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**One Africa, Many Nations: Why and How African Nations Should
Unite Through Sovereignty-Preserving Economic Integration**

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Abstract

Calls for African unity have been a constant of the continent's political thought since independence, yet what unity should mean in practice remains contested. This article consolidates a leadership-oriented policy framework with an integrative review of the literature on regional integration, pan-Africanism, trade, infrastructure, climate, human capital, and security to address two questions: why should African nations unite, and how? Drawing on integration theory, continental legal instruments, and recent evidence from the African Union, the AfCFTA Secretariat, Afreximbank, UNCTAD, the World Bank, and the United Nations, it argues that the most realistic path is neither political federation nor the status quo, but sovereignty-preserving functional integration. It identifies ten interlocking rationales for integration, examines the role of the eight Regional Economic Communities, including IGAD, the EAC, and ECOWAS, and considers recent initiatives such as the Horn of Africa Gateway Development Project, the Africa Climate Summits, and the Africa Carbon Markets Initiative. It then proposes a five-stage pathway (trade, infrastructure, people, finance, and political coordination) within a seven-layer model of

integration. The analysis reveals a persistent gap between ratification and implementation: 50 of 54 signatories have ratified the AfCFTA, yet only four states have ratified the Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, and intra-African trade remains between roughly 14 and 18 percent of total African trade. The article concludes that Africa's unity should be practical before it becomes political, and that leadership, variable geometry, and credible implementation mechanisms are decisive.

Keywords: *African integration; AfCFTA; pan-Africanism; regional economic communities; sovereignty; free movement of persons; value chains; leadership*

1. Introduction

Few ideas have exerted as durable an influence on African political imagination as the call for continental unity. From Kwame Nkrumah's (1963) insistence that *Africa must unite* to the African Union's (AU) *Agenda 2063* vision of "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa" (African Union Commission [AUC], 2015), unity has been presented as both a moral aspiration and a developmental necessity. Yet more than six decades after the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the continent remains institutionally dense but economically fragmented. It hosts eight AU-recognised Regional Economic Communities (RECs), dozens of overlapping trade arrangements, and a continental free trade area that is among the largest in the world by membership, while trade between African countries still accounts for a modest share of their total trade (African Export-Import Bank [Afreximbank], 2025; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2019).

This paradox, which may be described as abundant integration commitments combined with limited integration outcomes, is the starting point for this article. It addresses two linked questions. First, *why* should African nations pursue closer union at this historical moment? Second, *how* should such union be pursued, given the realities of national sovereignty, uneven state capacity, overlapping regional institutions, and divergent national interests? The article also engages a conceptual question that is often left implicit in public debate: what does "unity" mean? Much popular discussion oscillates between a maximalist image of a single African state and a sceptical dismissal of integration as rhetoric. Neither pole offers much practical guidance to policymakers.

The article advances a central proposition, summarised in the phrase *One Africa, Many Nations*: Africa does not need to become one country in order to become more united. The practical objective is deeper continental integration that makes it progressively easier for people, goods, capital, knowledge, and services to move across African borders, while national sovereignty and identities are preserved (Pillai, 2026). In this framing, unity is measured less by the creation of supranational institutions than by the reduction of the everyday costs of cooperation: the delay at a border post, the cost of converting currencies, the non-recognition of a professional qualification, or the absence of a transmission line between neighbouring power systems.

The article makes three contributions. First, it consolidates a leadership-oriented policy framework on African integration with a structured review of the scholarly and policy literature, connecting normative argument to empirical evidence. Second, it proposes a sequenced five-stage pathway embedded in a seven-layer model of integration, specifying the instruments and indicators associated with each stage. Third, it foregrounds the "implementation gap" between legal commitment and operational practice as the central problem of African integration, and frames leadership, rather than institutional design alone, as the bridge between vision and implementation.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. The next section describes the methodology. The article then reviews the relevant literature across six strands, sets out the conceptual framework, and examines the rationales for integration. It subsequently presents the five-stage pathway, discusses the shift from competition to complementarity through regional value chains, analyses the principal constraints and risks, and considers the leadership challenge. The article closes with policy recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Methodology

The article adopts a conceptual and integrative review design (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Integrative reviews are appropriate where the aim is to synthesise heterogeneous bodies of evidence, including theoretical works, empirical studies, and policy documents, in order to generate a new framework rather than to estimate a single pooled effect. The analysis proceeded in three steps.

First, two primary source texts were consolidated: a policy paper on African integration (Pillai, 2026) and a leadership-oriented presentation on the same theme prepared for a 2026 leadership forum. Their arguments were decomposed into discrete propositions concerning the rationale for, and the pathway to, integration. Second, each proposition was examined against the scholarly literature on regional integration theory, African political economy, trade, infrastructure, natural resources, demography, and security, drawing on books, peer-reviewed articles, and working papers identified through purposive and backward-citation searching. Third, the propositions were tested against recent official and institutional data, including AU legal instruments, AfCFTA implementation status reports, Afreximbank's African Trade Reports, UNCTAD's Economic Development in Africa Reports, World Bank analyses, the United Nations' *World Population Prospects 2024*, and the *Global Terrorism Index 2025*. Priority was given to primary institutional sources and peer-reviewed work; secondary reporting was used only to corroborate the timing of recent events.

Two limitations of this design should be noted at the outset. Integration statistics are sensitive to definitions (for example, whether intra-African trade is measured as a share of exports or of total trade, and whether informal cross-border trade is included), and implementation data change rapidly. Figures are therefore reported with their source and reference year, and the argument does not rest on any single estimate.

3. Literature Review

Pan-African Thought and the Federalist-Gradualist Debate

The contemporary debate on African unity reproduces a cleavage that emerged at independence. Nkrumah (1963) argued that the newly independent states were too small and too dependent to develop separately, and called for an immediate continental union government with common economic planning, defence, and foreign policy. The Casablanca group of states broadly shared this federalist vision, whereas the larger Monrovia group favoured a looser association of sovereign states cooperating functionally. The OAU Charter of 1963 largely reflected the gradualist position, entrenching the principles of sovereign equality, non-interference, and the inviolability of inherited borders (Adebajo, 2010).

Subsequent continental strategy retained this gradualist logic while expanding its economic ambition. The *Lagos Plan of Action* (OAU, 1980) called for collective self-reliance, and the *Abuja*

Treaty (OAU, 1991) envisaged an African Economic Community built through six stages over thirty-four years, with the RECs as its building blocks. The transformation of the OAU into the AU in 2002, the adoption of *Agenda 2063* (AUC, 2015), and the launch of the AfCFTA (AU, 2018a) represent a renewed attempt to translate the Abuja sequence into operational commitments. The literature thus suggests that the relevant question is no longer whether Africa should choose federalism or gradualism, but how gradualism can be made to deliver results.

Theories of Regional Integration

Classical economic integration theory provides the analytical vocabulary for the debate. Viner (1950) distinguished between the trade-creating effects of customs unions, which shift production to more efficient partners, and their trade-diverting effects, which shift imports away from more efficient external suppliers. Balassa (1961) proposed a linear sequence of stages running from a free trade area through a customs union, common market, and economic union to full political integration. The Balassa model has deeply influenced African integration design, including the Abuja Treaty's staged approach.

Political science offers complementary explanations. Neofunctionalism holds that cooperation in one technical sector generates pressures for integration in adjacent sectors, a process of "spillover" that gradually transfers loyalties and competencies to regional institutions (Haas, 1958). Mattli (1999) argues that successful integration requires both demand, in the form of market actors who gain from cross-border exchange, and supply, in the form of political leaders willing to accommodate that demand and a benevolent leading state or "regional paymaster" able to ease distributional conflicts.

A substantial body of scholarship questions whether these European-derived models suit African conditions. Draper (2010) and Hartzenberg (2011) contend that the linear market-integration model presupposes diversified productive structures, strong states, and significant existing trade, conditions largely absent in much of Africa. They and others advocate a "developmental integration" approach that emphasises production, infrastructure, and industrial cooperation alongside tariff liberalisation (Asante, 1997). Gathii (2011) argues that African regional trade agreements are best understood not as rigid legal regimes but as flexible, variable-geometry arrangements that prioritise regime survival and policy space over strict compliance. Söderbaum (2016) similarly highlights the "regime-boosting" function of African regionalism, in which regional organisations may strengthen incumbent governments' legitimacy without deepening integration. This critical literature is important for the present article because it cautions that institutional proliferation is not evidence of integration, and that the design of integration must fit the political economy of African states.

Trade Performance and the Economics of the AfCFTA

Empirical studies consistently find that intra-African trade is low relative to other world regions, although it is more diversified and more manufacturing-intensive than Africa's trade with the rest of the world. UNCTAD (2019) reported that intra-African exports accounted for 16.6% of total African exports in 2017, compared with 68.1% in Europe, 59.4% in Asia, and 55.0% in the Americas. UNCTAD (2023) further notes that intra-African trade contains a markedly higher share of processed goods than Africa's exports to the rest of the world, suggesting that regional markets offer a stronger platform for industrial upgrading. Earlier econometric studies attributed the weak performance of African RECs to high tariffs, poor infrastructure, similar production structures, and overlapping memberships (Yang & Gupta, 2007), while Geda and Seid (2015) identified

substantial unrealised trade potential constrained principally by supply-side and infrastructure deficits.

The AfCFTA has become the focal point of recent economic analysis. The World Bank (2020a) estimated, using a computable general equilibrium model, that full implementation could raise regional income by 7% (about US\$450 billion) by 2035 and lift 30 million people out of extreme poverty. Critically, the same study found that the larger share of these gains, roughly US\$292 billion, would come from trade facilitation measures rather than tariff cuts. This finding reinforces a central theme of the critical literature: the binding constraints on African integration lie predominantly in non-tariff barriers, logistics, and institutional capacity.

Infrastructure, Geography, and Trade Costs

A related literature links Africa's low trade intensity to transport costs and geography. Limão and Venables (2001) demonstrated that poor infrastructure accounts for a large portion of the transport-cost penalty faced by landlocked countries, and that infrastructure improvements can substantially raise trade volumes. Collier (2007) emphasised the distinctive disadvantages of being landlocked with poorly connected neighbours, a condition that affects a significant number of African states. The Africa Infrastructure Country Diagnostic documented deficits in power, transport, water, and ICT that raised business costs across the continent (Foster & Briceño-Garmendia, 2010). The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2018) later estimated Africa's infrastructure needs at US\$130 billion to US\$170 billion per year, with a financing gap of US\$68 billion to US\$108 billion. The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), adopted by the AU, represents the continental attempt to plan infrastructure as a network of cross-border corridors rather than as isolated national projects.

Natural Resources, Industrialisation, and Value Chains

The literature on natural resources and development cautions that resource abundance does not automatically translate into structural transformation. Venables (2016) explains why resource wealth has proven difficult to convert into development, pointing to volatility, weak institutions, and the challenge of transforming depletable assets into productive capital. Rodrik (2016) documents "premature deindustrialisation" in many developing countries, including in sub-Saharan Africa, where manufacturing shares have peaked at lower income levels than in earlier industrialisers. Mkandawire (2001) argues that African states can nonetheless play developmental roles if they build appropriate institutional capacity. The AU's *Africa Mining Vision* (AU, 2009) calls for resource-based industrialisation through linkages and beneficiation. More recently, Afreximbank (2026b) has placed capturing more value from commodities at the centre of its outlook, underlining the policy relevance of moving from raw-material export to regional value creation.

Human Capital, Demography, and Security

Demographic research frames Africa's population growth as a potential dividend conditional on policy. Bloom et al. (2003) show that a rising share of working-age population can accelerate growth when accompanied by education, health, and employment opportunities, and Canning et al. (2015) apply this reasoning to Africa, concluding that the dividend is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Continental frameworks such as the *Continental Education Strategy for Africa* (AU, 2016) and the Addis Convention on the recognition of higher education qualifications (UNESCO, 2014) seek to build a more mobile and connected African talent pool. On security, the

literature on the African Peace and Security Architecture documents the AU's move from non-interference towards "non-indifference", while also highlighting chronic funding and capacity constraints (Engel & Porto, 2010; Williams, 2016).

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature supports four conclusions. First, the historical debate has shifted from whether to integrate to how integration can be implemented. Second, the linear market-integration model, applied without attention to production, infrastructure, and state capacity, has delivered disappointing results. Third, the largest potential gains from integration arise from trade facilitation, infrastructure, and regional value chains rather than tariff removal alone. Fourth, African regionalism is characterised by a persistent gap between commitment and compliance. What remains underdeveloped is an integrated framework that links the multiple rationales for integration to a practical sequence of implementation, and that treats leadership as an explicit variable. This article seeks to contribute to filling that gap.

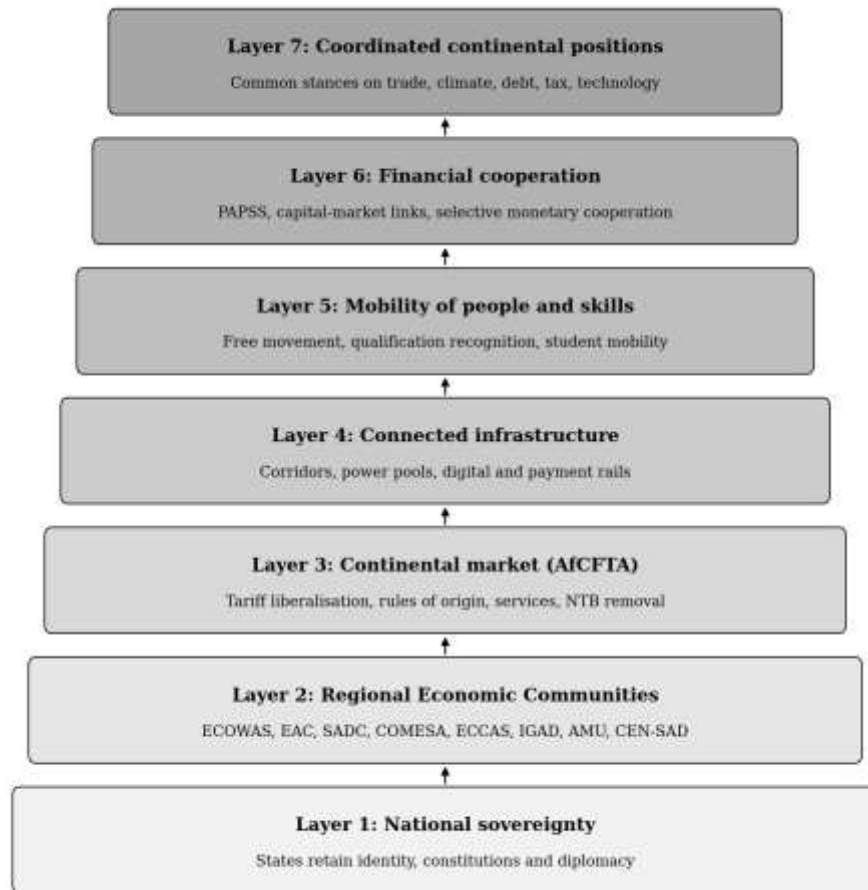
4. Conceptual Framework: Sovereignty-Preserving Functional Integration

The article proposes a conceptual model termed *sovereignty-preserving functional integration*. It rests on the premise that unity and sovereignty need not be treated as a zero-sum trade-off. States retain their constitutional identity, their national diplomacy, and their decision-making authority, while progressively pooling or coordinating specific functions in which collective action yields clear gains. The model therefore combines the functional logic of neofunctionalism (Haas, 1958) with the flexibility emphasised by Gathii (2011) and the developmental orientation advocated by Hartzenberg (2011).

Figure 1 presents the model as seven cumulative layers. National sovereignty forms the foundation. RECs serve as the building blocks, consistent with the Abuja Treaty. The AfCFTA provides the continental market layer. Above this sit connected infrastructure, the mobility of people and skills, financial cooperation, and, at the apex, coordinated continental positions on international issues. The model differs from the Balassa sequence in two respects. It does not culminate in political federation, and it treats infrastructure and human mobility as integral layers rather than as by-products of market integration.

Figure 1

A Layered Model of Sovereignty-Preserving African Integration



Note. Adapted from Pillai (2026) and the leadership framework consolidated in this article. Each layer builds on the one below; no layer requires the surrender of national sovereignty.

The guiding principle of the model can be stated succinctly: African countries remain sovereign while making it increasingly easy for African people, goods, capital, knowledge, and services to move across African borders (Pillai, 2026). The corresponding measure of success is not the number of treaties signed but the reduction of the practical cost of cross-border activity for citizens and firms.

The Regional Building Blocks: Africa's Economic Communities

The second layer of the model, the Regional Economic Communities, deserves particular attention because it is where most practical integration has occurred. The AU formally recognises eight RECs as the building blocks of the African Economic Community envisaged in the Abuja Treaty (OAU, 1991). Table 1 summarises their membership, the depth of integration each has achieved, and their principal integration instruments. The RECs vary widely in ambition and performance. The East African Community (EAC) has progressed furthest, operating a customs union and a common market protocol, and it expanded to eight members with the accession of

Somalia in 2024. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) pioneered free movement of persons through its 1979 protocol and operates a common external tariff, while its francophone core forms the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). The Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) operate free trade areas, and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), the world's oldest customs union, is nested within SADC.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) illustrates a distinct model. Originally established to address drought and desertification, IGAD has evolved into the principal regional platform for conflict mediation, food security, and climate resilience in the Horn of Africa, including through its role in the South Sudan peace process and its drought resilience initiatives. Its trajectory shows that integration in fragile regions often begins with shared vulnerability, such as drought, displacement, and insecurity, rather than with trade. At the same time, IGAD's experience underscores the fragility of regional bodies: Eritrea, which had suspended its participation in 2007 and reactivated it in 2023, formally withdrew in December 2025, citing the organisation's alleged failure to meet regional aspirations (The Reporter, 2025).

Inter-REC consolidation is also advancing. The COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) entered into force on 25 July 2024 after reaching the threshold of 14 ratifications among its 29 member and partner states (COMESA, 2024). The TFTA's three pillars of market integration, infrastructure development, and industrial development closely mirror the developmental integration approach advocated in the literature (Hartzenberg, 2011), and it offers a model for rationalising overlapping memberships under the AfCFTA umbrella.

Table 1

The Eight AU-Recognised Regional Economic Communities

REC	Est.	Members	Level of integration achieved	Selected instruments and initiatives
AMU (Arab Maghreb Union)	1989	5 (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Tunisia)	Largely dormant; limited implementation	Free trade aspirations constrained by political tensions
CEN-SAD (Community of Sahel-Saharan States)	1998	About 25 across the Sahel and Sahara	Cooperation framework; limited trade integration	Security, free movement, and development cooperation
COMESA	1994 (PTA 1981)	21 across Eastern, Southern, and North Africa	Free trade area; customs union launched but not fully operational	Regional payment and settlement system; member of TFTA
EAC (East African Community)	2000 (orig. 1967)	8, including Somalia (joined 2024)	Customs union and common market;	Common Market Protocol; Northern and

REC	Est.	Members	Level of integration achieved	Selected instruments and initiatives
			monetary union planned	Central Corridors; member of TFTA
ECCAS	1983	11 in Central Africa	Free trade area; CEMAC monetary union nested within	Central African Power Pool; peace and security architecture
ECOWAS	1975	12 (after the 2025 withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger)	Free movement of persons; common external tariff	1979 Free Movement Protocol; ECOWAS passport; WAEMU nested within
IGAD	1996 (IGADD 1986)	7 (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda) after Eritrea's 2025 withdrawal	Peace, security, and resilience focus; limited trade integration	Conflict mediation; drought resilience and food security programmes; regional free movement framework
SADC	1992 (SADCC 1980)	16 in Southern Africa	Free trade area; SACU customs union nested within	Southern African Power Pool; member of TFTA

Note. Membership reflects the position as of September 2026. COMESA = Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa; ECCAS = Economic Community of Central African States; ECOWAS = Economic Community of West African States; IGAD = Intergovernmental Authority on Development; SADC = Southern African Development Community; PTA = Preferential Trade Area; CEMAC = Central African Economic and Monetary Community; SACU = Southern African Customs Union; TFTA = COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area; WAEMU = West African Economic and Monetary Union. Compiled by the author from REC sources, COMESA (2024), and The Reporter (2025).

5. Why Should African Nations Unite? Ten Rationales

This section examines ten mutually reinforcing rationales for integration, each assessed against the evidence reviewed above.

Market Scale and Collective Economic Weight

Many African economies have small domestic markets that limit economies of scale, specialisation, and investment attractiveness. Collectively, however, the continent represents a market of more than 1.5 billion people. The World Bank (2020a) described the AfCFTA as connecting 1.3 billion people across 55 countries with a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion. Scale matters because firms in manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, digital services, and agro-processing require access to markets larger than most single African economies can offer. An integrated market also improves the continent's attractiveness to investors, who can serve many countries from a single production base.

Raising Intra-African Trade

African countries have historically traded more with external partners than with one another. Table 2 summarises the comparative evidence. Recent Afreximbank data show modest improvement: intra-African trade rose to an estimated US\$213.8 billion in 2025 (Afreximbank, 2026a), and its share of total African trade has been estimated at 15.3% for 2024 and roughly 18% for 2025, depending on methodology (Afreximbank, 2025, 2026b). Official figures also exclude much informal cross-border trade, which is substantial in many border regions. Even so, Africa's intra-regional share remains far below that of Europe or Asia, indicating considerable unrealised potential.

Table 2

Intra-Regional Trade Shares: Africa in Comparative Perspective

Region / Period	Measure	Intra-regional share	Source
Africa, 2017	Share of total exports	16.6%	UNCTAD (2019)
Europe, 2017	Share of total exports	68.1%	UNCTAD (2019)
Asia, 2017	Share of total exports	59.4%	UNCTAD (2019)
Americas, 2017	Share of total exports	55.0%	UNCTAD (2019)
Africa, 2024	Share of total trade	15.3%	Afreximbank (2025)
Africa, 2025	Share of total trade	~18% (approx.)	Afreximbank (2026b)

Note. Figures are not strictly comparable across sources because of differences in coverage and methodology. Official statistics generally exclude informal cross-border trade.

Making the AfCFTA Effective

The AfCFTA provides the institutional framework for a single continental market. Its legal progress has been rapid by historical standards: as of September 2026, 50 of the 54 signatories had deposited instruments of ratification, with Eritrea the only AU member yet to sign (tralac, 2026). However, legal ratification is only the first step. For preferential trade to flow, State Parties must also finalise, gazette, and implement their schedules of tariff concessions and put customs procedures for rules of origin in place. By late 2025, 25 countries had completed this process (International Trade Administration [ITA], 2025). The gap between ratification and operational trade is thus the defining feature of the AfCFTA's current phase, and the principal justification for sustained political attention.

Continental Infrastructure Networks

Economic integration cannot succeed without physical and digital connectivity. The evidence that infrastructure deficits raise trade costs, particularly for landlocked economies, is robust (Limão & Venables, 2001). An integrated approach requires planning roads, railways, ports, power grids, telecommunications, and payment systems as connected corridors rather than as projects that stop at national borders. The practical shift is a change of mindset from isolated national projects to connected continental economic corridors. PIDA, the Single African Air

Transport Market, and regional power pools provide the institutional scaffolding for this shift, although financing remains the binding constraint (AfDB, 2018).

The Horn of Africa offers an instructive example. The Horn of Africa Initiative, launched in 2019 by the region's governments with the support of the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the European Union, seeks to deepen regional integration through transport, energy, and digital connectivity. Its first operation, the Horn of Africa Gateway Development Project (HoAGDP), was approved in September 2020 with US\$750 million in International Development Association financing to upgrade the Isiolo-Mandera Regional Road Corridor in northern Kenya and to improve the movement of people and goods, digital connectivity, and access to social services for more than 3.2 million people (World Bank, 2020b). The corridor links Kenya with Ethiopia and Somalia and combines road upgrading with fibre-optic infrastructure. Following additional financing agreed in 2026, the World Bank is financing 508 km of the 740 km corridor together with spur roads built to climate-resilient standards (State Department for Roads, 2026). The project is significant for integration in three respects: it connects historically marginalised borderland regions to national and regional markets; it treats digital and physical connectivity as a single investment; and it demonstrates how a national project can be deliberately designed as part of a cross-border corridor. Together with the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor, it forms part of an emerging network that could reorient the Horn of Africa's trade towards regional markets and seaports.

Food, Energy, and Climate Security

Africa's agricultural, mineral, hydrocarbon, and renewable resources are unevenly distributed. Cooperation allows countries to exploit complementarities: surplus food producers can supply deficit regions, and countries with abundant hydropower, gas, or solar potential can export electricity to neighbours. Energy access remains a critical constraint. Nearly 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa lack access to electricity, and the World Bank and AfDB-led Mission 300 initiative aims to connect 300 million people by 2030, with regional energy integration identified as one of its pillars (World Bank, 2025). Regional power pools, cross-border transmission, cold chains, storage, and agro-processing reduce dependence on extra-continental imports where African production can meet African needs.

Climate change adds a further and increasingly urgent rationale. Africa has contributed a small share of historical greenhouse gas emissions yet faces some of the most severe climate impacts, including recurrent drought in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. Because droughts, floods, desertification, and climate-induced displacement ignore national borders, they call for collective responses. The AU's *Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022–2032)* provides a continental framework (AU, 2022), and the Great Green Wall initiative, which aims to restore degraded land across the Sahel, illustrates the potential of cross-border ecological cooperation (UNCCD, 2020). The Africa Climate Summit has become the principal platform for articulating a common continental position. The first summit, held in Nairobi in September 2023, adopted the Nairobi Declaration, an 11-point call to action on global financial reform, debt relief, climate finance, and green growth (AU, 2023). The second summit, convened in Addis Ababa in September 2025 by the Government of Ethiopia and the AU, adopted the Addis Ababa Declaration, which placed adaptation, resilience, and nature-based solutions at the centre and called for climate finance that reduces rather than adds to Africa's debt burden (AU, 2025). The Declaration also called for Africa's share of global renewable energy investment to rise from about 2% to at least 20% by 2030 (E3G, 2025). Carbon markets represent a further arena of continental

coordination. The Africa Carbon Markets Initiative (ACMI), launched at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh in November 2022, set the ambition of producing 300 million carbon credits annually by 2030 and 1.5 billion by 2050, which it estimated could unlock US\$6 billion in revenue and support 30 million jobs by 2030 (Sustainable Energy for All [SEforALL], 2022). By early 2023, seven countries (Burundi, Gabon, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Togo) had committed to developing national carbon market activation plans, and US\$200 million in advance market commitments had been secured from corporate buyers (SEforALL, 2023). The initiative is contested: civil society critics argue that large-scale voluntary crediting risks enabling offsetting by polluters elsewhere and raises concerns about credit integrity and fair benefit-sharing with local communities (REDD-Monitor, n.d.). From an integration perspective, these debates strengthen rather than weaken the case for cooperation, since common continental standards on credit integrity, registries, and revenue-sharing would protect African countries from a fragmented race to the bottom and increase their collective bargaining power in global carbon markets. These initiatives show that climate policy is becoming one of the most active domains of continental integration, combining shared vulnerability with shared economic opportunity in renewable energy and green industrialisation.

Creating Value From Natural Resources

A persistent structural feature of African economies is the export of raw commodities for processing elsewhere. The integration agenda seeks to replace the sequence *raw material* → *export* → *processing elsewhere* with *resource* → *processing* → *manufacturing* → *African value chain* → *global market*. Regional cooperation makes this feasible because no single country need possess every capability: a mineral-producing state can combine with neighbours that have energy, manufacturing capacity, logistics, finance, or technology. The 2022 cooperation agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia to develop a regional battery value chain illustrates this logic. The literature cautions, however, that such strategies require credible institutions, predictable regulation, and attention to the political economy of rents (Venables, 2016).

Collective Negotiating Power

Individually, most African states carry limited weight in global negotiations. Acting collectively on trade, climate finance, development finance, debt, technology, international taxation, natural resources, and migration can strengthen their voice. The admission of the AU as a permanent member of the G20 in 2023 illustrates the value of collective representation, as does the coordinated African position on climate finance developed through the Africa Climate Summits and carried into the UN climate negotiations (AU, 2023, 2025). The objective is not to eliminate national diplomacy but to ensure that African interests can also be articulated collectively where appropriate.

Developing African Human Capital

Africa's greatest long-term resource is its people. Continental cooperation can support student mobility, university partnerships, research networks, faculty exchange, joint innovation programmes, recognition of professional qualifications, and skills development in priority sectors such as health, engineering, agriculture, finance, education, and artificial intelligence. The Addis Convention (UNESCO, 2014) and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (AU, 2016) provide frameworks for such cooperation. Universities are therefore not peripheral actors in integration; they are among its most important institutional channels. The guiding idea is the shift

from *talent migration* to *talent circulation*: a connected Africa requires a connected African talent pool.

Peace and Security

Conflicts, terrorism, organised crime, trafficking, and cyber threats routinely cross national borders. The Sahel has become the global epicentre of terrorism, accounting for 51% of all terrorism deaths worldwide in 2024 (Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP], 2025). Such challenges cannot be managed by individual states alone. Intelligence sharing, border cooperation, counter-trafficking measures, conflict prevention, mediation, regional peacekeeping, and cybersecurity cooperation are therefore integral to the integration agenda. Regional bodies already play a central role here: IGAD has led mediation efforts in South Sudan and Sudan, and ECOWAS has developed one of the continent's most elaborate regional security frameworks. Peace and security are prerequisites for sustainable economic development, and integration, by raising the economic interdependence of neighbours, can in turn raise the costs of conflict.

Africa's Demographic Future

According to the United Nations' *World Population Prospects 2024*, the population of sub-Saharan Africa is projected to grow by about 79% between 2024 and 2054, reaching approximately 2.2 billion (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2024). This trajectory creates both an opportunity and a responsibility. Whether population growth becomes a demographic dividend or a development challenge will depend on education, employment, health, infrastructure, entrepreneurship, technology, and governance (Bloom et al., 2003; Canning et al., 2015). Integrated markets expand the range of employment opportunities available to young people, and regional labour mobility allows skills to flow to where they are most productive.

6. How Should African Nations Unite? A Five-Stage Pathway

Rather than attempting political union immediately, the article proposes a gradual, sequenced pathway of five stages (Pillai, 2026). The stages are cumulative but not strictly sequential; progress in one area can and should proceed in parallel with others where conditions permit, consistent with the AU's principle of variable geometry. Table 3 sets out the objectives, key instruments, and indicative progress indicators associated with each stage.

Table 3

A Five-Stage Pathway to African Integration

Stage	Practical objective	Key instruments	Indicative indicators	progress
1. Trade	Make the AfCFTA genuinely functional	AfCFTA tariff schedules, rules of origin, NTB reporting mechanism, trade facilitation	Share of intra-African trade; number of operational State Parties; certificates of origin issued; border clearance times	
2. Infrastructure	Connect economies through roads, rail, ports, power, and digital networks	PIDA, regional power pools, SAATM, Horn of Africa Gateway and LAPSET corridors, digital infrastructure programmes	Corridor transit times; cross-border electricity traded; broadband coverage and cost	
3. People	Facilitate movement of students, professionals, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers	Free Movement Protocol, Addis Convention, African Passport, visa openness	Ratifications of the Protocol; visa-free access; mutual recognition agreements	
4. Finance	Strengthen payment systems, investment institutions, and selective monetary cooperation	PAPSS, capital-market linkages, Afreximbank and AfDB instruments	Share of intra-African payments settled in local currencies; cost of cross-border transfers	
5. Political cooperation	Coordinate foreign policy on issues of common interest	AU common positions, G20 membership, Africa Climate Summit declarations, ACMI, negotiating groups	Number and coherence of common African positions in global forums	

Note. NTB = non-tariff barrier; LAPSET = Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport corridor; PIDA = Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa; SAATM = Single African Air Transport Market; ACMI = Africa Carbon Markets Initiative; PAPSS = Pan-African Payment and Settlement System.

Stage 1: Trade, From Borders to Markets

The first priority is to make the AfCFTA genuinely functional. This requires reducing unnecessary tariffs, addressing non-tariff barriers, simplifying and digitising customs procedures, harmonising standards, improving logistics, developing regional supply chains, and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) entering neighbouring markets. Given the World Bank's (2020) finding that trade facilitation accounts for the larger share of potential gains, investments in customs modernisation and border management are likely to yield higher returns than further tariff negotiations alone. The long-term vision is that an African company should be able to regard the continent as one connected marketplace.

Stage 2: Infrastructure, Connecting Africa

The second stage connects African economies physically and digitally: cross-border railway networks, regional road corridors, modern ports and logistics hubs, integrated electricity networks, digital and telecommunications infrastructure, and interoperable digital payment systems. Closing the infrastructure financing gap will require blending public, concessional, and private finance, including greater mobilisation of African institutional investors such as pension funds and sovereign wealth funds (AfDB, 2018). Corridor projects such as the Horn of Africa Gateway Development Project show how national infrastructure can be designed from the outset to serve regional connectivity, and they should increasingly be built to climate-resilient standards (State Department for Roads, 2026).

Stage 3: People, Mobility of Skills and Ideas

The third stage facilitates the movement of students, professionals, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers. This is currently the weakest link in the integration architecture. The AU Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment (AU, 2018b) requires 15 ratifications to enter into force, yet only four states (Mali, Niger, Rwanda, and São Tomé and Príncipe) have ratified it despite 32 signatures. The contrast with the AfCFTA's near-universal ratification is striking and reflects the security, labour-market, and political sensitivities surrounding mobility. The AU Executive Council has accordingly encouraged a phased approach based on variable geometry (AU Executive Council, 2025). Progress at the regional level, notably within ECOWAS and the EAC, offers models that can be extended continentally.

Stage 4: Finance, Payment Systems and Investment

The fourth stage strengthens African payment systems, investment institutions, and, eventually and where appropriate, monetary cooperation. Historically, many intra-African transactions have required conversion through third-party currencies, adding cost and delay. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), launched in 2022 by Afreximbank with the AU and the AfCFTA Secretariat, enables settlement in local currencies. Following the accession of the Bank of Central African States in July 2026, the system's coverage extended to 28 African countries (PAPSS, 2026). Monetary union, by contrast, should be approached with caution. Masson and Pattillo (2005) show that the conditions for optimal currency areas are weakly satisfied across much of Africa, and that monetary union without fiscal discipline and convergence can impose significant costs. Payment interoperability, rather than a single currency, is the realistic near-term objective.

Stage 5: Political Cooperation and a Stronger Global Voice

The fifth stage involves coordinating foreign policy and international negotiations on issues of common interest. This includes developing common positions on international trade, climate and development finance, debt restructuring, global taxation, technology governance, natural resources, migration, and sustainable development. The Africa Climate Summits illustrate this stage in practice, producing negotiated continental declarations that frame Africa's position in global climate diplomacy (AU, 2023, 2025). The long-term vision is a *United African Community* rather than a United States-style federation, in which the AU plays a coordinating role and the RECs (including ECOWAS, SADC, the EAC, COMESA, and ECCAS) remain important building blocks.

7. From Competition to Complementarity: Regional Value Chains

A distinctive element of the framework is a shift in the question African economies ask of one another, from "How can we compete with each other?" to "What can we build together?" Many African economies have similar export structures, which UNCTAD (2023) identifies as a constraint on trade complementarity. Regional value chains offer a way to transform this similarity into complementarity. One country may possess minerals, another energy, a third manufacturing capability, a fourth financial services, and a fifth technology and skilled talent. Together they can construct value chains that none could build alone.

This logic has several practical implications. It suggests that industrial policy should be coordinated regionally rather than pursued in parallel national strategies that replicate one another's capacity. It implies that rules of origin under the AfCFTA should be designed to reward regional cumulation (UNCTAD, 2019). It also underscores the role of corridor infrastructure, such as the Lobito Corridor linking mineral-producing areas of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia to the Atlantic, in making such chains commercially viable. In short, the shift from competition to complementarity is the economic expression of the *One Africa, Many Nations* principle.

8. Constraints, Risks, and Counterarguments

A credible case for integration must engage with the obstacles and objections it faces. Six stand out.

The implementation gap. The most pervasive constraint is the distance between commitment and practice. The AfCFTA's high ratification count coexists with partial operationalisation of tariff schedules; the Free Movement Protocol has been widely signed but scarcely ratified. This pattern is consistent with Gathii's (2011) and Söderbaum's (2016) analyses, which suggest that African regional agreements often serve signalling and regime-legitimation purposes. Integration strategies must therefore prioritise implementation monitoring, domestication of commitments into national law, and incentives for compliance.

Overlapping memberships. Many African states belong to two or more RECs with differing tariff regimes and rules of origin, a "spaghetti bowl" that raises compliance costs and complicates customs union formation (Hartzenberg, 2011; Yang & Gupta, 2007). The AfCFTA offers an opportunity to rationalise these arrangements, and the entry into force of the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite Free Trade Area in July 2024 demonstrates that inter-REC consolidation is possible (COMESA, 2024).

Political fragmentation. Integration is not irreversible. The withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, which took effect in January 2025, and Eritrea's withdrawal from IGAD in December 2025 (The Reporter, 2025) show that political shocks, unconstitutional changes of government, and security crises can reverse long-standing integration gains. Conversely, the EAC's expansion to include Somalia shows that the pull of regional membership remains strong. Sovereignty-preserving integration is partly a response to this risk, as it lowers the political stakes of participation, but it does not eliminate it.

Distributional concerns. Gains from integration are unevenly distributed. More industrialised economies may capture a disproportionate share of manufacturing gains, while smaller and less diversified economies may face tariff revenue losses and adjustment costs (World Bank, 2020a). Mattli (1999) emphasises that integration schemes require mechanisms to

compensate losers. The AfCFTA Adjustment Fund, supported by Afreximbank, represents one such mechanism, and its adequacy will be important to sustaining political support.

Financing and debt. Infrastructure and human capital investments require substantial finance at a time when many African states face elevated debt burdens. Without innovative financing and the mobilisation of domestic and continental capital, the infrastructure layer of integration will remain underbuilt (AfDB, 2018).

Sovereignty sensitivities. Finally, sceptics argue that integration erodes national autonomy. The framework proposed here responds by distinguishing between the *pooling* of specific functions and the *surrender* of sovereignty. Coordinated customs procedures, interoperable payment systems, or mutual recognition of qualifications enhance rather than diminish the effective capacity of states to deliver prosperity to their citizens.

9. The Leadership Challenge

If the literature identifies the implementation gap as the core problem, the framework identifies leadership as the bridge between vision and implementation. African leaders, in government, business, universities, and civil society, must address five fundamental questions:

1. Can national interests and continental interests be aligned?
2. Can infrastructure be planned beyond national borders?
3. Can African talent circulate more freely?
4. Can natural resources create African value chains?
5. Can African countries cooperate without compromising national sovereignty?

Each question corresponds to a layer of the model in Figure 1, and each requires a form of leadership that looks beyond electoral cycles and national boundaries. This resonates with Mattli's (1999) argument that the supply of integration depends on political leadership willing to absorb short-term costs for long-term collective gains. It also implies that leadership development, including in higher education institutions that train future public servants and entrepreneurs, is itself an integration strategy.

A single reflective question captures the challenge: *If Africa has the people, resources, markets, and talent required for its development, what prevents Africans from creating greater value together?* The challenge is no longer simply what Africa possesses, but how effectively Africa can connect what it possesses.

What would success look like in everyday terms? A student could study in another African country more easily; a professional could work across borders with recognised qualifications; an African SME could sell throughout the continent; goods could cross borders with fewer delays; electricity could flow between neighbouring countries; African payment systems could facilitate cross-border commerce; universities could collaborate across regions; and African companies could build continental supply chains. Integration would then become part of everyday economic life rather than a subject of summit declarations.

10. Policy Recommendations

The analysis yields eight recommendations for African governments, the AU, the RECs, and non-state actors.

1. **Prioritise implementation over new commitments.** Establish transparent, publicly reported scorecards for the domestication and operationalisation of AfCFTA tariff schedules, rules of origin, and trade facilitation measures.
2. **Invest in trade facilitation first.** Given that most modelled gains derive from trade facilitation (World Bank, 2020a), accelerate digitisation of customs, one-stop border posts, and coordinated border management.
3. **Plan infrastructure as corridors.** Align national infrastructure plans with PIDA and regional power pools, and mobilise African institutional investors through blended-finance vehicles.
4. **Adopt variable geometry for free movement.** Allow coalitions of willing states to advance mobility for students, professionals, and entrepreneurs ahead of full continental ratification, drawing on ECOWAS and EAC experience.
5. **Scale payment interoperability.** Expand PAPSS connectivity and harmonise regulatory requirements for low-value cross-border payments before contemplating monetary union.
6. **Coordinate industrial policy regionally.** Identify priority regional value chains (for example, batteries, pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, and textiles) and align investment incentives, standards, and rules of origin accordingly.
7. **Mobilise universities as integration actors.** Implement the Addis Convention, expand student and faculty mobility schemes, and build continental research networks in priority sectors, including digital technologies and artificial intelligence.
8. **Strengthen compensation and inclusion mechanisms.** Resource adjustment funds adequately and design integration measures that include SMEs, women, youth, and informal cross-border traders.

11. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is conceptual and integrative; it does not estimate causal effects. Its data draw on institutional sources that use differing definitions and are subject to revision, and the rapid evolution of AfCFTA implementation means that some figures will date quickly. The five-stage pathway is presented as a heuristic rather than as a strictly sequential model, and its applicability will vary across regions. Future research could usefully (a) develop and test composite indicators of the ratification-implementation gap across AU instruments; (b) conduct comparative case studies of RECs that have advanced free movement, such as ECOWAS and the EAC, to identify transferable lessons; (c) evaluate the trade and welfare effects of PAPSS adoption using transaction-level data; (d) examine the role of higher education institutions and professional bodies in fostering talent circulation; and (e) investigate how leadership attributes and political incentives shape national compliance with continental commitments.

12. Conclusion

This article has argued that African nations have compelling reasons to deepen their cooperation, grounded in market scale, low intra-African trade, infrastructure needs, resource value addition, collective bargaining power, human capital, security interdependence, and demographic change. It has also argued that unity need not mean the creation of a single state or government. The more realistic and more achievable objective is sovereignty-preserving functional integration: African countries remaining sovereign while making it increasingly easy for African people, goods, capital, knowledge, and services to move across African borders.

The proposed pathway (trade, infrastructure, people, finance, and political coordination) offers a practical sequence for this project, while the seven-layer model situates it within the continent's existing institutional architecture. The evidence reviewed indicates that the principal obstacle is not the absence of frameworks but the gap between commitment and implementation. Closing that gap is ultimately a question of leadership.

The article's central message may therefore be summarised as follows: Africa's unity should be practical before it becomes political. The trajectory it envisages runs from fragmentation to integration, from raw materials to value creation, from national markets to continental markets, from talent migration to talent circulation, from competition to complementarity, and from individual voices to collective influence. The ultimate objective is simple: to make cooperation across African borders easier, stronger, and more beneficial for African people. One Africa, many nations, and a shared future.

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