

Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Ensuring Equity, Peace, Prosperity and Environmental Protection

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Table of Contents	
Abstract.....	3
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Promises and Pitfalls	6
3.0 Strengthening Trade for Sustainable Development in Africa	11
4.0 Conclusion	13
References	14

Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Ensuring Equity, Peace, Prosperity and Environmental Protection

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Abstract

This paper critically discusses how trade can be effectively harnessed in Africa for Sustainable Development. The paper argues that trade can be a powerful engine in the quest towards Sustainable Development. It posits that Africa has immense potential to utilise trade towards Sustainable Development including through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). However, despite its benefits, the paper notes that trade fuels several economic, social and environmental challenges in Africa which undermines the continent's development efforts. It examines some of the negative impacts of trade in Africa. In light of these concerns, the paper explores how trade can be effectively harnessed to spur Sustainable Development in Africa by ensuring equity, peace, prosperity and environmental protection.

1.0 Introduction

Trade refers to the voluntary exchange involving two or more parties in need of each other's resources (goods and services)¹. Trade therefore entails the voluntary exchange of goods and services. Trade can occur at various levels including between individuals, businesses, or nations, and it can take many different forms, such as direct bartering, cash transactions, and electronic payments². Trade has been identified as a powerful engine that can unlock Sustainable Development by creating jobs, reducing poverty and

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¹ What is 'Trade'. Available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/definition/trade?from=mdr> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

² Introduction to Trade: Trade Definition and Importance., Available at <https://financialcrimeacademy.org/introduction-to-trade/> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Ensuring Equity, Peace, Prosperity and Environmental Protection

increasing economic opportunities for individuals, businesses and nations³. It has been correctly noted that there are positive links between a country's trade policies and its socio-economic development⁴. For example, properly designed, open and well-functioning trade policies especially those supporting global and regional trade can enhance economic growth and reduce poverty in a country⁵. Effective trade policies and environments can foster Sustainable Development by enhancing competition, supporting economies of scale, attracting foreign investments, promoting equal access to resources and ensuring innovation and technological progress⁶.

The role of trade as an engine of growth is acknowledged under the United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁷. The Agenda recognizes international trade as tool for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction, and an important means of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁸. It has been argued that trade can help the global community achieve the SDGs through investments in food security, generating higher living standards towards reducing poverty, promoting decent employment opportunities for all, fostering technology transfer including access to low-carbon

³ World Bank Group., 'Trade' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

⁴ Trade and Economic Development- Understanding the Relationship., Available at <https://www.kommerskollegium.se/en/development-and-sustainability/trade-and-economic-development/> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia., 'Trade and Sustainable Development' Available at <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Session%201%20Trade%20and%20sustainable%20development%20v.2.pdf> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

⁷ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

⁸ Ibid

technologies to confront climate change, and ensuring availability of basic services such as health, education, water, sanitation and energy⁹.

Despite its role on fostering Sustainable Development, trade also raises several economic, social and environmental concerns including imbalances between developed and developing countries, high costs which negatively impact the poor, vulnerable and small businesses, biodiversity loss, land use changes and climate change¹⁰. Addressing these challenges is key in strengthening the role of trade in the quest towards Sustainable Development.

This paper critically discusses how trade can be effectively harnessed in Africa for Sustainable Development. The paper argues that trade can be a powerful engine in the quest towards Sustainable Development. It posits that Africa has immense potential to utilise trade towards Sustainable Development including through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). However, despite its benefits, the paper notes that trade fuels several economic, social and environmental challenges in Africa which undermines the continent's development efforts. It examines some of the negative impacts of trade in Africa. In light of these concerns, the paper explores how trade can be effectively harnessed to spur Sustainable Development in Africa by ensuring equity, peace, prosperity and environmental protection.

⁹ Galmés, G.V., 'Trade as an enabler of sustainable development and poverty eradication,' in United Nations, *The Road from Rio+20: Towards Sustainable Development Goals*, Issue 4, September 2014, p. 10. UNCTAD/DITC/TED/2014/1 Available at http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/ditcted2014d1_en.pdf (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹⁰ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia., 'Trade and Sustainable Development' Op Cit

2.0 Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Promises and Pitfalls

Trade plays an important role in fostering Sustainable Development in Africa and the rest of the Global South. The World Trade Organization (WTO), notes that international trade accounts for over 50 per cent of low-income countries' Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and is an important source of income for both the private and public sectors in developing countries¹¹. Trade is unlocking socio-economic development in Africa and the Global South by increasing the number and quality of jobs, stimulating economic growth, and driving productivity increases¹².

It has been argued that for Africa, intra-African trade holds immense potential for sustained economic growth, regional integration and development¹³. For example, intra-African trade can help Africa reduce vulnerability to global shocks, achieve economic diversification, enhance export competitiveness and create employment opportunities¹⁴. For Africa, regional trade is more resilient than trade with other continents since manufactured goods are less susceptible to price shocks which affect primary products that constitute over 50 percent of trade between Africa and other regions¹⁵. By enhancing intra-African trade, Africa can promote sustained and inclusive economic growth thereby creating more decent job opportunities for its citizens, enhancing industrialization and

¹¹ World Trade Organization., 'The WTO's Contribution to Achieving the SDGs.' Available at https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/coher_e/sdgs_e/wtoachsds_e.htm (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹² World Bank Group., 'The Role of Trade in Ending Poverty' Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/the-role-of-trade-in-ending-poverty> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹³ African Development Bank Group., 'Intra-African Trade is Key to Sustainable Development – African Economic Outlook.' Available at <https://www.afdb.org/fr/news-and-events/intra-african-trade-is-key-to-sustainable-development-african-economic-outlook-17022> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹⁴ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development., 'Intra-African Trade: Unlocking Private Sector Dynamism.' Available at https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/tdb60d4_en.pdf (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹⁵ African Development Bank Group., 'Intra-African Trade is Key to Sustainable Development – African Economic Outlook.' Op Cit

innovation, improving food security by stabilizing food prices and building more resilient socio-economic structures¹⁶.

African Union's *Agenda 2063*¹⁷ recognises the role of trade in unlocking Sustainable Development in Africa. Agenda 2063 notes that Africa is still to harness the full benefits that accrue from trading with itself, or with the rest of the world, resulting in a share of global trade that is not commensurate with its population or resource endowments¹⁸. It seeks to boost intra-African trade including through the creation of a Continental Free Trade Area in order to strengthen trade as a tool for Sustainable Development in Africa¹⁹. In addition, the *Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade*²⁰ recognises that trade is an important engine of economic growth and development both globally and in Africa. However, despite the role of trade as an engine for Sustainable Development, the Action Plan notes that trade has not served its purpose as an effective tool for the achievement of rapid and sustainable economic growth and development in Africa²¹. The Action Plan further notes that due to its failure to harness trade for Sustainable Development, Africa remains the most aid-dependent continent of the world, unable to eliminate poverty through trade²². According to the Action Plan, boosting intra-African trade and deepening regional market integration constitute a necessary response to the challenges

¹⁶ Mene. W., 'Intra-African trade and its potential to accelerate progress toward the SDGs' Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/intra-african-trade-and-its-potential-to-accelerate-progress-toward-the-sdgs/> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹⁷ African Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/33126-doc-framework_document_book.pdf (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ African Union., 'Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/pressreleases/26498-pr-action_plan_for_boosting_intra-african_trade_f-english.pdf (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

facing Africa in the multilateral trading system and the global economy towards harnessing trade as an instrument for Sustainable Development²³.

Strengthening trade including through boosting intra-African trade is therefore key in fostering Sustainable Development in Africa. The continent has immense potential to utilise trade as pathway towards sustainability. For example, with its abundant natural resources including arable land, forests, wildlife, minerals and the Blue Economy, Africa is well-positioned to become a leader in green industrialization by putting in place effective trade policies and instruments²⁴. Further, Africa's vast renewable energy potential including the abundance of wind and solar energy provides opportunities to harness trade for low-carbon and climate-positive growth²⁵. In addition, due to the abundance of green minerals in Africa including lithium, cobalt, nickel, rare earth elements and platinum group metals, Africa has the opportunity to develop green regional value chains that would foster industrialization and jobs towards a more sustainable and equitable future²⁶.

Establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) also provides opportunities to harness trade for Sustainable Development in Africa. The *Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*²⁷ creates AfCFTA whose objectives include to create a single market for goods, services, facilitated by movement of persons in order to deepen the economic integration of Africa²⁸; to create a liberalised market for

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Greening Africa's Future: Sustainable Trade and Green Industrialisation., Available at <https://tessforum.org/latest/greening-africas-future-sustainable-trade-and-green-industrialisation> (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Africa's Green Mineral Strategy., Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44539-doc-AGMS_Final_doc.pdf (Accessed on 28/10/2025)

²⁷ African Union., 'Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36437-treaty-consolidated_text_on_cfta_-_en.pdf (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

²⁸ Ibid

goods and services through successive rounds of negotiations²⁹; to contribute to the movement of capital and natural persons and facilitate investments building on the initiatives and developments in the State Parties and Regional Economic Communities³⁰; to enhance the competitiveness of the economies of state parties within the continent and the global market³¹; to promote industrial development in Africa through diversification and regional value chain development, agricultural development and food security³²; and to resolve the challenges of multiple and overlapping memberships and expedite the regional and continental integration processes in Africa³³. AfCFTA seeks to achieve the goals and aspirations of African Union's *Agenda 2063*³⁴ for a continental market with the free movement of persons, capital, goods and services, which are crucial for deepening economic integration, and promoting agricultural development, food security, industrialisation and structural economic transformation in Africa³⁵.

The creation of AfCFTA is a crucial step towards harnessing trade for Sustainable Development in Africa. AfCFTA is appropriately designed to deepen regional integration, foster trade and investment, enhance the mobility of capital and labour, support industrialization, and the development of a dynamic services sector in Africa³⁶. It has been argued that AfCFTA provides Africa with a renewed opportunity to steer its economic relations away from a reliance on external donors, foreign creditors and excessive commodity dependence towards a new economic era focused on self-reliance,

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Africa Union., 'Agenda 2063: The Africa we Want.' Op Cit

³⁵ African Union., 'Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.' Op Cit

³⁶ United Nations., 'Africa's Free Trade on Track, More Efforts Needed.' Available at [https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2023/africa%E2%80%99s-free-trade-track-moreefforts-needed#:~:text=lies%20ahead%2C%20though,-Presently%2C%20intra%20Africa%20trade%20stands%20low%20at%20just%2014.4%25%20of%20day\)%2C%20according%20to%20UNCTAD](https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2023/africa%E2%80%99s-free-trade-track-moreefforts-needed#:~:text=lies%20ahead%2C%20though,-Presently%2C%20intra%20Africa%20trade%20stands%20low%20at%20just%2014.4%25%20of%20day)%2C%20according%20to%20UNCTAD) (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

cooperation, deeper regional integration and higher levels of intra-African trade³⁷. AfCFTA creates the world's largest free trade areas bringing together 55 countries which form the African Union together with 8 Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to enable the free flow of goods and services across the continent and boost the trading position of Africa in the global market³⁸. According to the African Union, AfCFTA is properly designed to accelerate intra-African trade and boost Africa's trading position in the global market through a common voice and policy space in international trade negotiations³⁹. If well implemented, AfCFTA has the ability to promote trade, industrialisation, investments, food security, technology development and transfer, climate action, and job creation therefore enhancing the development and competitiveness of Africa in the global stage⁴⁰. Implementing AfCFTA is therefore key towards harnessing trade for Sustainable Development in Africa.

From the foregoing, it is evident that if well harnessed, trade can be a powerful tool towards achieving Sustainable Development in Africa. However, trade also fuels several economic, social and environmental concerns in Africa. For example, dependence on external markets undermines Africa's voice in global trade negotiations raising equity concerns⁴¹. In addition, vulnerable groups including women, the youth and small businesses face several barriers such as limited access to finance, trade information and markets raising trade inequalities in Africa⁴². Further, socio-economic conflicts in the

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ East African Community., 'African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement' Available at <https://www.eac.int/trade/international-trade/trade-agreements/african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-agreement> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

³⁹ African Union., 'The African Continental Free Trade Area' Available at <https://au.int/en/african-continental-free-trade-area> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁴⁰ East African Community., 'African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)' Op Cit

⁴¹ African Union., 'The African Continental Free Trade Area' Op Cit

⁴² Chelangat. F., 'Boosting Trade in Africa: Inclusion of Marginalized Trade Actors in Development Financing' Available at <https://www.afronomicslaw.org/category/analysis/boosting-trade-africa-inclusion-marginalized-trade-actors-development-financing#:~:text=To%20ensure%20that%20trade%20genuinely,in%20trade%20finance%20and%20development.> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

continent and hostile regulatory actions fuel intra-African trade wars undermining Africa's capacity to harness trade for Sustainable Development⁴³. Trade can also undermine environmental sustainability. For instance, due to heavy reliance on natural resources, high energy consumption, and transportation over long distances, trade can fuel environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions from energy and transport activities⁴⁴. It is imperative to address these challenges in order to effectively harness trade for Sustainable Development in Africa.

3.0 Strengthening Trade for Sustainable Development in Africa

Trade is a powerful tool that can accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development in Africa. With the continent's immense trade potential, it is imperative to harness benefits and address challenges in order to spur Sustainable Development. This requires Africa to accelerate the implementation of AfCFTA. It has been argued that the successful implementation of AfCFTA will lead to the creation of more decent jobs, improved welfare and better quality of life for all citizenry in Africa for equity, prosperity and Sustainable Development⁴⁵. It is also vital to strengthen Africa's voice in global trade negotiations⁴⁶. Boosting Africa's voice and representation in global trade negotiations can enhance the role of trade in fostering Sustainable Development in Africa including through equitable trade rules, policies and costs⁴⁷. Further, there is in need to ensure the

⁴³ Akinkugbe. O., & Amah. G., 'A Reflection on African Trade and Investment Wars in Context' Available at <https://www.afronomicslaw.org/category/analysis/reflection-african-trade-and-investment-wars-context> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁴⁴ Mpuure. D et al., 'The environmental impact of international trade in Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the role of policy and institutions for environmental sustainability' *Research in Globalization.*, Volume 9, December 2024

⁴⁵ United Nations., 'AU Summit 2023: Powering Trade through AfCFTA' Available at <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/february-2023/au-summit-2023-powering-trade-through-afcfta> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁴⁶ African Union., 'The African Continental Free Trade Area' Op Cit

⁴⁷ Amare. T., 'Africa must strengthen continental unity to boost its global influence' Available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/09/africa-must-strengthen-continental-unity-boost-its-global-influence> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups including Africa's women, youth and small businesses in intra-African trade towards equity and inclusivity ensuring that no one is left behind in the quest towards the continent's development⁴⁸.

Harnessing trade for Sustainable Development in Africa also involves fostering peace⁴⁹. Conflicts and wars can undermine trade by preventing the free movement of goods and services particularly in cross-border areas⁵⁰. Further, intra-African trade and investment wars affect the flow of goods, capital and investments in the continent thus hindering the growth of trade in the continent⁵¹. Fostering peace by addressing conflicts and wars including intra-African trade wars is therefore key in boosting intra-African trade for Sustainable Development in Africa.

It is also important to ensure environmental protection in order to effectively harness trade for Sustainable Development in Africa. This can be achieved by greening intra-African and international trade in the continent⁵². According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), greening trade serves as a non-technical entry point for actors keen to navigate the environment-trade policy conversation and promote sustainable trade and the overall Sustainable Development agenda⁵³. This can be

⁴⁸ Kenya Revenue Authority., 'The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)' Available at https://www.google.com/search?q=AfCFTA&oq=A&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUqDggAEEUYIxc7GIAEGloFMg4IABBFgCcYOxiABBiKBTIGCAEQRRg7MgYIAhBFGDsyBggDEEUYPDIGCAQRRg8MgYIBRBFGDwyBggGEEUYPDIGCAcQRRg80gEHOTk2ajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8 (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁴⁹ United Nations., 'UNECA: Intra-regional trade can reduce conflicts in Africa' Available at <https://africarenewal.un.org/en/magazine/uneca-intra-regional-trade-can-reduce-conflicts-africa#:~:text=Trading%20is%20a%20driver%20for,27%20October%20in%20Tangier%2C%20Morocco.> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Akinkugbe. O., & Amarh. G., 'A Reflection on African Trade and Investment Wars in Context' Op Cit

⁵² World Trade Organization., 'Harnessing Trade for Sustainable Development and a Green Economy' Available at https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/publications_e/brochure_rio_20_e.pdf (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁵³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Greening International Trade' Available at <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/greening-international-trade> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

achieved through approaches such as reducing carbon emissions from transportation across borders, ensuring energy efficiency in trade activities, promoting international and intra-African trade and investment in green sectors including renewable energy, and facilitating green technology development and transfer in order to tackle environmental threats including climate change⁵⁴.

Through the foregoing, it is possible to effectively harness trade for Sustainable Development in Africa.

4.0 Conclusion

Africa has immense opportunities to strengthen trade for Sustainable Development including through boosting intra-African trade under AfCFTA. However, in light of challenges such as exclusion of vulnerable groups including women, the youth and small businesses, intra-African trade and investment wars, lack of a strong African voice in global trade negotiations and environmental sustainability concerns, it is imperative to reorganize trade in Africa in order to ensure Sustainable Development⁵⁵. Ensuring equity, peace, prosperity and environmental protection is therefore vital in maximising benefits and tackling threats towards strengthening trade for Sustainable Development in Africa.

⁵⁴ United Nations Economic Commission for Africa., 'Africa Should Leverage the AfCFTA to Promote Green Transition' Available at <https://www.uneca.org/stories/africa-should-leverage-the-afcfta-to-promote-green-transition> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁵⁵ United Nations., 'Africa's Free Trade on Track, More Efforts Needed.' Op Cit

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Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Ensuring Equity, Peace, Prosperity and Environmental Protection

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Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Ensuring Equity, Peace, Prosperity and Environmental Protection

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Trade and Sustainable Development in Africa: Ensuring Equity, Peace, Prosperity and Environmental Protection