

SEMINAR AND CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

Regional Economic Integration in Africa: At the Centre of the Debate

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THREE seminars and conferences held in recent times focused on the theme of regional economic integration and trade agreements in the vast continent of Africa. The International Business Forum of the MIT World Peace University, Pune, organized an event on the theme 'Upeowa Macho' / Explore Beyond the Horizon: Business in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges on 9 January 2021. The Council of Leather Exports (CLE) organized an Indo-African Conclave on March 2023 in New Delhi. Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service (SSIFS) of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India organized a training programme for diplomats from the African countries Eritrea and Zambia on 18 April 2023 at their campus in New Delhi. While the events at MIT World Peace

University in Pune and the Indo-African conclave of the Council of Leather Exports (CLE) focused specifically on the regional economic integration and trade agreements in Africa, the programme at the SSIFS, though built on the broad theme of 'Global Economic Landscape', nonetheless, keeping the participants in view did touch upon the economic integration landscape in Africa.

The International Conference 'Upeowa Macho' at MIT Pune had Mrs. Sunanda Rajendran, Secretary General of the Indo-African Chamber of Commerce and Industries, delivering a keynote address on 'Doing Business in Africa', and as a Guest of Honour, I presented a paper on trading arrangements in Africa. The two-day Conference had four plenary sessions on different aspects of doing business in Africa in which representatives from trade, industry, diplomats, and government officials deliberated upon the various aspects of the business opportunities and challenges in Africa. The CLE's Africa Conclave saw the participation of the Heads of the Mission of African Countries in India along with the exporter community and government officials.

On all these occasions I had the opportunity of presenting a paper or delivering a talk on different aspects of trading arrangements in Africa. The paper presented by me in the 'Upeowa Macho' at MIT World Peace University was titled 'Preferential Trading Arrangements in Africa', the talk delivered in the African Conclave of CLE was on 'The African Continental Free Trade Area' and the presentation made in the diplomats' programme of the FSI also touched upon these themes. Though I am working on a detailed paper on the various themes mentioned above, it may still be useful to highlight the salient features of the talks delivered by me in these forums in the form of excerpts taken from my research paper. Incidentally, these forums represent an interesting combination in terms of the variety of stakeholders they touch upon: MIT World Peace University as an academic institution, CLE being a trade association and export promotion council, and the SSIFS being a specialized institution of the Government of India for diplomatic training. It may also be worthwhile to mention here that the insights drawn from the firsthand experience of doing business in Africa, initially as a corporate executive and subsequently as a representative of the export community when I visited number

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of African countries, have been useful. Indian Institute of Foreign Trade (IIFT) has also conducted training programmes for officials across the length and breadth of the vast continent. I had the fortune of being a faculty in these programmes and Programme Director of the Workshops organized in Seychelles and South Africa. All these programmes, amongst other things, deliberated on the dynamics of the multitude of economic integration initiatives across the African continent.

Africa provides an interesting case study of a multitude of economic integration arrangements existing on a continent. The massive exercise being attempted to integrate the various Regional Economic Communities into a Pan-African bloc is one of its kind effort in the world. The European Union provides another important case study of a complex regional economic integration effort. The European and African economic integration projects have the obvious difference in the kind of challenges they face on account of variations in the level of economic development at which the countries in the two continents operate or the experience that the two regions have related to the colonial past, one

as colonizers and the other as colonies. There is, nonetheless, another important distinction between the two projects. While the European case has been more about expansion in membership and deepening of economic integration within a bloc, the African case is about the creation, sustenance, and a sort of amalgamation of several independent trade blocs into a unified entity. In Europe, European Free Trade Area (EFTA) and European Economic Community (EEC) have coexisted and while European Union (EU) evolved from EEC and it grew in membership through countries shifting from EFTA to EU over the years or through the addition of the countries from East Europe, EFTA has in the meanwhile dwindled in size. African initiative, on the other hand, is a project-in-progress and has a complexity of its own as it entails integrating eight Regional Economic Communities into a massive African Economic Community.

The multiple regional arrangements in Africa are referred to as Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and there are overlaps in terms of membership in some of these RECs. There is a realization that these RECs can be

integrated to create a Pan-African entity. That is what African Union aims to do with its proposed African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCTFA), also referred to as Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA), that will integrate the existing eight Regional Economic Communities.

African Union was launched in 2002, subsequent to the Sirte Declaration of 1999 in Libya. It was created as a successor to the Organization for African Unity (OAU) which was created in 1963 in Addis Ababa. African Union has a goal to take the proposed AfCTFA to higher levels of economic integration of a Customs Union, to a Common Market, and eventually to the level of an Economic and Monetary Union with a common Central Bank and a common currency.

Africa is a huge continent that has 54 sovereign countries on its landmass that are engaged in a multitude of regional trade agreements comprising Africa plurilateral, within Africa, bilateral and Africa external plurilateral. Any further development on economic integration matters will thus continue to draw the attention of the international community and those who have business interests in Africa.

