



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

GLOBAL FORUM FOR
SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Volume 1 Issue 2 (2024)

PUBLISHED BY: E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA





African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement: Implications for Sustainable Rural Development

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Article Information

Received: May 28, 2024

Accepted: June 06, 2024

Published: August 17, 2024

Keywords

African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), Sustainable Rural Development, Market Access, Infrastructure Development, Trade Integration, Economic Growth, Intra-African Trade

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the consequences of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement on the long-term viability of rural development in Africa. The review examines the potential of the AfCFTA to improve market access, increase agricultural productivity, and promote infrastructure development in rural regions through the analysis of empirical research, reviews, and policy papers. The key findings emphasize the potential advantages of decreased trade barriers, which can encourage the use of contemporary farming methods and enhance rural incomes. Nevertheless, it is imperative to tackle obstacles such as inadequate infrastructure, environmental sustainability, and social equity in order to achieve comprehensive and fair growth. The analysis highlights the necessity of implementing comprehensive policies that provide assistance to small-scale farmers, encourage sustainable methods, and guarantee fair distribution of benefits from trade among rural communities. These findings offer a strong and reliable foundation of evidence for policymakers who want to utilize the AfCFTA to bring about significant and positive changes in rural development in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement, an important undertaking initiated on January 1, 2021, signifies a substantial advancement towards economic unification across the African continent (Mlambo *et al.*, 2022). The AfCFTA intends to establish the world's largest free trade area in terms of the number of participating nations, covering 54 out of 55 African Union member states. This agreement aims to promote commerce within Africa by lowering tariffs, standardizing trade protocols, and removing obstacles to trade, thereby promoting economic growth, diversity, and industrialization (Abrego *et al.*, 2020). According to ElGanainy *et al.*, (2023), the AfCFTA is not only a trade deal, but a crucial framework that has the capacity to transform economic landscapes, improve political stability, and foster equitable and sustainable development. The ramifications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are extensive, especially for rural development, as the bulk of the African population lives in rural areas and faces significant economic risks.

Within the framework of sustainable rural development, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has the potential to revolutionize agricultural sectors, enhance the economic capabilities of local communities, and alleviate rural poverty (World Bank, 2020). This research seeks to clarify the various effects of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on rural communities by thoroughly examining existing literature and empirical data. The main areas of concentration are market access, rural infrastructure improvement, agricultural efficiency, and the significance of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs).

Additionally, the research will investigate the ecological and societal aspects of sustainable rural development, examining the potential impact of the AfCFTA on sustainable farming methods, resource utilization, and fairness in society. This article aims to offer a thorough comprehension of how the AfCFTA can be utilized to foster all-encompassing and sustainable development in rural areas of Africa. By combining various viewpoints and empirical data, it seeks to contribute to the overall economic and social transformation of the continent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework on Trade and Development

The literature has firmly established the theoretical foundations that connect trade agreements to economic progress. Conventional economic theories, including the comparative advantage model by David Ricardo argue that free trade improves efficiency and productivity by enabling countries to focus on their areas of comparative advantage (Siddiqui, 2018). Modern frameworks have broadened these perspectives to encompass the dynamic advantages of trade, such as the transfer of technology, economies of scale, and heightened competitiveness. The New Economic Geography theory offers valuable insights into how trade integration, as facilitated by the AfCFTA, might promote regional development in Africa (Horner, 2015). This can be achieved through the concentration of economic activities and the establishment of new centers of growth (Horner, 2015). These theoretical viewpoints highlight the capacity of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to stimulate economic transformation throughout the continent.

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Effects of Trade Agreements on Rural Development

Empirical research has demonstrated that trade agreements have a substantial influence on rural development, although the results are frequently varied and contingent on the specific circumstances. Positive effects of this include enhanced market accessibility for agricultural goods, heightened inflow of foreign investments, and the possibility of rural industrialization (Douwe *et al.*, 2017). An example of this is the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which showed that increased trade can result in significant improvements in agricultural production and rural income in the nations involved (Silva & Cabral, 2024). Nevertheless, the advantages of these benefits are frequently dispersed in an unequal manner, posing difficulties for small-scale farmers and underdeveloped areas in their competition against larger, more proficient producers. The success of the AfCFTA in improving rural economies in Africa will rely on the implementation of supportive policies and investments in infrastructure, education, and capacity building (Ingeri, 2020).

Market Access and Productivity of Agricultural Products

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is anticipated to greatly enhance market entry for African farmers, potentially resulting in heightened agricultural efficiency and rural earnings. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2018), the complete implementation of the African Continental Free commerce Area (AfCFTA) is projected to result in a 15-25% increase in commerce between African countries, amounting to \$50-70 billion by the year 2040. Moreover, according to Signé (2018), if the AfCFTA is effectively implemented, Africa is projected to have a total consumer and commercial expenditure of \$6.7 trillion by 2030. Nevertheless, these projections are dependent on the implementation of ambitious trade liberalization throughout the entire continent. The enhanced accessibility to local markets can offer fresh prospects for farmers to vend their agricultural products at more favorable rates, hence promoting the adoption of contemporary farming methods and resources (Cole *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, the literature warns that the advantages mentioned above are dependent on the capability of rural producers to fulfill the necessary quality and standards demanded by bigger markets. This highlights the need for supportive policies that focus on enhancing capacity and developing infrastructure.

Infrastructure Development and Rural Connectivity

The success of the AfCFTA in encouraging sustainable rural development is heavily influenced by infrastructure development. Robust transportation networks, reliable energy supplies, and efficient communication systems are crucial for linking rural communities to regional and worldwide markets. The African Development Bank (AfDB, 2019) has found that inadequate infrastructure

continues to hinder trade in numerous African nations. Enhanced infrastructure not only enables easier entry into the market but also decreases expenses related to transactions, boosts competitiveness, and promotes the expansion of rural economies (Vagliasindi, 2022). Furthermore, allocating funds towards the development of rural infrastructure might result in a ripple effect, creating job opportunities and fostering economic growth in nearby towns.

Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Factors

The research emphasizes the significance of incorporating environmental sustainability into the development strategies linked to the AfCFTA. Implementing sustainable agricultural methods, such as conservation agriculture, agroforestry, and integrated pest management, is essential for preserving soil health, biodiversity, and water resources (Muhie, 2022). The AfCFTA offers a chance to encourage such practices by establishing criteria and rewards for sustainable production. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2020) studies highlight the need of trade policies being in line with environmental objectives in order to guarantee lasting sustainability. Ensuring this alignment is crucial for minimizing the detrimental effects of intensive farming techniques, which can result in soil degradation, deforestation, and water scarcity.

Promoting Fairness and Equal Opportunities in Development

The consequences of the AfCFTA for social fairness and inclusive development are of utmost importance. It is crucial to achieve sustainable development goals by ensuring that the advantages of trade are equitably distributed across rural communities, including women, youth, and marginalized groups. Monteiro, (2021) emphasizes that trade policies that are inclusive should tackle concerns related to labor rights, gender equality, and social protection. Enabling small-scale farmers, facilitating financial access, and fostering education and skills enhancement are essential approaches for achieving inclusive growth within the framework of the AfCFTA. Implementing these strategies can guarantee that rural areas are not excluded from the wider process of economic integration.

Conclusion and Literature Gap

The literature on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement highlights its capacity to bring about significant economic integration and promote sustainable rural development in Africa. Theoretical frameworks emphasize the role of trade liberalization in stimulating economic growth, enhancing market efficiency, and promoting regional development by leveraging comparative advantage and economies of scale. Empirical research shows that trade agreements have the potential to improve market access, boost agricultural productivity, and promote



rural industrialization. However, these gains are usually dependent on the presence of adequate infrastructure, capacity building, and complementary policies. The AfCFTA offers substantial enhancements in market entry and agricultural efficiency, contingent upon rural farmers' ability to adhere to market standards and quality criteria. Infrastructure development has a crucial role in facilitating economic activities by decreasing the expenses associated with transactions and linking remote regions to larger marketplaces. Furthermore, the incorporation of sustainable farming methods and the guarantee of social fairness are crucial for attaining enduring development objectives. The literature study establishes a strong basis for comprehending the diverse effects of the AfCFTA on rural development, emphasizing both favorable prospects and obstacles.

Although there has been significant study conducted on trade agreements and rural development, there are still several areas that have not been fully explored in relation to the AfCFTA and its direct impact on sustainable rural development. There is a shortage of empirical research that specifically examines the initial effects of the AfCFTA on rural economies, considering that the deal has only recently been put into action. Longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the medium- and long-term impacts of the AfCFTA on rural livelihoods, agricultural productivity, and poverty reduction. Furthermore, the current body of research often oversimplifies the possible advantages and difficulties, failing to fully take into account the varied economic, social, and environmental circumstances found in different regions of Africa. It is necessary to conduct comparative studies that consider geographical variances and specificities in order to offer more customized policy recommendations. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of study regarding the impact of digital infrastructure and technology on improving rural connectivity and market access within the scope of the AfCFTA. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of how digital tools may connect gaps in conventional infrastructure and enable trade is essential for optimizing the advantages of the agreement. There is a need for additional multidisciplinary study to investigate the connections between trade, sustainability, and social equity. Specifically, it is important to understand how trade policies might be adjusted to support environmental and social goals, in order to promote inclusive and sustainable rural development. In order to fully harness the potential of the AfCFTA to revolutionize rural economies throughout Africa, it is imperative to address these existing deficiencies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper utilizes a systematic review methodology to thoroughly evaluate the consequences of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement for sustainable rural development. The systematic review framework is selected for its meticulousness and capacity to be replicated, allowing for a comprehensive synthesis

of existing research. The process entails several crucial steps: formulating the research inquiries, devising a search plan, choosing studies according to predetermined criteria for inclusion and exclusion, extracting pertinent data, evaluating the quality of the selected studies, and analyzing the data to derive significant conclusions (Shaheen *et al.*, 2023). This methodological approach guarantees that the review is conducted in a methodical, transparent, and unbiased manner, resulting in a strong evidence base for comprehending the various consequences of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on rural development throughout Africa.

Search Strategy

The search method is formulated to encompass a complete spectrum of pertinent literature from various academic databases, such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The text utilizes keywords and search terms associated with the AfCFTA, rural development, sustainable agriculture, market access, infrastructural development, and social equity. Boolean operators are used to narrow down and broaden the search range, ensuring that both peer-reviewed papers and gray literature, such as reports from international organizations and policy briefs, are included (See Table 1). In addition, the reference lists of selected papers are examined to locate further relevant studies. The search is restricted to English writings from 2014 to 2024, encompassing both historical and present viewpoints.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria are carefully established to guarantee the pertinence and excellence of the chosen studies. The inclusion requirements pertain to empirical research, reviews, and policy papers that specifically focus on the AfCFTA and its effects on rural development, sustainable agriculture, or associated economic and social consequences in Africa. Research studies must present empirical evidence or substantial theoretical analysis that is directly applicable to the research topics. The exclusion criteria encompass research that examine trade agreements outside of Africa, studies that lack empirical data or thorough analysis, and publications written in languages other than English. Studies that are not directly relevant to rural development or sustainability within the context of the AfCFTA are also omitted in order to retain the review's specific emphasis (See Table 2).

Data Extraction

Data extraction is performed with a defined extraction form to guarantee uniformity and thoroughness. The essential details obtained from each study encompass the study's structure, geographic emphasis, sample size, data collection and analysis methodologies, significant discoveries, and their pertinence to the research inquiries. Particular emphasis is placed on gathering data pertaining to market access, agricultural productivity, infrastructural



development, sustainable practices, and the effects on social fairness. The extraction process is conducted by numerous reviewers in an independent manner to reduce prejudice and inconsistencies. Any differences are handled by discussion or by seeking input from a third reviewer.

Quality Assessment

The evaluation of the studies included in the analysis is conducted using known assessment procedures that are appropriate for various types of study designs. Empirical research utilizes techniques the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) critical appraisal tools to assess the methodological rigor, validity, and dependability of the findings (See Table 3). Review papers are evaluated based on their thoroughness, lucidity, and ability to integrate evidence. The quality evaluation process involves the examination of potential biases, the strength of the data, and the suitability of the procedures employed. During the synthesis and analysis stages, high-quality studies are prioritized to guarantee the legitimacy and dependability of the review's results.

Data Analysis

Data analysis entails the amalgamation of extracted information to discern prevalent themes, patterns, and deficiencies in the literature. The narrative synthesis approach is employed to examine both qualitative and quantitative data, enabling the integration of various forms of evidence. Thematic analysis is performed to classify research findings into important domains such as market accessibility, infrastructure advancement, agricultural efficiency, sustainable methodologies, and social fairness. If relevant, meta-analysis techniques are employed to quantify the impacts of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on specific outcomes, thereby offering a more accurate measure of its impact. The synthesis approach seeks to gain a thorough understanding of the diverse impacts of the AfCFTA, emphasizing both favorable results and obstacles, and providing recommendations for policy and practice based on data.

Table 1: Search Strategy

Database	Search Terms
Scopus	"AfCFTA" OR "African Continental Free Trade Area" AND "rural development" OR "sustainable agriculture" OR "market access" OR "infrastructure" OR "social equity"
Web of Science	"AfCFTA" OR "African Continental Free Trade Area" AND "rural development" OR "sustainable agriculture" OR "market access" OR "infrastructure" OR "social equity"
Google Scholar	"AfCFTA" OR "African Continental Free Trade Area" AND "rural development" OR "sustainable agriculture" OR "market access" OR "infrastructure" OR "social equity"
EconLit	"AfCFTA" OR "African Continental Free Trade Area" AND "rural development" OR "sustainable agriculture" OR "market access" OR "infrastructure" OR "social equity"
African Journals Online (AJOL)	"AfCFTA" OR "African Continental Free Trade Area" AND "rural development" OR "sustainable agriculture" OR "market access" OR "infrastructure" OR "social equity"

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Language	Articles published in English	Articles published in languages other than English
Publication Date	Studies published between 2014 and 2024	Studies published before 2014
Geographical Focus	Studies focusing on African countries and the AfCFTA	Studies focusing on trade agreements outside Africa
Content Relevance	Articles specifically focusing on the AfCFTA and its impact on rural development, sustainable agriculture, market accessibility, infrastructure, and social equality.	Articles that do not directly relate to the AfCFTA or rural development
Study Design	Empirical studies, reviews, and policy articles that offer significant theoretical analysis or empirical data pertaining to the research questions.	Editorials, opinion pieces, and studies lacking empirical data or rigorous analysis
Population Focus	Research that specifically examines rural communities, such as small-scale farmers, rural enterprises, and disadvantaged people.	Studies focusing exclusively on urban populations
Type of Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from international organizations, and policy briefs	Conference abstracts, non-peer-reviewed articles, and non-academic publications



Table 3: Quality Assessment

Quality Criteria	Description
Rigor of Methodology	Assesses the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the study methodologies, encompassing sample approaches, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures. High-quality studies employ rigorous, methodical, and reproducible techniques.
Sample Representativeness	Evaluates the extent to which the sample employed in the study faithfully reflects the wider population or phenomenon being examined. Research conducted with samples that accurately represent the population are favored because they improve the capacity to apply the findings to a larger group.
Validity of Findings	Evaluates the degree to which the study's results accurately correspond to the research questions and objectives. This encompasses the internal validity, which refers to the accuracy of the study's conclusions regarding causal linkages, and the external validity, which pertains to the degree to which the findings may be applied to different settings or groups.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

An analysis of the literature on AfTCA reveals its interconnectedness of various factors and their implications for sustainable rural development

Relationship between Market access and Agricultural Productivity

The systematic review demonstrates that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has the capacity to greatly improve market entry and agricultural efficiency in rural parts of Africa. Research suggests that the AfCFTA has the potential to boost intra-African trade by more than 50% through the reduction of tariffs and non-tariff barriers. This would result in increased chances for farmers to sell their produce at competitive rates (Simola *et al.*, 2021). The enhanced market access is anticipated to motivate farmers to embrace contemporary agricultural methods and resources, resulting in increased productivity and incomes (Borsellino *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the analysis also emphasizes that the advantages of expanded market access are not evenly dispersed. Smallholder farmers, who make up the majority of the rural population, typically face resource constraints that hinder their ability to effectively compete in larger marketplaces that are dominated by commercial farms (Tuni *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, although the AfCFTA offers substantial advantages, achieving these benefits will necessitate specific measures to assist small-scale farmers in meeting market requirements and improving their ability to compete.

Infrastructure Development and Rural Connectivity

Infrastructure development plays a crucial role in realizing the advantages of the AfCFTA for rural communities. Enhanced transportation networks, energy supply, and communication systems are crucial for decreasing transaction costs and linking rural producers to wider markets. The evaluation highlights the substantial lack of infrastructure in numerous African nations, which serves as a significant obstacle to commerce (Kaiser & Barstow, 2022). Examples of obstacles that impede the full engagement of rural communities in the economic opportunities provided by the African Continental Free

economic Area (AfCFTA) include inadequate road infrastructure and restricted availability of dependable energy. Investing in infrastructure not only enables trade but also has a ripple effect, creating jobs and supporting local economies (Mlambo *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, the research highlights that infrastructure initiatives frequently encounter obstacles such as funding, governance concerns, and environmental consequences. Hence, it is important to have collaborative endeavors among governments, private enterprises, and foreign collaborators in order to surmount these obstacles and guarantee that infrastructure advancement facilitates sustainable rural development.

Sustainable Agricultural Practices and Environmental Sustainability

The systematic review highlights the significance of incorporating sustainable agriculture practices into the AfCFTA framework to guarantee enduring environmental sustainability. Conservation agriculture, agroforestry, and integrated pest control are essential for preserving soil health, biodiversity, and water resources (Sinclair *et al.*, 2019). The AfCFTA can facilitate the adoption of these techniques by establishing standardized regulations at the regional level and offering rewards for sustainable production. Nevertheless, the evaluation reveals that existing regulations frequently favor immediate economic benefits at the expense of long-term sustainability, resulting in behaviors that harm the environment and exhaust natural resources. There is an urgent requirement for policies that effectively reconcile economic development and environmental protection, guaranteeing that the expansion of commerce does not harm ecological well-being (Yang *et al.*, 2022). This necessitates a fundamental change in thinking towards sustainable intensification, which involves increasing agricultural productivity without causing negative effects on the environment.

Promoting Fairness and Equal Opportunities in Development

The AfCFTA has major consequences for social fairness and inclusive development, however these effects are



intricate. The evaluation emphasizes that although the AfCFTA holds the potential to stimulate economic growth and alleviate poverty, there is a concern that the advantages may not be spread fairly, especially among marginalized demographics such as women, youth, and smallholder farmers (Thusi *et al.*, 2022). Promoting inclusive development necessitates intentional policies that specifically target and rectify systemic disparities while offering assistance to marginalized people. Enabling small-scale farmers, enhancing financial accessibility, and advocating for education and skill enhancement are crucial approaches for attaining equitable economic expansion. The assessment emphasizes the significance of labor rights and social protection measures in protecting workers' interests and ensuring that economic progress leads to better living conditions for everyone (Stringer *et al.*, 2020). In the absence of such safeguards, the implementation of the AfCFTA could worsen pre-existing disparities and weaken societal unity.

CONCLUSION

The systematic review of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement demonstrates its significant capacity to revolutionize rural economies throughout Africa through the improvement of market accessibility, the augmentation of agricultural output, and the promotion of infrastructure advancement. The findings emphasize that the successful achievement of significant economic growth and sustainable development through the AfCFTA depends on effectively addressing crucial obstacles such as infrastructural shortages, environmental sustainability, and social equality. Rural economies heavily rely on smallholder farmers, who need specific assistance to effectively compete in larger markets. Concurrently, it is crucial to incorporate sustainable farming techniques in order to maintain environmental well-being and guarantee sustainable productivity in the long run. Moreover, implementing inclusive policies that empower marginalized groups and guarantee fair distribution of trade advantages is essential in order to avoid worsening of current disparities. Hence, it is crucial for the AfCFTA to adopt a comprehensive and integrated strategy that encompasses infrastructure investment, sustainable practices, and social inclusion in order to fully realize its potential in promoting sustainable rural development throughout the continent. Further investigation should persist in examining these aspects to offer strong, empirically-supported policy suggestions that optimize the revolutionary influence of the AfCFTA..

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