eISSN: 3108-0723

International Journal of Technology, Health and Sustainability

African Integration Reimagined: From Continental-Level Aspirations to Regional-Level Realities

Danilo Desiderio[1*], Eric Tevoedjre[2]

[1]Trade Policy expert and Senior Associate, Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI), Regional Office Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya.

[2]Adjunct Professor in International Relations, Université Catholique de Lille, France.

*Corresponding Author

(Received: 30.05.2026; Accepted: 14.07.2026)

Abstract

This paper argues that Africa's economic integration must shift from a top-down, aspirational model toward a pragmatic, project-based approach centered on the development of Regional Value Chains (RVCs). While the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provides an overarching framework for advancing continental integration, persistent challenges—like infrastructural deficits, fragmented production systems, and misaligned regulatory environments—indicate that meaningful progress can only be achieved incrementally. Given Africa's economic and geographic diversity, regionally differentiated strategies are required, with RVCs serving as primary drivers and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as institutional anchors. By showing how RVC-led integration can align local comparative advantages with broader continental goals, the paper identifies a more viable pathway toward industrialization that enhances competitiveness, resilience, and technological upgrading.

Keywords: *Regional value chains (RVCs); AfCFTA; Regional integration; Regional Economic Communities (RECs)*

INTRODUCTION

Africa's persistent economic fragmentation - manifested in low levels of intra-regional trade, weak industrial linkages, and limited productive integration - continues to constrain the continent's long-term development prospects. Despite sustained efforts by Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the entry into force of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in May 2019, Africa still today remains the least economically integrated region globally, home to the largest share of the world's least developed countries (Jiboku, 2015).

This paper challenges the assumption that trade liberalization alone can drive integration in Africa. It argues that tariff reduction, non-tariff barrier removal and institutional reforms, while necessary, are insufficient without parallel efforts to build productive capacities within RECs. Absent such efforts, a continental economic integration agenda risks remaining largely aspirational. A pragmatic, project-based strategy based on the development of Regional Value Chains (RVCs) within individual RECs—supported by targeted infrastructure investment, coordinated industrial policies, joint skill development programs, and the promotion of cross-border production linkages—offers a more viable path. By fostering interdependence among member countries, RVCs can enhance resilience, deepen productive integration, stimulate industrial development, and support economic diversification, ultimately laying the foundation for a competitive and self-sustaining African economy.

The strategy proposed here suggests a phased and incremental approach. The initial phase should focus on incentivizing and supporting the development of cross-border industrial projects within individual RECs based on sectoral prioritization. RVC development should target sectors where each region holds a comparative advantage, and where market opportunities and growth potential are significant. High-potential areas include pharmaceuticals, automotive, lithium-ion batteries, agro-processing, leather products, textiles and apparel, as well as information technology (IT), financial, cultural and entertainment industries (AfCFTA Secretariat and UNDP, 2021).

In the second phase, RECs should coordinate with neighboring blocs to promote inter-regional production linkages through joint initiatives such as cross-border investment funds, transboundary economic zones or industrial parks, and inter-State logistics corridors. This approach aims to progressively integrate regional production clusters and interconnect them across the continent, leveraging the AfCFTA as a platform for broader integration, coordination, and interconnectivity of value chains.

Initiating this process within individual RECs is both practical and strategic. These blocs possess deeper economic and social integration, offering more cohesive policy frameworks, greater regulatory alignment, and a higher degree of harmonization of trade procedures. Coupled with existing transport and energy infrastructure, they provide a foundation that lowers trade and transaction costs, making cross-border value chain development more feasible and competitive. As these RVCs mature, they can be progressively interconnected across different RECs based on sectors that present genuine economic complementarities, such as linking agro-processing in one region with food manufacturing in another, or coordinating mining and mineral beneficiation with downstream industrial production. This approach would contribute to the emergence of a more integrated, resilient, and self-sustaining African production base. By connecting regional clusters into broader networks, this project-based model has the potential to transform Africa's economic geography from a fragmented landscape of isolated national markets into a network of interconnected and dynamic regional production ecosystems.

THE HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF AFRICAN INTEGRATION

Since gaining independence in the mid-20th century, African countries have viewed regional integration not only as an economic imperative but also as a political and strategic tool for reducing dependence on former colonial powers, strengthening their voice in global affairs, promoting economic development, and fostering solidarity (Boutaleb, 2022).

In the early post-independence period, two main ideological blocs emerged, each with a distinct vision for the path and pace of Africa's integration. The first one, known as the Casablanca Bloc and led by Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, included seven states. It advocated for an immediate and comprehensive political and economic unification of the continent. The second group was the much larger Monrovia Bloc. It included 20 countries led by Nigeria's first president Nnamdi Azikiwe. This bloc supported a more gradual and pragmatic approach, arguing the need of first establishing RECs in each African region (North, South, East, West and Central Africa) as the building blocks of continental integration, followed by the final creation of an African Economic Community (AEC). In the end, the Monrovia Bloc's vision prevailed, shaping Africa's integration strategy into a path centered around economic cooperation and trade integration as key foundations for achieving a full political unity (Leshoele, 2020). This approach continues to inform the structure and mandate of continental institutions such as the African Union (AU), as well as the scope and objectives of continental agreements like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

As a result, the early decades of post-independence saw a surge in regional integration efforts, driven by Pan-African ideals and a collective aspiration for unity, economic self-reliance, and shared prosperity. These efforts led to the creation of four major RECs:

1) *The East African Community (EAC)*, established in 1967 by Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. However, after only a decade (in 1977), political differences and uneven perceived benefits among member states led to its collapse[1]. The EAC was revived in 2000 and has since expanded to include several new members.
2) *The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)*, founded in 1975, sought to promote economic integration and collective self-sufficiency among its member states.
3) *The Southern African Development Community (SADC)* was initially established in 1980 as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC). Its main goal was to reduce economic dependence on apartheid-era South Africa. In 1992, SADCC was transformed into SADC with a broader mandate for regional integration and cooperation.
4) *The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA)* originated as the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern Africa (PTAESA) in 1981. In 1994, it was restructured and rebranded as COMESA, with the goal of forming a free trade area and ultimately a common market among its member states.

Nonetheless, the formation of economic and trade blocs in Africa has a history that pre-dates the independence of African nations[2], with several institutional frameworks established already during the colonial period, laying the groundwork for subsequent integration initiatives. The most significant of these include:

- *The Southern African Customs Union (SACU)*. Established in 1910, SACU is the oldest functioning customs union in the world. It was created between South Africa, Botswana (then Bechuanaland), Lesotho (then Basutoland), and Eswatini (then Swaziland) under the British colonial administration, with Namibia joining

[1] A 1991 report prepared by the Kiel Institute of World Economics for the World Bank argues that the original EAC integration process failed due to significant economic asymmetries within the bloc. Specifically, the manufacturing sectors of Uganda and Tanzania were less competitive than Kenya's, causing both countries to become net importers of Kenyan goods. This imbalance undermined the perceived fairness of the integration, weakened political support for cooperation, and ultimately contributed to the dissolution of the bloc.

[2] The first African country to gain independence in the 20th century (excluding Liberia and Ethiopia, which were never colonized in the same way as the rest of the continent) was Egypt, which achieved partial independence from Britain in 1922. However, full sovereignty, including the end of British military presence and control over the Suez Canal, was only realized in 1956. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the first country to gain full independence following World War II was Ghana, which became independent from Britain on March 6, 1957.

after independence. SACU aimed to facilitate trade within the region by establishing a common external tariff with a revenue-sharing mechanism among its members as a core feature. This system allocates customs and excise revenues among member states, functioning as a fiscal transfer mechanism that provides financial support to smaller economies within the union.

- *The East African High Commission* was a regional cooperation body between Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (then Tanganyika) that operated from 1948 to 1961, serving as a precursor to later integration efforts in East Africa. It was succeeded by the East African Common Services Organization (EACSO, 1961-1967) and eventually the first East African Community (1967-1977). However, regional cooperation among these three states dates back even further. A Customs Union between Kenya and Uganda was established by the British colonial administration in 1917, with Tanganyika joining the arrangement in 1927.
- The "*Conseil de l'Entente*". It was created in 1959 by Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), and Dahomey (now Benin), later joined by Togo in 1966[3]. This organization was established as a Francophone West African cooperation framework focused on promoting economic solidarity, development coordination, and the development of joint infrastructure projects among its members. Today, its mission is mainly focused on fostering peace, security and cooperation among its five member States, while also pursuing complementary objectives of economic integration.

These early frameworks embodied both the colonial legacies that shaped Africa's political economy and the emerging aspirations for continental cooperation. They also set institutional precedents that informed subsequent integration projects on the continent.

In July 2006, in response to a growing proliferation of overlapping integration schemes, the African Union Assembly adopted a "Decision on the Moratorium on the Recognition of RECs" (Assembly/AU/Dec.112 (VII))[4]. This decision limited the number of officially recognized RECs to eight: the EAC, COMESA, SADC, ECOWAS, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CENSAD), and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU). Since then, only these eight RECs have been permitted to participate in AU programs and mechanisms for policy coordination and harmonization, being considered the formal building blocks of the future AEC.

The table at Annexure 1 provides a chronological list of currently active African regional communities that focus on economic integration or convergence as part of their mandate. They are divided into 2 groups: a) pre-Abuja RECs, i.e., RECs established before the adoption of the Treaty of Abuja in 1991; and b) post-Abuja RECs. Organizations dedicated solely to non-economic objectives (such as security) are not included. For example, the Accra Initiative, established in 2017, is excluded from the list as its key focus is to prevent the spread of terrorism from the Sahel and to combat transnational organized crime and violent extremism at its member states' borders.

THE LAGOS PLAN OF ACTION AND THE TREATY OF ABUJA

The Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) for the Economic Development of Africa, along with its annexed Plan of Action, represents the first continent-wide development strategy formulated by the Organization of African Unity (OAU)—the predecessor of the African Union—in conjunction with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). The LPA was motivated by the need to establish an African social and economic order grounded in the continent's own resources, aiming to build a self-reliant economy and reduce the over-dependence on the export of basic raw materials and minerals. Signed in April 1980 by the OAU Heads of State and Government, the LPA articulated a continental vision of development through cooperation, strengthening of intra-African trade and progressive integration of African economies. Politically, the LPA fostered a shared commitment among African leaders to view integration as a survival strategy in a global system dominated by external powers. Overall, it provided the strategic blueprint later advanced through the Abuja Treaty and the AfCFTA.

Formally known as the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community (AEC), the Treaty of Abuja was signed in June 1991 in Abuja, Nigeria, with the objective of accelerating economic integration across the continent. It represented a significant milestone in the pursuit of a unified African market by providing a formal framework to promote closer cooperation among African states.

Building on the LPA, the Abuja Treaty sought to advance sustainable development and improve living standards by fostering increased intra-African trade, harmonized policies, and coordinated development strategies across the continent. To achieve these objectives, it established a six-stage roadmap for full continental integration, beginning with the strengthening of RECs and gradually progressing towards a continental customs union, a common market, a monetary union, and, ultimately, a full political union. The treaty's design draws to a considerable extent on the European Union integration model, which served as a reference point for African policymakers seeking to promote continental unity and economic transformation (Chirisa *et al.*, 2014; Babarinde, 2007).

However, despite these ambitious milestones, progress toward meaningful continental integration has been slow and uneven. A primary challenge has been the misalignment between national industrial policies and regional integration

[3]All of these countries gained independence from France in August 1960, with the exception of Togo, which achieved independence earlier, on 27 April 1960.

[4]https://archives.au.int/bitstream/handle/123456789/938/Assembly%20AU%20Dec%20112%20%28VII%29%20_E.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

objectives, a concern widely noted in literature on African integration and development (UNECA 2016; Fosu and Asongu, 2015). As a result, many African States continue to pursue largely disconnected development strategies, often shaped more by domestic ideological or political considerations than by tangible objectives of creating interconnected cross-border economic ecosystems. This fragmented approach has hindered the emergence of robust RVCs, constraining intra-African trade, industrial transformation, and the realization of economies of scale, which are all core objectives enshrined in the Abuja Treaty.

This experience stands in stark contrast to the EU integration journey, which adopted a sector-focused, project-based approach from the outset. In the aftermath of World War II, the European integration process was anchored in the development of regional value chains within the coal and steel industries, considered two strategic sectors vital to economic recovery and military capabilities. The creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 brought together six founding countries[5] under a supranational authority, establishing a common market for coal and steel through the elimination of tariffs and quotas and introducing shared institutions for production planning and prevention of anti-competitive practices such as monopolies, price-fixing, or unfair trade barriers (Warlouzet, 2023). These arrangements not only facilitated economic cooperation but also fostered political stability and trust among former adversaries, laying the foundation for deeper integration.

Building on the ECSC's success, the Treaties of Rome in 1957 established the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), expanding integration to a broader range of goods and services. Over the following decades, the EEC deepened integration through the establishment of a customs union (entered into force on July 1, 1968), removal of internal trade barriers, and common policies, culminating in the Single European Act (1986) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992), which created the European Union (EU). The Maastricht Treaty introduced new dimensions such as economic and monetary union and paved the way for the adoption of a common currency: the euro. Today, the EU is a comprehensive political and economic union of 27 member states (20 of which currently participate in the eurozone), with a single market encompassing nearly 450 million people.

The EU integration experience illustrates that strategies aimed at establishing inter-state linkages in carefully selected strategic sectors can generate a virtuous cycle of trust, cooperation, and institutional development, advancing economic integration, political stability, and prosperity across member states. This approach offers a valuable lesson for Africa as it seeks deeper continental integration through initiatives like the AfCFTA.

Compared to the EU, Africa's integration efforts have largely bypassed this production-driven path. Since the earlier stages of regional integration, the focus has been primarily on trade liberalization and institutional harmonization, without first developing the industrial capacities and sectoral complementarities necessary to make such integration effective. As a result, liberalized trade environments have been established (initially at sub-regional levels, and now continent-wide with the AfCFTA), without a sufficiently robust industrial base to fully capitalize on them (UNEA, 2015a).

The lack of alignment between national industrial policies and regional integration strategies has resulted in fragmented and sometimes conflicting development approaches. This fragmentation has hindered the development of RVCs, limited intra-African trade, and constrained the potential for economies of scale. Overlapping memberships in multiple RECs with divergent regulatory frameworks exacerbated institutional complexity: a phenomenon often referred as the "spaghetti bowl". Such conditions have produced policy incoherence, implementation fatigue, and duplication of efforts. Compounding these challenges, political instability, weak governance, and corruption further erode momentum for the development of cross-border industrial cooperation projects (Osuma *et al.*, 2024).

Infrastructure deficits (including inadequate transport networks, unreliable energy supplies, and limited digital connectivity) further constrain cross-border trade and production. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2022) estimates Africa's annual infrastructure financing gap at between $68 billion and $108 billion, severely limiting physical connectivity essential for integration.

Another critical issue is the limited productive complementarities among African economies, which are often structured around similar primary commodity exports and lack diversified manufacturing sectors. Consequently, intra-African trade remains underdeveloped. Only about 17% of Africa's trade is within the continent, compared to over 60% in the EU and 40% in Asia (UNCTAD, 2021). Yet, these aggregate figures provide only a partial representation of Africa's internal trade dynamics. Informal cross-border trade, which is particularly significant at inland border crossings, constitutes a vital component of regional economic activity and household livelihoods but is systematically underreported in official statistics. Mold (2022) argues that disregarding the magnitude and economic relevance of informal trade flows leads to a distorted understanding of Africa's true level of regional integration.

Against this backdrop, the AfCFTA represents a historic milestone. Signed in Kigali, Rwanda, on March 21, 2018, by 44 African Union member states and entered into force in May 2019, the AfCFTA is the world's largest free trade area by participating countries. It aims to create a single continental market for goods and services, supported by the free movement of people and capital.

Nevertheless, while the AfCFTA provides a framework for trade liberalization and regulatory convergence, it alone cannot guarantee structural transformation or industrialization. Trade liberalization without concurrent efforts to build productive capacities, strengthen regional

[5]Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and (West) Germany.

value chains, and upgrade infrastructure, risks reinforcing existing asymmetries and extractive trade patterns. As UNECA (2020), Said (2022) and Shafaeddin (2010) emphasize, the AfCFTA must be part of a broader economic transformation agenda that explicitly links trade to industrial policy, investment, and regional production integration.

UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL VALUE CHAINS

Regional Value Chains (RVCs) refer to the coordinated organization of production processes across neighboring countries within a specific geographic region. In such an economic pattern, the production of a good or service is divided into distinct stages, with each stage located in the country best suited to perform it based on its comparative advantage (Gereffi and Lee, 2016). In this model, intermediate goods and services frequently cross borders multiple times before reaching the final stage, often moving through the same countries more than once along the chain. This economic structure enables a coordinated division of labor, allowing participating countries to contribute to value-adding activities that collectively result in a final product or service. RVCs not only promote economic specialization and efficiency, but also reinforce regional trade by strengthening productive linkages. They are crucial for enhancing value addition, diversifying supply chains, and increasing resilience to external shocks (ITC, 2022). By creating backward, forward, and horizontal linkages across firms and sectors, RVCs support deeper structural transformation, acting as both a driver and an outcome of regional economic integration (Black *et al.*, 2020).

In contrast to Global Value Chains (GVCs), which span vast geographic distances and are often dominated by powerful lead firms that tightly control production standards and compliance requirements, RVCs offer a more inclusive and context-sensitive alternative for developing regions. In fact, GVCs are more susceptible to geopolitical disruptions, long lead times, and logistics bottlenecks (Bednarski *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, they are typically shaped by regulations, the market, and consumers' demands in advanced economies, which often limit the roles of firms in less developed countries to low-value-added or extractive activities (Manso and Hermida, 2025). RVCs, instead, present greater opportunities for local firms to engage in higher-value segments such as agro-processing, manufacturing, logistics, and innovation (Black *et al.*, 2020). This is particularly relevant in the African context, where RVCs can facilitate the production of semi-finished goods that are then integrated into GVCs. This model also offers a way to move beyond the traditional reliance on exporting unprocessed commodities, which has historically confined African firms to the lowest tiers of the value chain (AfreximBank, 2024).

Empirical evidence from the EAC highlights both the benefits and the challenges of participating in RVC. A study by Lwesya (2022) based on UNCTAD-Eora panel data from 2005 to 2018[6], examined the extent of EAC partner states' integration into RVCs and GVCs, and identified key factors influencing this integration. The study found that EAC members are predominantly engaged in low- to middle-value-added activities, which limits their capacity to climb the value chain and weakens the competitiveness of their industries in the global economy. One of the study's most important insights concerns the role of infrastructure. Poor infrastructure quality emerges as a major barrier, constraining both value chain integration and the economic upgrading of participating firms. These negative effects of poor infrastructure appear to be less severe in more geographically concentrated regional contexts, where infrastructure networks (such as roads, energy grids, and cold-chain logistics), tend to be more developed and better coordinated. This finding strongly resonates with Perroux's (1955) theory of growth poles, which emphasizes the catalytic role of dynamic clusters of economic activity in stimulating broader regional development. Localized RVCs can serve as such growth poles, generating spillover effects that enhance industrial upgrading and foster deeper economic integration. Evidence from some African regions supports this interpretation: for example, within ECOWAS, intensified RVC activity has been shown to produce mutually reinforcing effects on regional trade expansion and GDP growth (Tinta *et al.*, 2018). Thus, strengthening RVCs in Africa may not only facilitate participation in global production networks, but also create localized poles of growth that drive structural transformation across the continent.

Research by Nare and Alhassan (2024) further highlights the reciprocal relationship between RVCs and regional trade integration. Their analysis found that an improvement in one ultimately leads to an improvement in the other. This symbiotic relationship is seen as crucial for helping Africa achieve its regional integration goals, which are essential for sustainable economic development.

To sum up, across Africa, RVCs represent a more pragmatic and realistic framework for advancing Africa's integration and industrialization agenda. By offering a more homogeneous territorial, infrastructural and regulatory context, they can support intra-industry linkages, facilitate transfer of technology, strengthen local manufacturing capacities, and increase domestic value retention. These RVCs can later be scaled up through collaborative cross-REC projects, focusing on sectors and industries with the highest potential for integration. Specifically, there are four interrelated reasons why RVCs are particularly well-aligned with Africa's development trajectory, which are examined in more detail in the following subsections:

1) the continent's diverse resource endowments (and their possible complementarity) allow for sectoral specialization among neighboring countries.

2) geographic proximity reduces transport costs and simplifies coordination.

3) cultural and linguistic affinities foster trust and cross-border collaboration among businesses.

[6]The UNCTAD-Eora Global Value Chain (GVC) Panel Dataset is a comprehensive database developed collaboratively by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the Eora Global Supply Chain database covering 189 countries. It is designed to measure and analyze countries' participation in GVCs, particularly in terms of how economies contribute value-added to international production and trade.

4) RVCs facilitate coordinated regional responses to shared challenges such as food security, energy access, and climate change.

Complementarity of Resource Endowments as Foundation for an Enhanced Division of Labor

Africa's economic landscape is defined by a remarkable diversity of resources, ecological zones, and agricultural potential, offering a solid foundation for regional specialization and industrial clustering. These endowments are particularly conducive to the development of RVCs, where neighboring countries can leverage their respective comparative advantages across different stages of production, enabling a more efficient division of labor and fostering mutually reinforcing industrial growth.

A number of studies have identified high-potential sectors for the development of Regional Value Chains (RVCs) across

Table 1: Most promising sectors for value chain creation in Africa (ITC, 2022).

S. No.	Productive Sector	Products
1	Apparel	apparel of artificial fibers; apparel of cotton; apparel of textile materials; apparel of wool/fine animal hair; swimwear & ski suits
2	Beauty products & perfumes	soap, incl. medicated products
3	Beverages (alcoholic)	cider; spirits; wine of fresh grapes
4	Beverages (not alcoholic)	grape juice, incl. grape must, unfermented; grapefruit juice, unfermented; juice of fruit or vegetables, unfermented; non-alcoholic beverages; orange juice, unfermented; pineapple juice, unfermented; tomato juice, unfermented
5	Chemicals	(prepared) diagnostic/laboratory reagents & certified reference materials; swab and viral transport medium set
6	Cocoa beans & products	chocolate & other cocoa preparations; cocoa powder, sweetened
7	Fish products (processed)	aquatic invertebrates, excl crustaceans, prepared or preserved; prepared or preserved mackerel; prepared or preserved sardines
8	Food products n.e.s.* (processed or preserved) Food products	apricots, prepared or preserved; beans, prepared or preserved; bread, pastry; cereals in grain or flake form or other worked grains, pre-cooked or otherwise prepared; chewing gum; citrus fruit, prepared or preserved; coffee extracts and preparations; couscous; edible mixtures of fats, oil & fractions, chemically modified n.e.s.; edible parts of plants, prepared or preserved; food preparations for infant use; fruit jams or similar & nut pastes; groundnuts, prepared or preserved, excl with sugar; ice cream & other edible ice; mixes & doughs of flour; nuts & other seeds, prepared or preserved; palm hearts, prepared or preserved, excl in vinegar; peas, prepared or preserved; potatoes, prepared or preserved; preparations for sauces & prepared sauces; soups & broths & preparations therefor; strawberries, prepared or preserved; sugar confectionery not containing cocoa ; sweetcorn, prepared or preserved; tea or mate extracts & preparations; tomatoes, prepared; uncooked pasta; vegetables, prepared or preserved
9	Footwear	footwear, leather soles & uppers; footwear, rubber/plastic/leather soles & leather uppers
10	Home textiles	home furnishings of textile materials; home furnishings, knit/crochet
11	Jewelry & precious metal articles	articles of pearls or semi-precious stones; imitation jewelry, n.e.s.
12	Machinery, electricity	batteries; electric rotary converters; electro-thermic domestic appliances; generating sets; instantaneous water heaters; lathes for removing metal; machinery for working metals ; machines for working wood; magnets; rolling mills for metal; static converters
13	Metal products	hand-operated tools and mechanical tools; household and office articles, of base metal; sanitary ware of iron or steel; knives, spoons & similar kitchen/tableware, of base metal; reservoir, tanks, containers of aluminium; sanitary ware, of copper
14	Miscellaneous manufactured products	air heaters & hot-air distributors; matches; wigs and false hairs, of synthetics or human hair
15	Motor vehicles & parts	Motor cars
16	Optical products, watches & medical instruments	balances; medical/surgical equipment and consumables; orthopedic & other appliances
17	Paper products	face masks of cellulose/paper
18	Pharmaceutical components	gel preparations for medical purposes; pharmaceuticals
19	Processed meat	prepared meat or offal of bovine animals; prepared or preserved meat or meat offal of ducks
20	Skins, leather & products thereof	articles of (composition) leather
21	Textile fabric n.e.s.	textile fabrics and tapestries
22	Vegetable oils & fats	groundnut oil (excl crude) & fractions; maize oil (excl crude) & fractions; soya-bean oil (excl crude) & fractions; sunflower-seed or safflower oil (excl crude) & fractions
23	Wood products	articles of wood; doors, windows & their frames of wood

Africa. A joint report by the AfCFTA Secretariat and the United Nations Development Programme (2021) identified key priority sectors, including automotives, leather and leather products, cocoa, soya, textiles and apparel, pharmaceuticals, vaccine manufacturing, lithium-ion batteries, mobile financial services, and cultural and creative industries. Building on this, the International Trade Centre (ITC, 2022) conducted a more granular analysis using data on trade flows, market access, supply and demand dynamics, and sustainability indicators. This analysis produced a detailed list of promising sectors, identifying 23 production areas and 94 specific products that are particularly well-suited for RVC development and expansion (Table 1).

Most recently, the World Economic Forum concluded another study which identified four key sectors with high potential for strategic value chain development (WEF, 2023):

1) *Automotive industry:* drawing on analysis from the Overseas Development Institute (Prachi *et al.*, 2022), the WEF projects that Africa's automotive sector could exceed $42 billion by 2027, driven by rising household incomes, growing domestic demand, and expanding intra-African trade. This sector presents significant opportunities for RVC development, especially in vehicle assembly, parts manufacturing, and battery production (Metz, 2024).
2) *Agriculture and agro-processing:* agriculture remains a key driver of economic growth, job creation, and food security (AfCFTA Secretariat, 2021). The elimination of tariffs under the AfCFTA could boost intra-African trade in agricultural goods by 574% by 2030, creating powerful incentives for the emergence of agro-based RVCs focused on value addition and rural transformation.
3) *Pharmaceuticals:* the pharmaceutical sector is identified as a strategic priority due to its high value-added potential and regional health implications. Once tariff and non-tariff barriers are removed under the AfCFTA, new opportunities are expected to arise for localized production and distribution, reducing Africa's dependence on imported medicines and improving access to essential drugs.
4) *Transport and logistics*: as a critical enabler of trade and industrial growth, this sector is also poised for significant expansion. According to a study presented by UNECA at the 5th Africa Business Forum (UNECA, 2022), the AfCFTA could increase intra-African trade demand by 28% by 2030, generating demand for approximately 2 million trucks, 100,000 rail wagons, 250 aircraft, and over 100 vessels. This increased demand will not only stimulate the logistics sector but also reinforce the development of a regionally integrated automotive and transport equipment industry.

Geographic Proximity and Logistical Synergies

Africa's transport and logistics infrastructure remains currently significantly underdeveloped. As of 2022, only 43 percent of the population had access to an all-season road, and transport costs remain among the highest in the world (AfDB, 2022). These constraints make long-distance trade (even within the same region) expensive, inefficient, and often unreliable.

RVCs anchored in geographically contiguous countries that are connected through existing transportation networks offer a practical and cost-effective approach to regional industrialization. Proximity allows for shorter transport routes, more efficient use of shared infrastructure, and the development of cross-border logistical hubs, all of which help reduce transaction costs and improve delivery timelines.

For example, the North-South Corridor in Southern Africa (linking the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia to several ports in South Africa), serves as a strategic trade artery for both mineral exports and agricultural products within the SADC region. Likewise, the Northern Corridor in East Africa connects landlocked Uganda and Rwanda to the port of Mombasa in Kenya, facilitating the movement of tea, coffee, and manufactured goods. These regional transport corridors significantly enhance the economic feasibility of RVCs by reducing trade costs, shortening delivery times, and improving logistical efficiency. Equally important, they reduce Africa's reliance on global value chains, which—as noted earlier—are more vulnerable to geopolitical shocks, extended lead times, and supply chain disruptions. In this context, strategic investments in regional infrastructure and transport corridors, guided by existing RECs, can serve as powerful catalysts for productive integration and structural transformation across the continent.

Cultural, Linguistic, and Institutional Affinities

Successful economic integration requires more than infrastructure and trade agreements: it also depends on trust, shared cultural and linguistic traits, and similar business practices. In this regard, sub-regions in Africa benefit from a relatively high degree of cultural, linguistic, and historical homogeneity, which can facilitate interactions among economic actors. For example, francophone countries in West and Central Africa share similar legal and regulatory frameworks largely due to the harmonization efforts carried out by the *Organization pour l'Harmonisation en Afrique du Droit des Affaires* (OHADA), as well as common currencies in the two CFA franc zones[7]. Such commonalities reduce transaction costs associated with doing business across borders, enhance legal predictability, and create a conducive environment for cross-border investment and enterprise development. Similarly, shared languages such as Swahili in East Africa and Arabic in North Africa support more effective communication, labor mobility, and knowledge transfer. These affinities also strengthen cross-border cooperation among firms, regulatory bodies, and governments.

Although often underestimated, these forms of "soft infrastructure" play a critical role in facilitating the development of RVCs. By lowering barriers to interaction and promoting collaboration, they help establish the trust and

[7]These CFA zones are monetary unions linking multiple countries to common currencies - the West African CFA franc (XOF) and the Central African CFA franc (XAF) - that are pegged to the euro, providing monetary stability, facilitating cross-border trade, and promoting financial integration among member states.

institutional coordination essential for deeper production-sharing arrangements (Bach, 2016).

Coordinated Responses to Shared Regional Challenges

Africa faces numerous transboundary challenges that cannot be effectively addressed by individual states acting in isolation. Issues such as food insecurity, energy poverty, climate vulnerability, and public health crises transcend national borders and require coordinated policy responses. RVCs provide a practical mechanism to operationalize such cooperation by linking economic objectives with social and developmental imperatives.

For example, regional agro-processing value chains can be instrumental in enhancing food security, reducing post-harvest losses, and increasing value-added exports. Similarly, collaborative investment in renewable energy (such as cross-border solar and hydroelectric projects) can strengthen energy access and resilience, particularly in areas where individual countries lack the scale or financial capacity to undertake such projects alone (IRENA, 2015). In this way, RVCs align economic integration with broader developmental goals, reinforcing the African Union's Agenda 2063[8].

ANCHORING DEVELOPMENT IN COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGE

Based on the above findings, a strategic regional distribution of RVCs can be envisioned, coordinated in each region by the various RECs. In this model, countries would align their policies, regulatory frameworks and support mechanisms to capitalize on their complementary strengths in developing strategic sectors—such as agro-processing, automotive manufacturing, and pharmaceuticals—focusing on specific projects coordinated and facilitated by the RECs according to each country's comparative advantages. By allocating stages of production based on these comparative advantages, countries can enhance productivity through economies of scale and scope, while simultaneously fostering the development of integrated regional manufacturing ecosystems. Each country should play a distinct role in the production process, ranging from raw material extraction and primary processing to manufacturing, assembly, and marketing and commercialization. This structured specialization not only enhances efficiency but also strengthens cross-border value chains, creating interconnected regional economies capable of competing globally. When strategically coordinated through RECs, these ecosystems can serve as a catalyst for Africa's structural transformation, helping to overcome economic fragmentation and paving the way for a more resilient, competitive, and sustainable continental economy (UNCTAD, 2021).

[8]Agenda 2063 is a strategic framework adopted by the African Union in 2013 to guide Africa's socio-economic transformation over a 50-year horizon. It is often described as a blueprint for Africa's future and aims to build a prosperous, integrated, and peaceful continent. The agenda is grounded in Africa's shared vision of development and is intended to complement global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A Concrete Example: The *Côte d'Ivoire*–Ghana Agro-Industrial Alliance

The *Côte d'Ivoire*-Ghana Agro-Industrial Alliance (UNECA, 2025), launched in August 2025 with the UNECA and the African Union Commission (AUC) support, provides a concrete example of RVC development within African RECs. Coordinated by ECOWAS, this strategic initiative aims at interconnecting the productive systems of two contiguous countries (*Côte d'Ivoire* and Ghana) with the overarching objective of increasing value addition across shared agricultural sectors. By facilitating cross-border collaboration, ECOWAS is expected to play a critical role in creating the enabling conditions for RVCs in agro-processing to emerge.

Specifically, ECOWAS will support this initiative through the development of joint infrastructure projects, including transport corridors, cross-border agro-industrial parks and cold chain facilities, and other solutions aimed at reducing post-harvest losses (UNECA, 2015b). These interventions are designed to enhance the competitiveness of regional agricultural products, and promote sustainable agro-processing. In parallel, ECOWAS will mobilize financial support mechanisms and private investment, including the design of climate-resilient investment packages supported by the Green Climate Fund (GCF)[9], thereby strengthening the financial and environmental sustainability of these regional initiatives. For example, ECOWAS could leverage the Bank for Investment and Development (EBID), which provides loans, lines of credit, and equity to support regional projects (including industrial development and infrastructure).

Although still a forward-looking initiative rather than a fully realized case study, the *Côte d'Ivoire*–Ghana Alliance illustrates how RECs can proactively facilitate RVC development through targeted regional projects. By linking the productive systems of two of ECOWAS's largest economies, this initiative exemplifies how coordinated infrastructure, financial support, and institutional oversight can advance industrial collaboration, promote regional coordination, and generate shared economic growth. It is important to note, however, that this RVC-project-centered approach is entirely new; at present, there are no completed case studies demonstrating its full implementation, making this initiative a pioneering example of the model proposed in this paper.

SCALING RVCS ACROSS CONTIGUOUS GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS

Once RVCs are firmly established and have matured within the territories of individual African RECs, they can be progressively interconnected across different regional blocks to form a continent-wide network of complementary manufacturing clusters. This integration would target sectors where genuine economic complementarities exist, enabling the coordination of input suppliers, manufacturers, service

[9]The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is an international financial mechanism established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to support developing countries in their efforts to combat climate change.

providers, and distributors across multiple RECs. Strategically designed projects - such as cross-border industrial parks, sector-specific trade and transport corridors, coordinated logistics networks, and joint technology and innovation hubs - can facilitate these connections, enhancing value addition and optimizing the allocation of resources.

By linking mature RVCs across regions, African economies can expand market access, achieve greater economies of scale, and foster synergies that strengthen regional industrial ecosystems. This cross-REC integration aligns directly with the objectives of the AfCFTA, providing a framework for reducing trade barriers, harmonizing standards, and promoting coordinated industrial policies. Ultimately, such interlinked RVCs have the potential to accelerate continental industrialization, structural transformation, and global competitiveness, while building more resilient and diversified production networks capable of withstanding external shocks. The ultimate objective is to build a Pan-African value chain ecosystem, where inputs, intermediate goods, and final products can circulate freely across borders, supported by harmonized policies, shared infrastructure, and collaborative institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY SUPPORT FOR SCALING

Effective phased scaling of RVCs requires robust multi-level institutional coordination to ensure that economic complementarities are fully leveraged and that benefits are equitably distributed. The key actors and their potential roles in supporting this scaling process are outlined below:

A. *RECs:* they are central to driving RVC development. They should perform two main interconnected roles:

i. *Strategic coordination:* As explained above, RECs should identify and prioritize value chains that demonstrate the highest potential for competitiveness and industrial upgrading. This involves developing targeted policies and investment frameworks to support these priority chains and the launch of specific projects designed to facilitate the integration and cooperation of manufacturing units across member states, fostering complementarities in inputs, production capacities, and market access. To fund these initiatives, RECs could leverage a combination of regional development funds[10], contributions from member states, public-private partnerships (PPPs), and targeted support from international development partners and financial institutions. Strategic coordination by RECs ensures that RVCs are not developed in isolation but as part of a coherent regional industrial strategy. Moreover, in a second phase of development, RECs should collaborate to design inter-REC RVC projects thereby linking regional clusters. These cross-REC connections would enable sectoral complementarities, facilitate the movement of intermediate goods, and encourage regional specialization. Over time, this approach would give rise to integrated production networks capable of competing both continentally and globally.

ii. *Multi-stakeholder collaboration:* RECs can convene regional trade exhibitions, investment forums, and specialized conferences focused on priority value chains or flagship projects. These platforms serve multiple purposes: knowledge exchange, business matchmaking, and promotion of cross-border partnerships. Moreover, inclusive mechanisms should be established to engage a broad range of stakeholders—including private sector actors, academia, research institutions, and civil society—to ensure that RVC development is informed by diverse expertise and addresses broader socio-economic objectives. Through such collaboration, RECs can help create a supportive ecosystem that strengthens innovation, productivity, and competitiveness within each region.

B. *The AfCFTA Secretariat:* While RECs are indispensable in driving RVCs, coordination at the continental level is equally critical, as it enhances coherence across regional strategies and prevents duplication by synchronizing approaches in the design and implementation of cross-REC RVC projects. The Secretariat should therefore:

i. convene inter-REC platforms (such as coordination workshops, meetings, and forums) to enhance coordination between RECs;

ii. ensure that regional infrastructure projects (particularly road and rail corridors) are interoperable across borders. This entails aligning technical specifications (such as track gauge, signaling systems, and axle loads), to allow seamless movement of goods and services across national boundaries. In parallel, efforts should extend to other critical infrastructure domains, including energy grids and digital connectivity, ensuring that they are planned and implemented with regional integration in mind. Such interoperability reduces logistical bottlenecks, lowers transaction costs, and creates the physical backbone necessary for the efficient functioning of RVCs;

iii. co-sponsor joint projects among RECs to accelerate the emergence of cross-regional RVCs.

C. *Development finance institutions:* Pan-African institutions such as Afreximbank, the African Development Bank (AfDB), and national investment promotion agencies should play a catalytic role in financing cross-border infrastructure and de-risking private investments.

POLICY INSTRUMENTS TO ENABLE RVC INTEGRATION

Effective RVC integration requires a coherent and coordinated policy environment. A range of complementary

[10]This includes the creation of regional industrial development banks to mobilize funds to support investment in the development of regional and inter-regional industrial development projects or leverage instruments like industrial bonds to finance investments in RVCs. Some RECs already operate their own development banks, like in the case of the Bank for Investment and Development of ECOWAS mentioned in section – A Concrete Example: The Côte d'Ivoire–Ghana Agro-Industrial Alliance.

instruments is required to create the conditions for cross-border production networks to thrive:

- *Financing Mechanisms:* The financing gap is the primary bottleneck that needs to be addressed in order to adopt an RVC-based integration model. RVC development requires significant investment in both infrastructure and production capacity. Regional development banks, blended finance instruments, and the AfCFTA Adjustment Fund[11] can play a pivotal role in de-risking and financing cross-border RVC projects. Access to predictable, long-term financing is essential for both public and private stakeholders. Moreover, given the capital-intensive and technology-driven nature of cross-border industrial projects, PPPs can be particularly useful for scaling up operations and developing the infrastructure that will support these projects. By combining public policy frameworks with private sector efficiency and investment, PPPs can mobilize resources for industrial parks, energy systems, transport hubs, and digital platforms. Other financing models, including foreign direct investment, can also be leveraged to accelerate the development of RVCs.
- *Infrastructure Investment:* This includes multimodal transport corridors that connect ports, rail, and road systems; reliable and affordable energy grids; and robust digital connectivity to support logistics, e-commerce, and information exchange. Without these backbone systems, RVCs cannot achieve scale or efficiency.
- *Harmonization of Standards:* Divergent product standards and regulatory requirements remain a major source of non-tariff barriers. Harmonizing technical standards, certification procedures, and customs documentation across RECs is necessary to facilitate compatibility, reduce transaction costs, and allow goods to circulate seamlessly within regional markets.
- *SME Integration:* Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) form the backbone of African economies, representing more than 90% of businesses and employing about 60% of workers (AU, 2022). Yet, they frequently face challenges in accessing and integrating into regional production networks. Targeted policies are needed to facilitate their inclusion through measures such as capacity-building programs, access to finance, streamlined regulatory procedures, and support for cross-border partnerships that enable SMEs to participate effectively in regional value chains.
- *Labor Mobility and Skills Development:* Human capital is a decisive factor for RVC competitiveness. Facilitating the free movement of skilled labor across national borders can help address shortages and spread expertise. At the same time, aligning vocational training and higher education curricula with the specific skills demanded by emerging value chains ensures that the workforce is prepared for industrial upgrading.

[11]The AfCFTA Adjustment Fund, comprising a Base Fund, General Fund, and Credit Fund, is a critical financial mechanism designed to help African countries and their private sectors adapt to the new integrated trading environment created by the AfCFTA. It addresses transitional support needs, including tariff revenue losses, implementation of protocols and private sector investments in new technologies, improvement of productive capacities, or to meet the standards required to participate in regional value chains. Afreximbank has so fat committed US$1 billion to this fund.

POLITICAL AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING A VALUE-CHAIN-DRIVEN MODEL

Implementing an economic integration model centered on value-chain projects in Africa offers significant economic opportunities but also poses complex political and governance challenges. A key difficulty lies in the divergence of national priorities and industrial strategies across different regions. Although many RECs have developed regional integration strategies, coordination with national policies remains weak, as many governments prioritize domestic agendas aimed at protecting national industries, preserving employment, and securing rents from established sectors. Resistance to regional cooperation may arise when alignment with cross-border value chains is perceived to threaten domestic interests or shift economic benefits to neighboring countries (Geda and Taye, 2008). Political considerations may therefore override economic rationale, slowing the adoption of policies necessary for effective RVC development.

While protectionist tendencies and entrenched rent-seeking behaviors hinder the full implementation of the AfCFTA, developing RVCs, on the contrary, offer the most promising way forward. RVCs strengthen local businesses by creating new opportunities without undermining domestic industries. They do so by enabling firms to specialize in particular segments of the value chain, access larger regional markets, and progressively upgrade their productive capacities. Importantly, RVCs shield domestic firms from direct competition with more advanced foreign producers by allowing them instead to occupy value-added niches that build upon their existing strengths. In this way, participation in RVCs not only enhances competitiveness and resilience but also preserves—and in many cases reinforces—the role of domestic industries within national development strategies (UNECA, 2017).

Effective RVC implementation also requires transparent regulatory frameworks and a high level of cross-border coordination. In many African contexts, administrative inefficiencies, corruption, and weak bureaucratic capacity undermine these prerequisites, reducing the predictability and credibility of regional integration efforts. Additionally, institutional complexity in Africa's integration process is exacerbated by the "spaghetti bowl" effect, whereby the proliferation of overlapping trade agreements and competing commitments generates policy incoherence, duplication, and implementation fatigue (Akinkugbe, 2019). Yet, this challenge is not insurmountable. The establishment of efficient RVCs can progressively render such overlapping frameworks less relevant, as integration deepens around concrete, project-based initiatives. Drawing on the neo-functionalist insights of Ernst Haas (1958)[12], successful RVCs may generate spillover effects: integration in one pragmatic domain (e.g., such as a cross-border agro-industrial project), creates functional pressures and incentives for cooperation in other, closely linked sectors (Moravcsik, 2005). These may include, for instance, the harmonization of customs procedures to facilitate the movement of intermediate goods, the standardization of transport and logistics regulations to ensure seamless connectivity, or the coordination of energy policy to guarantee reliable power supply for industrial production. In this way, progress in one sector can catalyze gradual alignment across others, reinforcing the logic of regional interdependence. Such project-driven convergence provides a bottom-up mechanism to mitigate institutional fragmentation by demonstrating in practice the economic and political benefits of collaboration. By delivering tangible results, successful RVCs not only build trust among governments, firms, and communities but also create momentum for broader institutional alignment, ultimately contributing to a more coherent and effective regional integration architecture.

These dynamics, however, unfold within broader structural and political constraints. Persistent rivalries, border disputes, and political tensions often limit the willingness of countries to commit to long-term cooperative industrial projects requiring shared investments in infrastructure or production capacity. Political instability and frequent regime changes exacerbate these difficulties, as coups, contested elections, or abrupt shifts in policy priorities can derail RVC initiatives. Corruption and elite capture are particularly damaging in capital-intensive projects (industrial parks, transport corridors, logistics hubs), where the risk of misappropriation is high (Anyangwe, 2014). In addition, while economic integration schemes are designed to produce shared economic benefits, the perception of uneven distribution remains a political obstacle. For instance, recurring tensions within the EAC surface when Kenyan private-sector expansion and unequal industrial capacities are perceived to crowd out smaller partners, creating political resistance to deeper or faster liberalization in some sectors (Mathieson, 2016). Without deliberate mechanisms for balancing gains across countries, resistance may emerge even where long-term benefits could be substantial.

Equally important is the issue of stakeholder inclusion. Policymaking tends to be overly state-centric, with insufficient engagement of private firms, SMEs, the informal economy, and civil society. This exclusion reduces legitimacy, stifles innovation, and increases the risk of opposition from groups that feel marginalized. RVCs are, however, inherently project-oriented and depend on the active participation of diverse stakeholders to succeed. Structured engagement with local businesses, entrepreneurs, and civil society, combined with robust programs in vocational training and skills development, can broaden participation, enhance the adaptive capacity of firms, and strengthen local ownership. In turn, this helps ensure that RVCs generate not only competitiveness and efficiency but also sustainable, widely shared socio-economic benefits.

In sum, the political and governance challenges of implementing a value chain-driven model are profound and multifaceted. They extend beyond technical feasibility to encompass divergent national interests, weak institutions, trust deficits, corruption, and uneven perceptions of benefit-sharing. Yet, the potential payoff is equally significant. RVCs can generate jobs, expand markets, and boost revenues for all participants. If supported by political leadership capable of reconciling sovereignty with interdependence, and institutional frameworks fostering transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability, RVCs can progressively erode existing institutional fragmentation and transform Africa's integration into a pragmatic, project-driven process with long-term systemic impact.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: LESSONS FROM OTHER REGIONS

Experiences of regional integration in other parts of the world offer important insights for Africa's own integration agenda. Although shaped by distinct historical, political, and economic trajectories, these cases reveal both the opportunities and the constraints inherent in efforts to deepen regional cooperation. Examining models such as the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the *Mercado Común del Sur*[13], (MERCOSUR) provides useful lessons on institutional design, sequencing of integration, and mechanisms for policy coordination.

At the same time, these comparisons underscore the need for Africa to adapt integration strategies to its unique context, marked by diverse economies, uneven levels of industrial development, and the critical role of regional production systems.

The European Union

The European Union stands as the most advanced example of regional economic integration worldwide. It began with focused cooperation in specific sectors such as coal and steel, which laid the groundwork for broader collaboration. Over time, this sectoral cooperation evolved into a comprehensive single market, accompanied by a customs union that facilitates the free movement of goods, services, capital, and people across member states. The EU's success in achieving deep integration is largely supported by strong supranational institutions, such as the European Commission, European Parliament, and European Court of Justice, that help enforce common rules and mediate disputes among member States. Additionally, the EU employs fiscal transfer and solidarity mechanisms (e.g., Structural Funds)[14] to address economic disparities among its diverse members, which promotes cohesion and stability across the union.

[12]Neo-functionalism is a theory of regional integration which argues that cooperation in specific, pragmatic sectors generates "spillover" effects, creating pressures for further integration in related areas. Haas highlights two types of 'spillover. The first type, called 'functional spillover', occurs when cooperation in certain sectors of the economy (or society) creates technocratic pressure for cooperation in adjoining sectors, thereby propelling integration forward. The second type, 'political spillover', occurs when ongoing cooperation in certain areas empowers supranational officials to act as informal political entrepreneurs in other areas.

[13]Which translates to Southern Common Market.

The main takeaway for Africa is that durable integration requires robust institutional frameworks, gradual policy and regulatory alignment, and trust-building across diverse economies.

ASEAN

ASEAN exemplifies a model of regional integration rooted in flexibility, consensus-building, and a pragmatic emphasis on infrastructure development and private sector cooperation, rather than on centralized institutions. Much like the African RECs, ASEAN operates as a cooperation-based, intergovernmental organization, where all decisions are made collectively, and no supranational body holds authority over member states or can impose binding decisions. This model reflects ASEAN's commitment to non-interference and national sovereignty, often referred to as the "ASEAN Way" (Acharya, 2001).

ASEAN has strategically invested in multimodal infrastructure and transnational economic corridors in cross-border regions such as the Greater Mekong Subregion[15], to support trade, mobility, and production linkages across borders. The ASEAN integration strategy emphasizes an incremental approach, where infrastructure and industrial projects are developed first, providing the foundation for deeper economic and regulatory integration through mutual agreement among members (The Jakarta Post, 2023). A practical example of this approach is the gradual facilitation of professional mobility and business visitors through Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs). These MRAs acknowledge qualifications in high-demand fields such as architectural services, surveying, medical practitioners, dental practitioners, engineering services, nursing and accounting services, and tourism professionals, allowing certified professionals to work across ASEAN countries, thus laying the groundwork for broader freedom of movement in the future (ASEAN, 2025).

This incremental and project-driven approach also offers a valuable lesson for African regional integration. By prioritizing the development of regional clusters and RVCs, African RECs could similarly leverage targeted infrastructure and industrial initiatives to build functional connectivity and economic complementarities across borders. Just as ASEAN's MRAs create trust and practical mechanisms for professional mobility, carefully designed African RVC projects can facilitate cooperation among firms in complementary sectors, progressively laying the groundwork for broader economic integration at both regional and continental scales.

MERCOSUR

MERCOSUR was established with the purpose of creating a unified economic space among countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay, subsequently joined by Venezuela and Bolivia[16]. Its ambitions include developing a customs union and a broader common market. Yet, despite these objectives, MERCOSUR has encountered significant cohabitation challenges rooted in persistent political instability, macroeconomic divergence across member states and internal political turmoil—ranging from coups and presidential impeachments to shifts in ideological orientation—which frequently disrupted policy continuity and trust among members (Caichiolo, 2017).

Nevertheless, despite these structural challenges, MERCOSUR made significant advancements in two key areas. First, it established protocols supporting social and labor mobility, which have facilitated cross-border access to employment, education, and social protection within the bloc. Second, MERCOSUR introduced the principle of differentiated integration (Ayuso, 2022), allowing member states to engage at varying levels of commitment and participation based on their individual capacities and readiness. This approach closely aligns with the concept of "variable geometry", as articulated in Article 5(c) of the AfCFTA Agreement[17].

The primary takeaways from MERCOSUR for Africa are that even in the face of significant challenges, integration can be advanced through a focus on social and labor mobility and by adopting the principle of differentiated integration, which accommodates the varying capacities and readiness of member states.

WHICH TRAJECTORY FOR AFRICA?

The ASEAN experience and the early stages of EU integration both demonstrate the effectiveness of a project-based, incremental approach to regional integration. The

[14]The European Structural Funds, now encompassed under the broader European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), are a suite of financial instruments designed to advance the European Union's cohesion policy, aimed at reducing regional disparities, strengthening social inclusion, supporting economic transformation, and achieving sustainable development across the bloc. These funds typically operate within multi-year programming periods (currently 2021–2027) and are co-managed by the European Commission and national authorities.

[15]The Greater Mekong Subregion is a transnational economic region in Southeast Asia, united by the Mekong River basin. It includes six partners: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and, in China, the Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Founded in 1992 with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), it was established to enhance regional cooperation through socioeconomic development. The program focuses on three strategic pillars (Connectivity, Competitiveness, and Community).

[16]Bolivia became a full member of MERCOSUR on 5 July 2024, following the promulgation of the accession law by its President. The country is currently in the process of aligning its national legislation with MERCOSUR's legal and institutional framework: a process that must be completed within four years from the date of accession, as stipulated by the bloc's integration protocols. By contrast, the Republic of Venezuela, although formally a full member, has been suspended from MERCOSUR since 1 December 2016. This suspension was due to a combination of institutional shortcomings, particularly concerns about democratic governance and non-compliance with MERCOSUR's economic and legal obligations, including failure to adopt key trade and regulatory commitments.

[17]Variable geometry means that countries or groups of countries can integrate at different speeds or depths, depending on their readiness and capacity. This is particularly important in the African context, where significant disparities in economic development, institutional capacity, and infrastructure exist among nations. By accommodating these differences, the principle ensures that no country is left behind, while still enabling progress toward deeper continental integration.

early EU sought to build trust and cohesion by integrating strategic sectors (such as coal and steel) under the oversight of a centralized authority. By contrast, ASEAN prioritized the creation of functional economic linkages and sectoral complementarities, initially through infrastructure projects that gradually expanded into other domains. In contrast, the MERCOSUR experience underscores that political alignment and macroeconomic coordination are indispensable for durable integration.

For Africa, these lessons suggest that regional integration should be anchored in targeted projects designed to create complementarities among manufacturing units and clusters. RECs should play a central role in coordinating these RVC projects, simultaneously providing institutional support, and ensuring policy coherence, economic stability, and regulatory harmonization.

RVCs offer a practical mechanism to strengthen intra-African trade, enhance productive capabilities, and foster regional interdependence. However, they require substantial investment in capital, technology, and skilled labor, and cannot substitute for comprehensive industrial strategies. A phased, project-driven integration model—grounded in tangible economic linkages, leveraging RECs and the AfCFTA, and supported by inclusive financing mechanisms—can gradually transform localized clusters into interconnected continental production networks, enabling structural transformation that reflects Africa's diverse economic realities.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the limitations of advancing continental trade integration primarily through policy harmonization and institutional centralization, without a parallel focus on regional industrialization. Trade liberalization alone cannot fundamentally transform Africa's economic landscape unless it is embedded within comprehensive industrial policy frameworks. Within such frameworks, the development of RVCs can serve as a catalyst for industrial upgrading, enhanced value addition, and deeper economic integration.

For integration to yield tangible and transformative outcomes, Africa must move beyond a top-down, aspirational approach at the continental level. This approach is ill-suited to a continent spanning over 30 million square kilometers. A more pragmatic and context-sensitive strategy lies in regionally anchored initiatives. RECs, leveraging their proximity to economic agents and relatively homogeneous territorial, infrastructural, and regulatory environments, are uniquely positioned to design and oversee the implementation of projects that cluster businesses operating in complementary productive sectors. Such clustering facilitates the emergence of RVCs by promoting coordination, specialization, and value addition across member states.

Building integration from the regional level upward can generate resilient production networks that reflect Africa's economic and geographic diversity while establishing the foundation for sustainable continental integration. By initially developing regional clusters through carefully designed projects and progressively coordinating across RECs to interlink these clusters at the interregional level, Africa can create interconnected value chains at the continental scale. This approach will strengthen intra-African trade, accelerate technological upgrading, enhance economic resilience, and ensure that integration is anchored in productive activities that deliver broadly shared benefits.

Ultimately, by prioritizing cluster-based RVC development, aligning infrastructure and institutional frameworks through RECs, and leveraging the AfCFTA as a mechanism for scaling, Africa can move from abstract aspirations toward a concrete, inclusive, and durable model of economic integration.

ORCID iD

Danilo Desiderio: 0009-0008-8819-0799

Eric Tevoedjre: 0000-0002-3497-8440

Grant Support Details

The present research did not receive any financial support to conduct the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/ or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy has been completely observed by the authors.

REFERENCES

1) Acharya, A. (2001) *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*. Routledge. https://fmc90.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/constructing-a-security-in-asean.pdf
2) AfCFTA Secretariat (2021) *AfCFTA private sector engagement strategy, 2022–2032*. African Continental Free Trade Area.
3) AfCFTA Secretariat and UNDP (2021) *Futures report 2021*. AfCFTA Secretariat and United Nations Development Programme. https://www.undp.org/africa/publications/futures-report-2021
4) AfDB (2022) *African economic outlook 2022*. African Development Bank, Abidjan. https://am.afdb.org/en/publications/african-economic-outlook-2022
5) AfreximBank (2024) *Regional value chains and Intra-African trade promotion*. Afreximbank Research and University of Development Studies, Ghana. https://media.afreximbank.com/afrexim/Regional-Value-Chains-and-Intra-African-Trade.pdf
6) ASEAN (2025) *ASEAN economic community blueprint 2025*. ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta. https://www.miti.gov.my/miti/resources/AEC_Blueprint_2025.pdf
7) AU (2022) *The first AU SME annual forum to realize Africa's industrialization in the context of the integrated market*. Information and Communication Directorate, Press Notice, African Union. https://au.int/sites/default/files/pressreleases/41976-pr-PR-_The_First_AU_SME_Annual_Forum.pdf
8) Ayuso, A. (2022) 'Differentiated integration in MERCOSUR: Risks and opportunities for the association with the European Union', *CIDOB Notes Internacionals*, 272. https://www.cidob.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/272_ANNA%20AYUSO_ANG.pdf
9) Babarinde, O. (2007) 'The European Union as a Model for the African Union: the limits of imitation', *Jean Monnet/Robert Schuman Paper Series*, 7(2). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255632923_The_European_Union_as_a_Model_for_the_African_Union_the_limits_of_imitation

10) Bach, C.D. (2016) *Regionalism in Africa: Genealogies, institutions and trans-state networks*. Routledge. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299406902_Regionalism_in_Africa_Genealogies_institutions_and_trans-state_networks_Abingdon_Routledge
11) Bednarski, L., Roscoe, S., Blome, C., *et al.* (2023) 'Geopolitical disruptions in global supply chains: A state-of-the-art literature review', *Production Planning & Control*, 36(4), pp. 536–562. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09537287.2023.2286283
12) Black, A., Edwards, L., Ismail, F., *et al.* (2020) 'The role of regional value chains in fostering regional integration in Southern Africa', *Development Southern Africa*, 38(1), pp. 39–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2020.1834354
13) Boutaleb, O. (2022) 'Regional integration: Can it bring more independence to Africa?', *Policy Center for The New South, Policy Brief*, 24/22. https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2022-04/PB_24-22_Boutaleb.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
14) Caichiolo, C.R. (2017) 'The Mercosur experience and theories of regional integration', *Contexto Internacional*, 39(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315732860_The_Mercosur_Experience_and_Theories_of_Regional_Integration
15) Chirisa, I.E.W., Mumba A. and Dirwai, S.O. (2014) 'A review of the evolution and trajectory of the African Union as an instrument of regional integration', *Springerplus*, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3940719/
16) Fosu, A.K. and Asongu, S.A. (2015) *Growth and Institutions in African Development*. African Governance and Development Institute (AGDI). Working Paper WP/15/033. https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/68656/1/MPRA_paper_68656.pdf
17) Geda, A. and Taye, H.K. (2008) 'Regional economic integration in Africa: A review of problems and prospects with a case study of COMESA', *Journal of African Economies*, 17(3), pp. 357-394. https://doi.org/10.1093/jae/ejm021
18) Gereffi, G. and Lee, J. (2016) 'Economic and social upgrading in global value chains and industrial clusters', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 133(1), pp. 25-38. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2373-7
19) Haas, E.B. (1958) *The uniting of Europe: Political, social, and economic forces, 1950–1957*. Stanford University Press. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/100books/file/EN-H-BW-0038-The-uniting-of-Europe.pdf https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/VVC_paper_final___.pdf
20) IRENA (2015) *Africa Power Sector Planning and Prospects for Renewable Energy*. International Renewable Energy Agency. https://www.ctc-n.org/sites/default/files/resources/irena_africa_power_sector_synthesis_2015_0.pdf
21) ITC (2022) *Made by Africa. Creating value through integration*. International Trade Centre, Geneva. https://www.intracen.org/file/madebyafricaenpdf
22) Jiboku, P.A. (2015) 'The Challenge of regional economic integration in Africa: Theory and reality', *Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review*, 3(4), a96. https://doi.org/10.4102/apsdpr.v3i4.96
23) Kiel Institute (1991) *Regional integration among developing countries: survey of past performance and agenda for future policy action*. Kiel Institute of World Economics, Joint UNDP/World Bank Trade Expansion Program. Occasional Paper 7. 22143. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/191201468780314985/pdf/multi0page.pdf
24) Leshoele, M. (2020) 'AfCFTA and regional integration in Africa: Is African Union Government a dream deferred or denied?', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 41(1), pp. 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1795091
25) Lwesya, F. (2022) 'Integration into regional or global value chains and economic upgrading prospects: an analysis of the East African Community (EAC) bloc', *Future Business Journal*, 8, 33. https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-022-00141-9
26) Manso, R.C.C. and Hermida, C. (2025) 'Global value chains, technological sophistication and economic complexity: panel data for 58 economies from 2006 to 2015', *Economia e Sociedade, Campinas, Unicamp. IE*, 34(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388214563_Global_value_chains_technological_sophistication_and_economic_complexity_panel_data_for_58_economies_from_2006_to_2015
27) Mathieson, C. (2016) *Political economy of regional integration in Africa: The East African Community (EAC) report*. European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM). https://ecdpm.org/application/files/9116/5546/8874/ECDPM-2016-Political-Economy-Regional-Integration-Africa-EAC-Report.pdf
28) Metz, S. (2024) *Morocco's automotive industry shifts gears to prep for electric vehicle era*. Associated Press News (APN). https://apnews.com/article/morocco-automobile-industry-electric-vehicles-2981a049578c411b95b525752d243f93
29) Mold, A. (2022) 'The economic significance of intra-African trade—getting the narrative right', *Brookings Global Working Paper*, 44. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Economic-significance_of_intra-African_trade.pdf
30) Moravcsik, A. (2005) 'The European constitutional compromise and the neofunctionalist legacy', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 12(2), pp. 349–386. https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/haas.pdf
31) Nare, B. and Alhassan, A.L. (2024) 'Regional trade integration and regional value chains in Africa. Implications for the Africa Continental Free Trade Area Agreement', *Afreximbank Policy Research Working Paper Series*, APRWPS/2024/03. https://media.afreximbank.com/afrexim/APRWPS202403_Regional-Trade-Integration-and-Regional-Value-Chains-in-Africa-3.pdf .
32) Osuma, G., Ayinde, A. and Ntokozo, N. (2024) 'Evaluating the impact of systemic corruption and political risk on foreign direct investment inflows in Nigeria: an analysis of key determinants', *Discover Sustainability*, 5, 432. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s43621-024-00676-7
33) Pakinkugbe, O.D. (2021) 'A Critical appraisal of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement'. In: *International Economic Law from a (South) African Perspective*; Kugler, K. and Sucker, F. South Africa: JUTA Law. https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1604&context=scholarly_works
34) Perroux, F. (1955) 'Note sur la notion de "pôle de croissance"', *Économie appliquée*, 8(1–2), pp. 307-320. https://doi.org/10.3406/ecoap.1955.2522
35) Prachi, A., Black, A., Lemma, A., *et al.* (2022) *The African Continental Free Trade Area and the automotive value chain*. Overseas Development Institute.
36) Said, J. (2022) *The key to AfCFTA's success is industrial policy, not trade policy*. African Newspage. https://www.africannewspage.net/2022/10/op-ed-the-key-to-afcfta-success-is-industrial-policy-not-trade-policy-by-jonathan-said/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
37) The Jakarta Post (2023) *Private sector key to realizing ASEAN economic integration front row*. The Jakarta Post. https://www.thejakartapost.com/front-row/2023/08/09/private-sector-key-to-realizing-asean-economic-integration.html
38) Tinta, A.A., Sarpong, D.B., Ouedraogo, I.M., *et al.* (2018) 'The effect of integration, global value chains and international trade on economic growth and food security in ECOWAS', *Cogent Food & Agriculture*, 4(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311932.2018.1465327
39) UNCTAD (2021) *Reaping the potential benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area for inclusive growth*. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Geneva. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aldcafrica2021_en.pdf
40) UNECA (2015a) *Industrializing through Trade: Economic report on Africa*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/796369?ln=en&v=pdf
41) UNECA (2015b) *Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire chart pathways to develop cross-border agricultural value chains and a common agro-park*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, press notice. https://www.uneca.org/stories/ghana-and-côte-d'ivoire-chart-pathways-to-develop-cross-border-agricultural-value-chains-and
42) UNECA (2016) *Economic Report on Africa 2016: Greening Africa's industrialization*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa. https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/fullpublicationfiles/era-2016_eng_rev6may.pdf
43) UNECA (2017) *Assessing regional integration in Africa VIII: Bringing the continental free trade area about*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa. https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/aria8_eng_fin.pdf

44) UNECA (2020) *Economic report on Africa 2020: Innovative finance for private sector development in Africa*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa. https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/fullpublicationfiles/ERA_2020_mobile_20201213.pdf
45) UNECA (2022) *The African continental free trade area and demand for transport infrastructure and services*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Addis Ababa. https://repository.uneca.org/entities/publication/bc2fc297-54a6-4bd6-9be8-03c2d61115f8
46) UNECA (2025) *Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire chart pathways to develop cross-border agricultural value chains and a common Agro-park*. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, press notice. https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/stories/ghana-and-cote-divoire-chart-pathways-develop-cross-border-agricultural-value-chains-and
47) Warlouzet, L. (2023) 'Competition versus planning: A battle that shaped European integration'. In: *The Cambridge history of the European Union*; Segers, M. and Hecke, S.V. Cambridge University Press. https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-history-of-the-european-union/competition-versus-planning-a-battle-that-shaped-european-integration/72A9B52979B643EC2BF3EEF8109F7EB8
48) WEF (2023) *AfCFTA: A new era for global business and investment in Africa. Insight report*. World Economic Forum, Geneva, Switzerland. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Friends_of_the_Africa_Continental_Free_Trade_Area_2023.pdf

Annexure I: Comparative table of African Regional Economic Communities (RECs).

REC	Year of Establishment	Predecessor	Governing Treaty	AU-recognized REC?	Member States	Main Objectives
PRE-ABUJA RECS						
SACU	1910	None	SACU Agreement	NO	Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa	Customs union, common external tariff, revenue sharing mechanism
Conseil de l'Entente	1959	None	Constitutive Act	NO	Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger (Togo joined in 1966)	Sub-regional solidarity and economic cooperation.
Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC)	1964	None	Fort-Lamy (N'Djamena) Convention	NO	Cameroon (1964), Chad (1964), Niger (1964), Nigeria (1964), Central African Republic (1996) Libya (2008). The Congo Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and Sudan are observers.	Sustainable and equitable management of Lake Chad and other shared water resources, the preservation of ecosystems, the promotion of integrating and preserving of peace and transboundary security in the Lake Chad Basin
ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States)	1983	Union Douanière et Économique de l'Afrique Centrale-UDEAC (1964)[18]	ECCAS Treaty	YES	Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Congo (Rep.), DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, São Tomé & Príncipe, Rwanda	Regional economic integration, peace and security, common market
EAC (East African Community)	1967 (revived 2000)	East African Common Services Organization (EACSO, 1961), and previously, East African High Commission (1948)	EAC Treaty	YES	Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, DRC (observer)	Customs union, common market, monetary union, eventual political federation
Liptako-Gourma Authority	1970	None	Memorandum of Understanding establishing the Liptako-Gourma Integrated Development Authority (replaced in 2017 by a Treaty)	NO		Promote a regional framework to enhance and develop mining, energy, hydraulic, agricultural, pastoral, and fisheries resources in the Liptako Gourma area. Enhance security cooperation between its member states, to prevent radicalisation, and to address intra- and extra-community conflicts.
Organization for the Development of the Senegal River/ Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal	1972	Mission for the Development of the Senegal River (1959)/ Mission d'Aménagement du Fleuve Sénégal, followed by the establishment of the Integrated Program for the Development of the Resources of the Senegal River Basin	Nouakchott Convention establishing the Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal	NO	Senegal, Mauritania, Mali	Economic development of the Senegal River: Achieve food self-sufficiency. Secure and improve incomes of populations. Preserve ecosystem balance in the basin. Reduce vulnerability of member states' economies to climate variability and

(OMVS)		(1963)/Programme Intégré de Mise en Valeur des Ressources du Bassin du Fleuve Sénégal and the Organization of the States bordering of the Senegal River/Organisation des États riverains du fleuve Sénégal (1968)				external shocks.
CILSS (Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel/Comité permanent inter-États de lutte contre la sécheresse dans le Sahel)	1973	None. CILSS was created on September 12, 1973 in response to the devastating Sahel droughts of the early 1970s	Convention Establishing a Permanent Inter-State Drought Control Committee For The Sahel	NO	Burkina Faso; Cape Verde; Chad Côte d'Ivoire; Gambia; Guinea Guinea-Bissau; Mali; Mauritania; Niger; Senegal; Togo; Benin (joined later)	Coordinate efforts among Sahelian countries to combat drought, ensure food security, and promote sustainable development in the face of environmental challenges.
Mano River Union (MRU)	1973	None	Treaty of Freetown		Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea (joined in 1980), Côte d'Ivoire (joined in 2008)	Promote economic integration and peace among the basin countries of the Mano River, which flows along the Liberia–Sierra Leone border
ECOWAS	1975	None	Treaty of Lagos	YES	Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo *(Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger withdrew in 2025)*	Economic integration, free movement, conflict resolution, regional development
CEPGL (*Communauté Économique des Pays des Grands Lacs*/Economic Community of the Great Lakes Countries)	1976	None	Gisengy Agreement	NO	Burundi, DRC, Rwanda	To ensure state and population security, promote shared development initiatives, and strengthen trade and mobility of goods and people. Member states also aim to deepen cooperation across key sectors: social, economic, scientific, cultural, political, military, and technical, with particular focus on justice, customs, health, energy, transport, and telecommunications
COMESA	Established in 1981 as Preferential Trade Area of for Eastern and Southern Africa and evolved in a free trade area in 1994 (COMESA)	Preferential Trade Area of for Eastern and Southern Africa (1981)	COMESA Treaty	YES	21 members incl. Burundi, Comoros, DRC, Egypt, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe	Free trade area, customs union, investment promotion, regional integration
SADC	Established in 1980 as Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) and rebranded SADC in 1992	SADCC (1980)	SADC Treaty	YES	Angola, Botswana, Comoros, DRC, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe	Economic growth, poverty eradication, regional peace, infrastructure

Indian Ocean Commission (IOC)	1982	None	Port Louis Declaration (1982), replaced in 1984 by the Victoria Agreement	NO	Comoros, Réunion and Mayotte (France), Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles	Promote sustainable development; enhance maritime cooperation and security; foster regional integration and cooperation in trade, environment, and social development; coordinate responses to shared challenges like natural disasters and climate change
IGAD	Established in 1986 as Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) and rebranded IGAD in 1996	IGADD (1986) was established by countries in the Horn of Africa on the model of the CILSS to coordinate regional responses to the recurring and severe challenges of drought, desertification, and food insecurity that had plagued the region throughout the 1970s and 1980s.	IGAD Agreement	YES	Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda	Drought resilience, food security, regional development, peace and security
AMU / UMA	1989	In 1964, the Economic Ministers of Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia established the *Conseil Permanent Consultatif du Maghreb* (CPCM) in Tunis to coordinate development plans and regional trade. This initiative was revived in 1988 at the first Maghreb summit, where the same four countries, joined by Mauritania, agreed to pursue economic integration. The meeting led to the creation of the Maghreb High Commission and several specialized committees under the Zeralda Declaration to advance regional unity.	Treaty of Marrakech	YES	Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia	Economic and political unity in the Maghreb, free movement of goods and people
POST-ABUJA RECS						
CEN-SAD	1998	None	CEN-SAD Treaty	YES	Central AfricanRepublic, Eritrea, Nigeria, Djibouti, The Gambia, Senegal, Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, Tunisia, Benin, Togo, Côte d'ivoire, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Comoros, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania. Kenya, Liberia, São Tomé and Principe, and Cabo Verde signed the 1998 Treaty but did not sign the revised CEN–SAD Treaty (2013) and are no longer members	Establish free trade area, economic integration in the Sahel-Saharan zone
WAEMU / UEMOA	1994	BCEAO-led cooperation	WAEMU Treaty	NO	Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo	Monetary union (CFA Franc), economic convergence, fiscal harmonization
CEMAC	1994	Union Douanière et Économique de l'Afrique Centrale-UDEAC (1964)	CEMAC Treaty	NO	Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon	Monetary union (CFA Franc), customs union, economic cooperation

Gulf of Guinea Commission	2001	None	Constitutive Act of GGC	NO	Angola, Cameroon, Congo Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, São Tomé and Principe	Create the conditions of mutual confidence, peace, and security conducive to the harmonious development of its member states and promote a coordinated approach among its members in the exploitation of the natural resources of the Gulf of Guinea.
G5 Sahel	2014	None	Convention on the G5 Sahel creation	NO	Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger	Ensure conditions for development and security within member countries; provide a strategic framework for coordinated action; integrate development and security efforts; promote democracy and good governance through mutually beneficial regional and international cooperation; and foster inclusive and sustainable regional development.
Alliance of Sahel States (AES), also known as the Confederation of Sahel States	2023	None	Liptako-Gourma Charter	NO	Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	Coordinate military efforts and counterterrorism, promote political and economic unity through shared initiatives (passport), reduce reliance on Western powers (notably France). AES has plans for a common currency, central bank, and joint infrastructure projects.

[18]UDEAC was established in 1964 by Cameroon, Chad, Gabon, the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo, which all obtained independence from France in 1960. Equatorial Guinea joined in January 1984. Its purpose was to promote economic integration and form a customs union among Central African countries. In 1994, UDEAC was succeeded by CEMAC, which expanded its mandate to include deeper economic and monetary integration, including a shared currency (the CFA franc) and harmonized fiscal and monetary policies. UDEAC also served as a precursor to ECCAS, which was established in 1983 to create a broader regional framework that included both UDEAC members and other Central African countries not part of UDEAC, such as Angola, Burundi, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire). ECCAS aimed to foster wider cooperation in economic, social, political, and security domains, extending beyond the narrower trade and customs focus of UDEAC.