
Perspectives on Engagement of Non-State-Actors in Regional Integration in SADC Region's AfCFTA Context

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ABSTRACT: The role of Non-State Actors (NSAs) in the SADC regional integration was approved by the Council of Ministers in 2022. The Council gave the NSAs the mandate to participate in the regional integration agenda and contribute into SADC policy development, roll out, monitoring and evaluation. Ironically, there are no clear systematic mechanisms providing for NSAs' engagement within the SADC structures and processes despite existence of SADC institutions. The coming in of the AfCFTA agreement sought to create a single African market thereby creating opportunities for NSAs. To date no noticeable increase in Africa intra-trade has been recorded. The study therefore, examines the perspectives on engagement of Non-State-Actors in the context of Regional Integration focusing on SADC region. The findings show that state actors are not involving non-state actors as they discuss regional economic integration agreements. The researcher recommends that valuable additions to regional economic integration and strengthening should be premised on an environment where policies and regulations are formulated from a consultative and inclusivity of NSAs. It is concluded that, when NSAs explore regional markets or create regional value chains, they facilitate regional economic integration from the bottom-up approach through their activities.

KEYWORDS: Regional Integration, Non-State-Actors, Southern Africa Development Community, Africa Continental Free Trade Area

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the continental inter-regional economic cooperation and integration efforts have been ongoing for several decades across the globe, Africa's regional integration ambitions influenced the formulation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1963. The Africa's political leadership who in the context of this study are state actors pledged the desire to foster unity and peace across the continent. The perceived inter-regional organisation vision was underpinned on the realisation that in order to achieve economic growth and or peace on the African continent, state actors would have to work together. Theory and experience over the years have proved that regional cooperation can positively influence development across member states and integrated regions.

Regional integration initiatives in Africa include mainly the initiatives such as the African Union (AU), Southern African Development Community (SADC) and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) which are regarded as the three key regional and continental institutions under the Sub-Sahara region. The tripartite coordinated cooperation between SADC, the East African Community (EAC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

The past decades the African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have been observed to be excluding the involvement of Non State Actors (NSAs) and only accommodating the interest of heads of state and diplomats. This paper argues that this should not be the case and motivated the researcher to examine the perspective of non-state actors in a world of nation-states in Regional Economic Integration (REI) in the context of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The researcher theoretically discusses the appropriate approaches that can address the interplay between business activities and regional politics to promote beneficial Regional Integration (RI) dividends.

11. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Globally, RECs were established mainly to facilitate regional economic integration between member states through the wider economic community. Initially, the public bureaucrats were left out in pre-and post-events of integration agenda. Similarly, in the early formative days of SADC, NSAs play essentially no role during the negotiation and policymaking stages. The researcher hold the view that NSAs' roles were recognised only during the implementation and operationalisation phase. Even under the COMESA community, the presence of the NSAs was not afforded credible channel to participate in the preliminary decision-making processes. Additionally, the three negotiation phases of AfCFTA also reflect minimum participation from NSAs. AfCFTA operates in eleven of the Southern Africa countries. These are, Angola, Botswana, DRC, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia,

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Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe. OSISA promotes open society values by working towards building vibrant and tolerant democracies across the region through our various thematic and country programmes. It is therefore important to understand the key words in this study as follows:-

Non-State Actors

According to different narratives on international politics, non-state actors are groups not affiliated with, directed by, or funded by any sovereign government. NSAs exercise significant control over themselves within the borders of nation states or across. The following provides some examples of the key NSAs across the world:-

Large national or multinational corporations

These are corporations that are legally authorized to act as single artificial person. Typical examples are The Coca-Cola Company, McDonald's, General Motors, Adidas, Samsung, Nestlé, and Toyota. These corporations are very large businesses that operate transnationally.

Individual business Entrepreneurs

Examples of these are individuals such as Bill & Melinda Gates, Elton John AIDS Foundation etc. These individuals are also considered NSAs since they take their wealth to the extent of influencing national and international affairs.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

This class include international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) which are usually large non-profit organizations seeking to effect change in humanitarian, educational, ecological, healthcare, public policy, social, human rights, environmental, and other areas. Examples of NGOs are Greenpeace, Red Cross/Red Crescent, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and World Wildlife Fund. Goodwill ambassadors or humanitarian aid workers involved with International Non-governmental Organizations' overseas efforts, such as CARE and Doctors without Borders may also be considered non-state actors;

Private Sectors Businesses including Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)

The private sector is the part of the economy that is run by individuals and companies for profit and is not state controlled. Therefore, it encompasses all for-profit businesses that are not owned or operated by the government. The researcher therefore holds the view that, private sector is the segment of a national economy that is owned, controlled, and managed by private individuals or enterprises. The most obvious difference between state actors and non-state actors is that while state actors are the ruling governments of a country, non-state actors are the influential organizations or wealthy individuals having the potential to influence the activities of state actors, but are not directly allied to a particular country. The Non-State Actors under this study focuses the business community specifically the Private Sectors Businesses including SMEs. These parties were considered the watchdogs and implementers of the government policies and engagements. The researcher also expects the study to educate the Non-State Actors on the status of REI in the context of AfCFTA and SADC at a regional level.

Regional Integration

Regional Integration (RI) from the perspective of economists, politicians and business people is regarded as a concept that guaranteed an increase in the economies and wealth of individual or collective member states (Peters-Berries, 2010). Historical evidence such as the bureaucratic effort to facilitate political unification and expansion of capitalism point towards frustrations derived from the high hopes brought about by the initial prospects of RI. RI subsists when two or more neighboring nation-states agree to upgrade and co-operate through common institutions, and rules and work closely together to achieve peace, stability and wealth (McCormick, 1999). Generally, there are two aspects for regional integration which are economic and political. This study therefore focus on the economic aspect. Economic aspect focuses on the increase in trade opportunities, market access to other countries and providing insurance against the breakdown of multilateralism.

Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)

SADC is the predecessor of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) established in 1980. When SADCC started, its vision was mainly to become a coordination alliance and its main purpose was to coordinate development projects to lessen the economic hardships and dependence on the then apartheid South Africa (Dr. Tax, 2016).

In 1992, as the entire member states were liberated, SADCC saw it important to change its name to SADC, which transformed the regional bloc name from being a developer conference to a community (Dr. Tax, 2016). The name change was an effort to transform the Southern African Community more into a legal body and refocus its development agenda towards economic integration (Dr. Tax, 2016). The current SADC member states are Angola, Botswana, Union of Comoros, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe (www.sadc.int, 2021).

The focus of SADC from its inception was on addressing the causes of colonial political liberation in Southern Africa, and reduction of dependence on the apartheid South Africa (Dr. Tax, 2016). SADC passed the resolutions that bound member states to cooperate

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and leverage the strengths and resources endowment of each other. This study postulates that SADC focus is inclined to driving regional integration in economic, social and security cooperation within the Southern Africa region.

Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

AfCFTA refers to free trade area in Africa that is bringing together the fifty-five countries under the African Union (AU) membership and eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) including SADC. As of May 2022, there are 54 signatories, of which 43 (80%) have deposited their instruments of ratification. Additionally, one country (Somalia) completed its domestic ratification, but had not yet deposited their ratification with the depository by May 2020. The main focus of the AfCFTA is to create a single continental market with a population of about 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of approximately US\$ 3.4 trillion. The AfCFTA is one of the AU's projects under the Agenda 2063 (*The Africa We Want*). Agenda 2063 is the African Union's development strategy meant to transform the continent into a global economic powerhouse.

As part of its mandate, the AfCFTA is focused on elimination of trade barriers that in the past impeded the intra-Africa trade. In particular, its objective is to advance beneficiation and value addition production across all service sectors of the African economy. This from the researcher's point of view is expected to contribute to establishment of regional value chains in Africa, enabling. The study further argues that the honest implementation of the AfCFTA has the potential to foster industrialisation, job creation, and investment. This reasoning motivated the researcher's desire to examine the perspective of non-state actors in the context of AfCFTA mandate.

Non-State Actors and Regional Integration Context

Most scholarly studies read by the researcher on regional integration were biased towards a state-centric regional institutions approach which are more inclined to policy-driven trading arrangements. This inclination for a state-centric approach is not surprising. The researcher argues that, this inclination reflects government involvement in facilitating any form of regional cooperation. The study appreciates that government involvement is inevitable, as governments are key stakeholders in the negotiation process, signing and ratification of treaties, amongst other noticeable state actors' functions but the private sector are the key drivers of economies. The study further postulates that the state-centered elements of RECs is a failure by academics to amply explore and market the role NSAs in regional economic integration that promotes intra-regional trade.

111. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of NSAs in this study is limited to the formal private sector particularly (SMEs) as well as general private business community. To the knowledge of the researcher, mainstream discussions on African regional economic integration focus mainly on the role of the political leadership, bureaucrats and state institutions (in this study referred to as state-actors) in facilitating regional integration without reflecting on the potential contributions of the NSAs. This study postulates that while state-actors do facilitate conducive operating environment regional integration to strive, their approach if a top-down perspective. Contrary, NSAs have the greater potential to facilitate regional integration using a "bottom-up" approach which is considered more inclusive of all players involved in national economic growth. Unlike other studies of regional economic integration, this study makes two interconnected arguments:

- (a) NSAs are essential in promoting regional economic integration and intra-regional economic trade and should be given appropriate recognition and;
- (b) Within the context of AfCFTA within SADC bloc, the private sector, principally small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) and private business community are central to the success of regional economic integration.

IV. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

According to the World Economic Forum report, African nations currently trade more globally than with each other. Intra-African trade accounts for 17% of African exports, which is low compared to 59% for Asia and 68% for Europe, AfCFTA involvement came in targeting an increase in intra-Africa trade in goods. Its scope includes services, investment, intellectual property rights and competition policy, although these aspects are still under negotiation. To date no noticeable increase in Africa intra-trade has been recorded. The researcher argues that AfCFTA impartial recognition of non-state actors makes it impossible to scale up intra-Africa trade within the region. This study therefore examines the perspective of NSAs in a world of nation-states in Regional Economic Integration (REI) in the context of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to examine the perspective of non-state actors in a world of nation-states in Regional Economic Integration (REI) in the context of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The following are the specific objectives being to:-

- Examine the role of NSAs to drive REI agenda through AfCFTA concept;
- Investigate challenges faced by NSAs in their engagement with the AfCFTA and existing Regional Economic Integration

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(RECs)

- Investigate the extent in which NSAs are exploiting the REI opportunities within AfCFTA membership
- Recommend framework that brings together AfCFTA state actors and non-state actors

VI. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Elaborate the role of NSAs as a stakeholder to drive REI agenda through AfCFTA concept?
- Relate the key issues that inform the involvement and or non-involvement of NSAs in the REC activities?
- To what extent are NSAs fully exploiting the REI opportunities within AfCFTA membership?

VII. SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

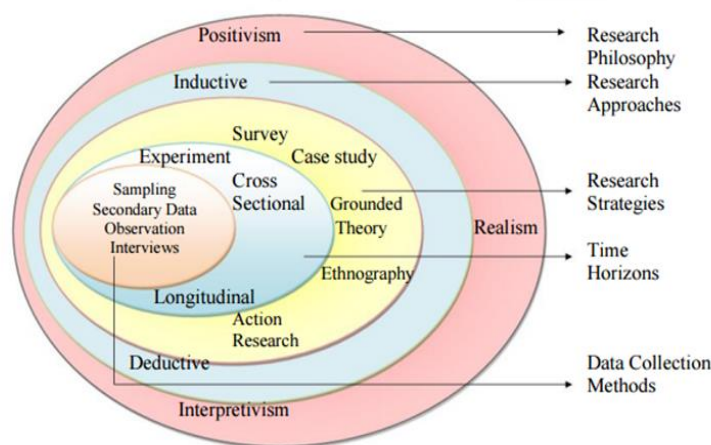
This research is premised on the examination the perspective of NSAs in a world of nation-states in Regional Economic Integration (REI) in the context of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The researcher is convinced that, the current involvement of NSAs is not reflecting the dictates and opportunities engraved in the AfCFTA concept. The conviction therefore, motivated the researcher's to examine the perspective of non-state actors in a world of nation-states in REI in the context of AfCFTA. Most importantly, the researcher endeavour to share the opportunities embodied in the AfCFTA concept and sell the capabilities the NSAs have that can promote REI at a larger scale.

The study findings are expected to inform all stakeholders on the potential constructive contributions of NSAs in driving the AfCFTA agenda, bridge the current working relation between state actors and non-state actors and subsequently promote the African regional economic cooperation agenda. The researcher at the end recommends the framework that brings together AfCFTA state actors and non-state actors not only from the researcher's experiential viewpoint and the academia's more empirical perspective but also from the hybrid context of the policymakers and captains of industry. The key stakeholders identified by this study are SADC Secretariat, GoZ (represented by relevant line ministries and departments), AfCFTA secretariat, non-state actors (represented by the SMEs).

VIII. METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by the research onion developed by Saunders et al, (2016) to achieve the design as illustrated in the Figure below.

Fig 1.1 Research Onion



Source: Mark Saunders, Philip Lewis and Adrian Thornhill, (2016)

The study adopted the qualitative design and deductive approach. The study analyzed content instead of numbers and figures. Qualitative research is exploratory and non-experimental (Saunders, 2012). The researcher sought to discover meaning, experiences and phenomena among the existing literature of regional integration. Data was generated from REI literature, content themes, and viewpoints collected from published journals, SADC and AfCFTA websites and reports (Schmidt, & Brown, 2019). The Case study research strategy focusing on an in-depth investigation of a single case (AfCFTA) or a small number of cases (SADC) was used. In the case of study strategy, information was explored from the analysis of publications of REI (Singleton & Straits, 2009).

The study analyzed secondary data and extracted themes for content analysis. The following selected strategic documents were analyzed for content: SADC Regional Integration Policy Processes Toolkit (RIPPT) (Southern Africa Trust, 2020), Status of

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Integration in the Southern African Development Community Report (SADC, 2019), the Impact of Non-State Actors on World Politics: A Challenge to Nation-States (Muhittin, 2003), Magnifying the Role of Non-State Actors in the Africa Continental Free Trade Area (African Union, 2021), Non-State Actors In Regional Integration: The Case Of The Kenya Private Sector (Brown, 2012), The Role of NGOs and MNCS In Globalization: A SADC Perspective (Chisale, 2018), Intra-African Trade, Unlocking Private Sector Dynamism (UNCTAD Report, 2013), and Mainstreaming Non-State Actors in African Regional Integration (Olafuyi, 2019). The study adopted the interpretivist approach on narratives, already published articles on REI, perceptions and interpretations and believes the researcher's understanding and viewpoints become the contributions to the crafting of frameworks.

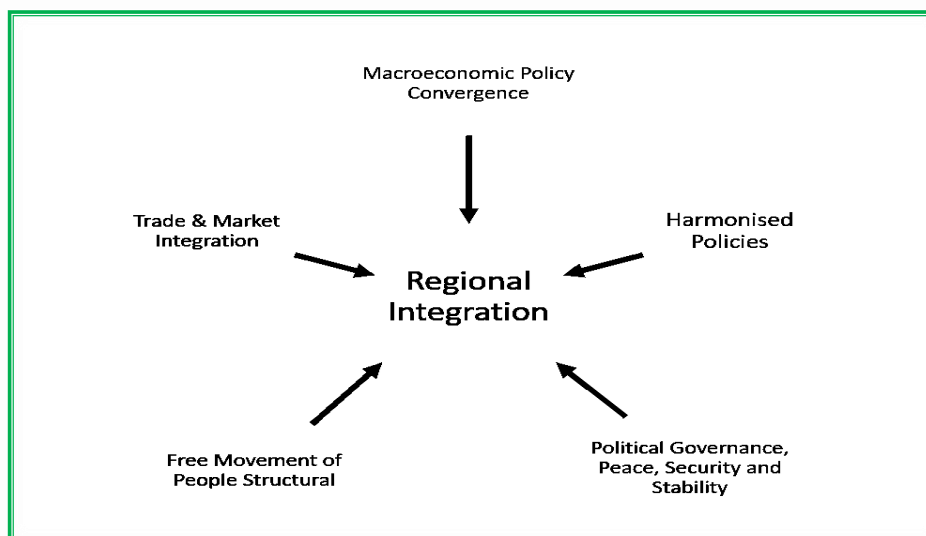
In this study, the researcher pulled four concepts (themes) of regional economic integration to inquire how the concept of RI in the AfCFTA region reflects the expectations of SADC region. These are as detailed below: -

1. **Free trade area.** This is the most basic form of economic cooperation. Member countries remove all barriers to trade between themselves but are free to independently determine trade policies with non-member nations.
2. **Customs union.** This type provides for economic cooperation as in a free-trade zone. Trade barriers are removed between member countries. The primary difference from the free trade area is that members agree to treat trade with non-member countries similarly.
3. **Common market.** This type allows for the creation of economically integrated markets between member countries. Trade barriers are removed, as are any restrictions on the movement of labour and capital between member countries. Like customs unions, there is a common trade policy for trade with non-member nations. The primary advantage to workers is that they no longer need a visa or work permit to work in another member country of a common market.
4. **Economic union.** This type is created when countries enter into an economic agreement to remove barriers to trade and adopt common economic policies.

The results are displayed qualitatively text form. Data was examined with pre-determined concepts from regional integration notions (deductive). The content was examined for deeper meaning in the text (latent).

IX. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study conceptualised the concepts appropriate on engagement of NSAs in Regional Integration. To measure the process of integration within the context of AfCFTA in SADC region, the study identified five key pillars derived from treaties and protocols of the African Union and the regional economic communities.



Source: Observatory on Regional Integration in Africa

X. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher argument rests on the position that regional economic integration is a heterogeneous, collectivistic, multi-dimensional phenomenon, taking place in several sectors and is often constructed by a variety of actors such as state, market and non-state. The study assumes the artificial separation, of state and non-state actors, and of the civil society which is associated with traditional regional integration approaches. By emphasizing that regional integration is not necessarily state-centric, the study provides a more holistic perspective which if well employed, could inform formulation powerful framework for SADC regional economic integration.

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In this regards, the study adopted the emerging philosophy of Afri-capitalism, first proposed by Nigerian entrepreneur Tony Elumelu and revised by Professor Idemudia, Amaeshi and Okupe in their book *Afri-capitalism: Rethinking the Role of Business in Africa* in 2018. This study postulates that the philosophy is an introduction to the potential of the non-state actors in Africa which this study pursued. Idemudia et al (2018, further posits that Afri-capitalism is underpinned by philosophies of co-existence between modern business management practices with African values in a manner that is approachable to the traditions of the Africa and its regional affiliation context.

According to the Tony Elumelu Foundation (2010), Afri-capitalism is a call-to-action for nation states to make decisions that will motivate and increase involvement of non-state actors. The study argues that, the participations by non-state actors will contribute significantly promote development in the communities and nations. The Afri-capitalism theory adopted in this study hinges on eight key pillars. This study had interest in the four pillars of which are: - regional connectivity, value-added growth, a shared purpose and long-term investments.

However, this researcher criticize the theory arguing that there is need political leadership level advocacy and buy-in to be done in conceptualising Afri-capitalism logically. Furthermore, the theory focused on a broader picture and did not clearly disclose for the benefit of state actors that the NSAs in Africa are an undisputable player and even at SMEs levels, the constituency is beginning to think regionally and globally in terms of trade and partnerships.

XI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The section addresses the research objective which are: to examine the perspective of non-state actors in a world of nation-states in Regional Economic Integration (REI) in the context of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), exploit the extend of involvement of NSAs in AfCFTA negotiations; investigate key issues that informs the involvement and or non-involvement of NSAs in the REC activities; investigate whether NSAs are fully exploiting the REI opportunities within AfCFTA membership; and Recommend framework that brings together AfCFTA state actors and non-state actors.

- **To examine the perspective of non-state actors in a world of nation-states in Regional Economic Integration (REI) in the context of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).**

The results show that, NSA's interface with AfCFTA secretariat is through government ministry representatives (in most cases Permanent Secretaries of the relevant Ministries). Ordinarily, this is the channel where the representatives of the NSA's can find space to present the issues from their constituencies. The communication procedure is considered appropriate and common across all SADC Member State. This is meant to ensure state actors are sensitised to the issues first which the non-state actors consider to discuss with AfCFTA and SADC secretariat.

The researcher also found out that SADC secretariat recognises that NSAs are key drivers of the successful implementation of AfCFTA programme of action. This is evidenced by SADC's engagement efforts in the development of the proposal on the SADC Mechanism for Engagement with Non- State Actors (NSAs) in Line with Treaty Provisions (Article 5 (2), 16A and 23). The Article 5 (2), 16A and 23 recommended that the involvement of NSAs in the regional economic integration agenda be formalized through the establishment of an institutionalized mechanism as a way of operationalizing Article 23 of the Treaty and the succeeding amendments.

The researcher however identifies gaps in the proposed engagement channels, that is, permanent secretaries of member states as first port of call and institutionalization of NSAs. The study holds the view that valuable additions to the AfCFTA strengthening should be premised on an environment where policies and regulations are formulated from a consultative and inclusivity of NSAs. Consultation is vital in policy and regulation formulation as it encompasses the actual needs that speak to the requirements of the NSAs.

Trade and market integration policies, macroeconomic policy convergence, free movement of persons structural, and harmonization of sectoral policies are the key pillars that promote the successful implementation of the intra-regional economic integration. These pillars in this study are considered the key drivers of NSAs trade activities. Therefore the study postulates that, crafting of these frameworks and their implementation at national, regional and continental levels requires a consultative process involving all stakeholders particularly involvement NSAs who represent Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and captains of industry.

Consequently, as countries were transitioning to embrace regional economic integration into the AfCFTA focus, there was need to draw lessons from the SADC bloc to develop platforms for consultative forums and structures that adequately capture the voices of NSAs who are an umbrella of private actors, generality of CSOs and captains of industries. The study reasoning is that, these consultative forums transparently discuss and prioritise trade opportunities within the AfCFTA agenda. Moreso, this will foster a functional communication channel and ensure a two way information and feedback flow between government and non - state actors

- **Examine the role of NSAs to drive REI agenda through AfCFTA concept**

As highlighted in objective one above, implementation of AfCFTA protocols, policies and strategies currently takes place at the national level regardless fact that they would be programmes are of a regional nature. In this study, being of a regional nature means

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that implementation required more than one nation and that would be more efficient to implement the programme as a regional programme across the member states. The results of the study revealed that in most cases implementation require NSAs whose mandate, charters and business plans are to turn concepts into realisable and tangible results on the ground.

The study further reveal that, it is only at implementation stage of approved AfCFTA programmes and projects that NSA's, are then appraised on the decisions on regional economic integration. The following are identified key NSAs roles that can contribute to the successful drive of the REI agenda through the AfCFTA concept. These are, going concern, policy formulations and recommendations, government watchdogs, policy implementation, and advocacy and stakeholders mapping.

Going Concern

Non-state actors' involvement in AfCFTA are key in continuity of programmes after changes in political leadership. Based on the concept of democracy political leadership across the globe have a term limit which at one point comes to an end. In most cases, the in-coming political leadership priorities in relation to regional integration may be refocused. In that context, NSAs will become perpetual key players in ensuring that a particular strategy is continued beyond the expired term of political leadership of the day. It becomes necessary that NSAs be integrated into the different levels of national and regional planning to ensure that key trade negotiations, implementation and any progress made with regards to regional integration is carried over in the event of the changes in government or political leadership.

Policy formulations and recommendations

Under this section, the results review that, NSAs are not being involved in the initial policy formulation processes. State actors roles should be limited in creating conducive investments environment across the regions of membership. The researcher argues that NSAs should play a key role in delivering meaningful policies because they have hands on experience on macro-economic activities. Their knowledge and practical experience prove valuable when engaging in the diverse areas of policy formulation such as competition policies, Macro-convergence policies, tariffs frameworks and regulation and intellectual property rights (IPR) which will complement the government efforts. Bringing the NSAs on board will offer state actors evidence-based recommendations which will ensure that the welfare of people is well represented in the AFCFTA agenda and ensure that the intended benefits are distributed equitably across the economy and region. Furthermore NSAs have a more grass roots interface in comparison to the state actors and therefore tend to represent the interests of the vulnerable, hence their inclusion is reasonably argued to channel the voices of the vulnerable when formulating policies.

Government Watchdogs

One of the key focus of AfCFTA is transparency and accountability. For the AfCFTA agenda to be successful, the citizens of state actors must have easy access to all information relating to the programmes in place. Moreso, State actors must be or be seen to transparent in their engagements with NSAs and ensure that they fulfil their commitments in relation to REI. On the other hand, state actors must provide space for NSAs to function without interference from other government agents. NSAs must freely advocate for the existence of adequate legal and institutional frameworks. In that respect, the NSAs role will then be to ensure that state actors respect the principles of equality and non-discrimination. Ideally, NSAs main role will be the monitoring and evaluation of policies and in the process increase the state actors' accountability and transparency of the system. This study postulates that, the role of NSAs if given space will promote respect for the rule of law. Additionally, the researcher argues that the principle of accountability and transparency in the long run will provide ordinary citizens to have channels of redress through representation in decision making by NSAs, therefore, their inclusion strengthens the voices of the poor in effective implementation and country integration into the AfCFTA.

Policy implementation

Under this sub-heading, the study reveals that, mush as the state actors' agents may be in the forefront of negotiations and signing of these agreements, it is the NSAs that practically implement the agreements. For example, it is the NSAs constituencies such as the cross border traders who will be the ones using the agreements such as free movement of people structural and harmonised policies who will feel their impact the most. The study therefore holds the view that engaging them at policy making state will ensure coming up with realistic and beneficial objectives. For example, under the goal of increasing intra-trade in SADC of a certain product or service, it will be upon the NSAs to come up with realistic targets that will push the objective into fruition.

Advocacy and Stakeholders Mapping

NSAs play a pivotal role in ensuring a level of inclusivity. Governments may sometimes will be stretched with other regional demands such as emerging epidemics or natural disasters and then tend to forget the voices of marginalised groups participating in trade. When marginalised groups are not recognised or are even criminalised, they are not able to access services and support to alleviate their community challenges. The researcher is convinced that, through the nature of relationships that exist between state actors and marginalised stakeholders, NSAs are well placed to represent these marginalized stakeholders and advocate for their priorities and interests giving the government more space in the process to shape the country positions on key issues that help in the nations' building.

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- **Investigate challenges faced by NSAs in their engagement with the AfCFTA and existing RECs**

The following are the identified challenges faced by NSAs in their engagement with the SADC and existing RECs in this study AfCFTA: - capacity issues, shrinking operating space, uncoordinated scheduled engagements, regional bureaucracy, and lack of rule based approach in engagement

Capacity Issues

One of the key challenges noted by the study faced by the NSAs relates to the technical know-how and financial resources. Results revealed that, NSAs are sometimes be constrained by their limited access to technical skills and financial resources. Majority of NSAs are reported to lack adequate resources to effectively contribute to the regional economic integration programmes. To some extent, NSAs may be faced with a serious shortage of skills meet the regional demand. The researcher posits that with a limited technical and financial capacity, NSAs will not be taken seriously on regional economic engagements.

Shrinking Operating Space

In terms of regional economic involvement, the NSAs claim they are not given conducive space to participate in negotiations of agreements. NSAs advocate for direct access to continental institutions such as the SADC and regional economic communities (RECs) in this study represented by the AfCFTA agenda. It was also noted that in instances where NSAs could have capacity to reach across borders there are no functioning direct channels through which NSAs can access regional institutions such as the SADC and AfCFTA. While the AfCFTA aspirations are inclined to transform REI into a people-centered organisation (AU Agenda 20630 NSAs according to this study are not considered to the primary negotiation and engagement roles. Based on the narrative the researcher holds the view that there is shrinking operating space for NSA which then poses challenge in scaling up REI programmes.

Uncoordinated scheduled engagements

It was noted that decision to hold engagements may not be in the power of NSAs, but the RECs. The other challenge noted is that, NSAs are engaged on an ad hoc basis within regional economic communities. This study argues that if the engagements remain in un-coordinated manner it leads to an engagement gap between NSAs and AfCFTA. If engagements continue this way, it is impossible for NSAs to adequately prepare and present its issues appropriately. The results are in line with the previous studies conducted by SADC that also showed that the engagement between SADC and NSAs have a tendency of occurring at the discretion of the SADC Secretariat. In that regards the study generalised the findings that it is currently difficult for NSAs to engage, AfCFTA and SADC policymakers and therefore the SADC region intra-regional trade remains low.

Regional Bureaucracy

The study further revealed that the challenge with involving the NSAs is that their formations are not fully representative of every sector, geography or even in terms thematic coverage therefore compromised the risk that state actors are supporting a certain sector of their preference. Ordinary citizens further claim they find it challenging to make significant contributions to regional integration because of the existing formal bureaucracy within the NSAs that suffocates their visibility. A notable example is that of participation of COMESA where only those groups with expertise on regional integration and regional issues are accredited. The study therefore generalise that, NSAs and RECs need to facilitate a conducive environment that capture the interest of as many economic players as possible, leaving no one behind. That way increase in intra-regional trade is guaranteed.

Lack of rule based approach in engagement

The study acknowledge that there are existing indirect mechanisms for NSA participation, which however, are considered not effective. Results further reveal that there are limited rules of procedure for NSA participation, and consultations that enable them to provide formal inputs and submissions to RECs such as AfCFTA. If engage with RECs is not rule based, it becomes difficult for NSAs to have a clear roadmap of the level of contribution needed for the integration process.

Currently NSAs in the region have different approaches when engaging with AfCFTA. This poses challenges for AfCFTA because they have to deal with a diverse group of actors in most cases who are experienced in operations of AfCFTA or have the expertise to meaningfully engage and provide input into the regional integration processes. This lack of knowledge on how AfCFTA operate and how they are structured impact negatively on intra-regional trade.

- **Investigate the extend in which NSAs are exploiting the REI opportunities within AfCFTA membership**

The AfCFTA aims to increase continent-wide trade, which has historically been low, by creating a single market for goods and services. The volume of intra-African exports represented 16.6% of total exports in 2017. This is substantially less than exports within other regions, such as Europe and Asia, which amounted to 68.1% and 59.4%, respectively. Limited productive capacity and lack of economic diversification in SADC region delay the ability to produce value-added goods that can be traded at the continental and global level such as intermediate and final products as well as the development of regional value chains. On the other hand, tariff and non-tariff barriers increase costs and hinder the competitiveness of companies on the continent. Currently, many NSAs in businesses within SADC region struggle with high operating costs due to inadequate infrastructure and limited supply of electricity.

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Given the opportunities provided through the AfCFTA agreement, NSAs have access to a much larger market. The agreement also supports the creation of a conducive business environment by improving the African trade landscape and boosting industrialization, technological development and investment opportunities.

In addition to trade, the NSAs have an opportunity to contribute through infrastructure investments. Inadequate infrastructure and connectivity are currently a serious hindrance to the growth of intra-African trade. Poor roads, rail and maritime infrastructure adds 30-40% to the costs of goods traded among African countries. At this time when the multilateral trading system is under severe strain created by other competing demands such as war in Ukraine, climate change and fighting epidemics, NSAs specifically in SADC region must grab the opportunity created through AfCFTA agreements. Results of this study however show that the involvement of the NSAs is still minimum. This is evidenced by the fact that, export of primary goods is still high in SADC compared to other regions, yet the region remains a net food importer and one of the most food-insecure regions in the world. There is no evidence of NSAs participating in key linkages from the design of the product, manufacturing of components to assembly, marketing and international production chains. Besides, products from Asia are dominating the region. Entering and participating in regional or global value chains is key to the NSAs growth.

XII. RECOMMENDATIONS

In magnifying the role of NSAs in the AfCFTA, the following recommendations are proposed, collaboration of NSA, systems strengthening, rule based approach, arranged engagements, refining of bureaucracy.

NSA Collaboration

The study recognises that there are multiple and diverse NSAs within the RECs. However, without mutual agreements amongst themselves there are implied challenges in receiving intervention from the AfCFTA or even SADC secretariat. Therefore, NSAs must arrange to trade in as collaborative unit. That way, it will allow them to have a single and stronger voice. Furthermore collaboration will increase the capacity of the NSAs to engage with the AfCFTA either technically or financially. In addition, collaboration limits possibilities of overwhelming the AfCFTA as NSAs request engagements as separate units hence make it easier for the AfCFTA to respond to presented issues.

Systems Strengthening

The study acknowledges the efforts of SADC bloc in promoting the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) Free Trade Areas as building blocks towards the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). In this disposition, it is important to strengthen the existing platforms and structures that promote NSAs engagement in the mission to further strengthen the AfCFTA and ultimately increase intra-trade within Africa's regional economic blocks. Therefore, strengthening the SADC thematic committees can improve NSAs participation at national and regional level engagements. Generally, improving participation of NSAs at regional level is important in capturing pertinent issues around poverty alleviation and further improve NSA engagement mechanisms.

Rule based approach

There is need to come up with standard operating procedures (SOPs) to regulate the activities of NSAs. The SOPs must be able to account for possible occurrences that may come out of the process. The idea may limit potential conflicts and discrepancies among players and ultimately smoothen the operating environment. However, these SOPs must be simplified to ensure that they are comprehended clearly by all levels of NSAs. Penalties must also be clearly spelt out so that the NSAs are aware of the consequences of non-compliance.

Arranged engagements

There is need to come up with a calendar of engagements to allow NSAs to adequately plan prior to meetings. This will improve the engagements quality and adequately provide sustainable solutions. Further, these engagements must not only be convened at the discretion of the AfCFTA or other state actors. It will be important to hold engagements at the request of NSAs to allow solution provision on matters that may need immediate intervention. These engagements must foster dual information flow.

Refining of bureaucracy

The study also proposes that even before NSAs begin to air grievances on the challenges of engaging with responsible bodies in the AfCFTA, they must ensure that they mechanisms amongst themselves that capture and represent the various levels. Ideally, decision making must occur after consultations from everyone to ensure inclusivity. RECs also on the other hand must complete this cycle by limiting any form of politicking that may exclude some NSA voices

CONCLUSION

While RECs are pronounced to be the building blocks for continental integration, the NSAs are key stakeholder for the objectives to be successfully achieved. When NSAs explore regional markets or create regional value chains, they could facilitate integration from the bottom-up through their activities. This study argues that AfCFTA give legal backing for continental economic

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liberalisation, however, it is NSAs who yield results through their activities, and therefore governments and or regional economic communities need to pay more attention to NSAs at various levels.

This study therefore further suggests that NSAs alone as well cannot carry the weight of regional and continental integration. Instead, it advocates for a public-private-partnership. The reasoning is that, in many cases, the private sector is infamous for ignoring issues relating to inequality and labour standards and it is known to perpetuate rent-seeking behaviour. However, with the appropriate level of collaboration, perhaps the African model may hold up differently.

In conclusion, while state-actors facilitate integration from the top-down, private actors need to be empowered to facilitate integration from the bottom-up. In order for NSAs to be incentivised, the study recommends an increase in investment in infrastructure, accessibility of loans, systems strengthening, and strengthening mechanisms for consultation between state actors and non-state actors. In addition to these, study recommend the development of trust between state actors and NSAs through repeated interactions and democratisation of opportunities for NSAs to play an active role in the regional economic integration process.

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