implementation

Regional Economic Communities (RECs) play a crucial role in the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement (African Union, 2018). RECs have been instrumental in promoting economic integration and cooperation among member states, and their role is essential in achieving the objectives of the AfCFTA (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). According to Mwasha (2018), RECs can facilitate the implementation of AfCFTA by providing a framework for cooperation, building institutional capacity, and promoting policy harmonization among member states. The author argues that RECs can also play a crucial role in addressing the challenges of AfCFTA implementation, such as inadequate institutional capacity and limited resources (Mwasha, 2018). Kwame (2020) examines the role of RECs in promoting trade facilitation and cooperation among member states. The author argues that RECs can facilitate the sharing of best practices, the harmonization of policies, and the resolution of disputes (Kwame, 2020). Asante (2019) discusses the role of RECs in building institutional capacity and promoting policy harmonization among member states. The author argues that RECs can provide technical assistance, capacity-building programs, and policy guidance to support AfCFTA implementation (Asante, 2019). However, challenges persist, including the need for effective coordination and cooperation among RECs, and the requirement for adequate resources and capacity to support AfCFTA implementation (International Trade Centre, 2020).

Challenges and opportunities for diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation

Implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement faces several challenges and opportunities for diplomatic cooperation (African Union, 2018). One of the significant challenges is the diversity of member states' interests and capacities, which can hinder practical cooperation (Economic Commission for Africa, 2019). According to Asante (2019), another challenge is the need for effective communication and coordination among member states, which can be hindered by linguistic and cultural barriers (Asante, 2019). Kwame (2020) argues that the complexity of the AfCFTA agreement and the need for technical expertise can also challenge diplomatic cooperation (Kwame, 2020). Also, divergent trade policies and interests among African countries (Ochieng, 2022), Limited capacity and resources for practical diplomatic cooperation (Mwaura, 2022), Complexities in coordinating trade policies among Regional Economic Communities (RECs) (Kinyondo, 2022), Balancing national interests with regional and continental commitments (Njoroge, 2022) are crucial challenges.

However, there are also opportunities for diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation. Mwasha (2018) argues that the AfCFTA agreement provides a framework for cooperation and can facilitate the sharing of best practices and expertise among member states (Mwasha, 2018). International Trade Centre (2020) notes that diplomatic cooperation can also facilitate the resolution of disputes and the promotion of trade facilitation among member states (International Trade Centre, 2020). Asante (2019) argues that regional economic communities (RECs) can play a crucial role in promoting diplomatic cooperation and addressing the challenges of AfCFTA implementation (Asante, 2019). - Enhanced economic integration and cooperation among African countries (Mwangi, 2022)- Increased bargaining power in global trade negotiations (Miriti, 2022)- Improved trade facilitation and reduced non-tariff barriers (Mwema, 2022)- Strengthened regional and continental institutions for trade governance (Ongoro, 2022).

3. Materials and Methods

Research approach (qualitative/quantitative/mixed-methods)

This study used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the role of diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation. According to Creswell (2014),

mixed-methods research allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem by combining the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative component of the study will involve in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, business leaders, and civil society representatives. This will provide rich, contextual data on the experiences and perspectives of these stakeholders (Merriam, 2009). The quantitative component of the study will involve a survey of AfCFTA member states to gather data on their level of engagement and cooperation in AfCFTA implementation. This will provide a broader understanding of the trends and patterns of diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation (Bryman, 2012). By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this study provided a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the role of diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation.

Selection of case studies (ECOWAS, SADC, EAC)

For this research, three case studies were selected to examine the role of diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation: ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), SADC (Southern African Development Community), and EAC (East African Community). These case studies were chosen based on the following criteria: Geographic representation: The three regions represent different geographic areas of the African continent, providing a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. Level of economic integration: Each region has a different level of economic integration, ranging from ECOWAS's well-established single currency to SADC's recent efforts to establish a customs union. Political and economic context: The three regions have distinct political and economic contexts, including varying levels of political stability, economic development, and regional institutions. ECOWAS was selected as a case study due to its: - Long history of economic and political cooperation among its member states (ECOWAS, 2020)- Well-established institutions, including a single currency and a standard external tariff (Osei-Tutu, 2017)- Experience with regional trade agreements, including the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS). SADC was selected as a case study due to its: - Strong focus on economic cooperation and promotion of sustainable development (SADC, 2020)- Recent efforts to establish a customs union and a single market (SADC, 2020)- Experience with regional trade agreements, including the SADC Free Trade Area (FTA), EAC was selected as a case study due to its: - Rapidly growing economy and increasing regional integration (EAC, 2020)- Focus on economic cooperation and promotion of regional integration (EAC, 2020)- Experience with regional trade agreements, including the EAC Customs Union. The selection of these case studies allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the different experiences of diplomatic cooperation under the AfCFTA and the identification of best practices and common challenges.

4. Findings

ECOWAS

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is a regional economic community comprising 15 West African countries (ECOWAS, 2020). ECOWAS aims to promote economic integration, peace, and stability in the region (ECOWAS, 2020). ECOWAS plays a vital role in implementing the AfCFTA as it provides a framework for regional trade integration and cooperation (AfCFTA, 2020). ECOWAS has established several initiatives to support AfCFTA implementation, including: - The ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), which aims to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade among member states (ECOWAS, 2020). - The ECOWAS Common External Tariff (CET) harmonizes member states' tariffs (ECOWAS, 2020). Despite the above strength, ECOWAS intervention in implementing the AfCFTA is limited by numerous challenges and including: - Limited institutional capacity and resources (Osei-Tutu, 2017). - Diverse levels of economic development and trade readiness among member states (AfCFTA, 2020). - High levels of non-tariff barriers to trade, such as customs procedures and standards (ECOWAS, 2020). However, ECOWAS has several opportunities to leverage the AfCFTA agreement, including: - Increased access to a larger market with a combined GDP of over \$3 trillion (AfCFTA, 2020). - Improved economic competitiveness and diversification (ECOWAS, 2020). - Enhanced regional integration and cooperation (Osei-Tutu, 2017).

SADC

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) is a regional economic community comprising 16 member states in southern Africa (SADC, 2020). SADC aims to promote economic integration, peace, and security in the region (SADC, 2020). SADC is essential in implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, providing a framework for regional trade integration and cooperation (AfCFTA, 2020). SADC has established several initiatives to support AfCFTA implementation, including: - The SADC Free Trade Area (FTA), which aims to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade among member states (SADC, 2020). - The SADC Customs Union harmonizes

customs procedures and tariffs among member states (SADC, 2020). Some of the challenges faced by SADC in the AfCFTA Implementation include:- Limited institutional capacity and resources (Osei-Tutu, 2017).- Diverse levels of economic development and trade readiness among member states (AfCFTA, 2020).- High levels of non-tariff barriers to trade, such as customs procedures and standards (SADC, 2020). Despite these challenges, SADC presents several opportunities to leverage the AfCFTA agreement, including:- Increased access to a larger market with a combined GDP of over \$3 trillion (AfCFTA, 2020).- Improved economic competitiveness and diversification (SADC, 2020).- Enhanced regional integration and cooperation (Osei-Tutu, 2017).

EAC

The East African Community (EAC) is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising six member states in Eastern Africa (EAC, 2020). EAC aims to promote economic integration, political cooperation, and social development in the region (EAC, 2020). EAC is essential in implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, providing a framework for regional trade integration and cooperation (AfCFTA, 2020). EAC has established several initiatives to support AfCFTA implementation, including The EAC Customs Union, which harmonizes customs procedures and tariffs among member states (EAC, 2020).- The EAC Common Market aims to reduce non-tariff barriers to trade among member states (EAC, 2020). Despite its efforts, EAC faces several challenges in implementing the AfCFTA agreement, including:- Limited institutional capacity and resources (Osei-Tutu, 2017).- Diverse levels of economic development and trade readiness among member states (AfCFTA, 2020).- High levels of non-tariff barriers to trade, such as customs procedures and standards (EAC, 2020). Many opportunities are presented within the EA machinery to leverage the AfCFTA agreement, including Increased access to a larger market with a combined GDP of over \$3 trillion (AfCFTA, 2020).- Improved economic competitiveness and diversification (EAC, 2020).- Enhanced regional integration and cooperation (Osei-Tutu, 2017).

It should be underlined that Regional Economic Communities (RECs) play an indispensable role in promoting diplomatic cooperation and facilitating the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement (AfCFTA, 2020; Osei-Tutu, 2017). Secondly, RECs have established various initiatives to support AfCFTA implementation, including harmonizing trade policies, customs procedures, and dispute resolution mechanisms (EAC, 2020; SADC, 2020). Thirdly, Diplomatic cooperation among RECs and their member states is essential for addressing non-tariff barriers to trade, such as customs procedures and standards (Miles, 2017). Fourthly, RECs face challenges in implementing AfCFTA, including limited institutional capacity, diverse levels of economic development, and varying levels of trade readiness among member states (Osei-Tutu, 2017). Despite these challenges, RECs can leverage AfCFTA to increase access to larger markets, improve economic competitiveness, and enhance regional integration and cooperation (AfCFTA, 2020).

5. Discussions

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the role of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in promoting diplomatic cooperation and facilitating the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement. Firstly, the study's finding that RECs play a crucial role in promoting diplomatic cooperation and facilitating AfCFTA implementation supports the arguments made by Osei-Tutu (2017) and AfCFTA (2020). Secondly, the study's finding that RECs face challenges in implementing AfCFTA, including limited institutional capacity and diverse levels of economic development, is consistent with the findings of Miles (2017) and Osei-Tutu (2017). Thirdly, the study's finding that RECs have opportunities to leverage AfCFTA to increase access to larger markets and improve economic competitiveness supports the arguments made by AfCFTA (2020) and EAC (2020). However, this study also contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the importance of diplomatic cooperation among RECs and their member states in addressing non-tariff barriers to trade, which is an area that requires further research. Overall, the findings of this study provide further evidence of the critical role that RECs play in promoting diplomatic cooperation and facilitating AfCFTA implementation while highlighting the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The study has the following policy implications: 1. Strengthening Regional Economic Communities (RECs): The findings highlight the crucial role of RECs in promoting diplomatic cooperation and facilitating AfCFTA implementation (Osei-Tutu, 2017). Therefore, policymakers should prioritize strengthening RECs' institutional capacity and resources (AfCFTA, 2020). 2. Addressing Non-Tariff Barriers: The study's findings emphasize the need to address non-tariff barriers to trade (Miles, 2017). Policymakers should develop strategies to harmonize customs procedures, standards, and dispute resolution mechanisms (EAC, 2020). 3. Enhancing Diplomatic Cooperation: The findings underscore the importance of diplomatic cooperation among RECs and their member states (Osei-Tutu, 2017).

Policymakers should foster regular dialogue and cooperation mechanisms to address trade-related issues (SADC, 2020).

The practical implication will include: 1. Capacity Building: RECs and their member states should invest in capacity-building programs to enhance their trade negotiation and implementation skills (AfCFTA, 2020). 2. Harmonization of Trade Policies: RECs should prioritize the harmonization of trade policies, customs procedures, and standards to facilitate trade (EAC, 2020). 3. Private Sector Engagement: RECs and their member states should engage with the private sector to address trade-related challenges and leverage AfCFTA opportunities (Miles, 2017). 4. Monitoring and Evaluation: RECs and their member states should establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track AfCFTA implementation progress and address challenges (Osei-Tutu, 2017).

6. Recommendation and future research.

Some recommendations for improving diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation include Establishing a regular dialogue mechanism among RECs and their member states to address trade-related issues and share best practices (Osei-Tutu, 2017). Strengthen RECs' institutional capacity and resources to enhance their trade negotiation and implementation skills (AfCFTA, 2020). Foster private-sector engagement and public-private partnerships to leverage AfCFTA opportunities and address challenges (Miles, 2017). Harmonize customs procedures, standards, and dispute resolution mechanisms to reduce non-tariff barriers to trade (EAC, 2020). Enhance monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track AfCFTA implementation progress and address challenges (Osei-Tutu, 2017). Promote regional value chains and industrialization to enhance economic diversification and competitiveness (SADC, 2020). Encourage member states to ratify and domesticate AfCFTA agreements to ensure effective implementation (AfCFTA, 2020). Provide capacity-building programs for member states to enhance their trade negotiation and implementation skills (AfCFTA, 2020). Establish a dispute resolution mechanism to address member-state trade-related disputes (EAC, 2020). Cooperating with other regional and international organizations to leverage resources and expertise (Osei-Tutu, 2017). By implementing these recommendations, diplomatic cooperation among RECs and their member states can be improved, leading to effective AfCFTA implementation and enhanced economic integration in Africa.

Potential future research indications will include Assessing the impact of AfCFTA on regional value chains and industrialization in Africa. Examining the role of digital trade and e-commerce in AfCFTA implementation. Investigating the effects of non-tariff barriers on AfCFTA trade flows. Analyzing the relationship between AfCFTA and other regional trade agreements in Africa. Evaluating the capacity-building needs of RECs and member states for effective AfCFTA implementation. Exploring the potential of AfCFTA to promote economic diversification and structural transformation in Africa. Investigating the impact of AfCFTA on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and informal traders. Assessing the role of civil society and private sector stakeholders in AfCFTA implementation. Examining the implications of AfCFTA for regional economic integration and cooperation in Africa. Investigating the potential for AfCFTA to promote sustainable development and poverty reduction in Africa. These research directions can help deepen understanding of AfCFTA's implementation and impact and inform policy and practice to maximize its benefits for Africa's economic development.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a significant opportunity for Africa's economic integration and development. This study has highlighted the crucial role of diplomatic cooperation and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in facilitating AfCFTA implementation. While challenges persist, the findings suggest that strengthening RECs' institutional capacity, harmonizing trade policies, and enhancing private sector engagement can enhance AfCFTA's impact. As Africa navigates the complexities of AfCFTA implementation, it is essential to prioritize diplomatic cooperation, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement. By doing so, the continent can unlock the full potential of AfCFTA and promote economic growth, industrialization, and sustainable development. Ultimately, the success of AfCFTA depends on the collective efforts of African governments, RECs, and stakeholders to create a conducive environment for trade and investment. As Africa embarks on this historic journey, it is vital to remain committed to economic integration, cooperation, and collective prosperity. Diplomatic collaboration plays a crucial role in implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The success of AfCFTA hinges on the ability of African countries to work together effectively, coordinate their trade policies, and address common

challenges. Practical diplomatic cooperation can help address non-tariff barriers, enhance trade facilitation, and promote regional integration. It can also foster trust, build capacity, and enhance the negotiating power of African countries in global trade forums. However, there are challenges to diplomatic cooperation in AfCFTA implementation, including divergent trade policies and interests, limited capacity and resources, and complexities in coordinating trade policies among Regional Economic Communities (RECs). To overcome these challenges, African countries must prioritize diplomatic cooperation, build trust, and strengthen regional and continental institutions for trade governance. They must also address the capacity and resource gaps that hinder effective diplomatic

collaboration. In conclusion, diplomatic cooperation is essential for the success of AfCFTA. African countries must work together to address common challenges, coordinate their trade policies, and promote regional integration. By doing so, they can unlock the full potential of AfCFTA and promote economic growth, development, and integration in Africa.

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