



United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa



Creating One African Market

EXISTENTIAL PRIORITIES

for the African Continental Free Trade Area



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A decorative background consisting of a grid of thin grey lines. At the intersections of these lines are small, semi-transparent colored circles in shades of teal, orange, pink, and grey. The circles are scattered across the page, with some appearing in clusters and others in isolation.

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Foreword

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is of the same order of historical significance as the establishment of the Organisation for African Unity in 1963 and the African Union in 2002. Through trade and trade-related areas, it is poised to change the economic geography of Africa by creating the African Common Market. The AfCFTA enjoys strong political will and ownership at the highest level across the continent, which greatly improves its prospects. As a rules-based institution, it will inject a degree of predictability into trade and investment across the continent, which until now has been sorely lacking. It will support long-term planning in the public and private sectors. Underlying such processes of deep integration—which entail more than just trade liberalization between member states—is the harmonization of disparate regulatory regimes. The AfCFTA's implementation will improve the business environment through wide-ranging policy reforms across the spectrum of trade and investment facilitation, fair competition, intellectual property and innovation, digitalization, and gender and youth empowerment in trade, as well as effective settlement of disputes and compliance with obligations on the part of governments for the benefit of stakeholders.

Africa has clearly articulated a vision of the AfCFTA as the continental forum for adopting, implementing, improving and enforcing a common set of agreed trade and trade-related rules and norms for the Africa We Want under Agenda 2063. The AfCFTA will progressively become a full common market as a key pillar of the African Economic Community. It should be inclusive, leaving no one and no country behind. It should benefit women, youth and small to medium-size enterprises. It should be transformative, and to this end, trade facilitation, industrialization and infrastructure will be critical must-wins. It should be digitalized and modern, to cope with and benefit from the digital and artificial intelligence advances of the fourth industrial revolution. It should be a learning and innovation-based institution. And it should be well-resourced, fit for purpose and green throughout.

We note with satisfaction that within just two and a half years, the AfCFTA has left its mark on the continent and throughout the world. It has mobilized partnerships with technical and financial institutions and with governments. The institutional framework for implementation, finalization of outstanding negotiations and strengthening of the Secretariat is in place. And while we are keenly aware of the challenges that must be addressed, we are undaunted by them.

Existential threats and challenges of conflicts, pandemics and epidemics, climate change and environmental destruction, and cyber-crime, as well as inequality and exclusion, must be continuously addressed if the AfCFTA is to succeed. The more practical challenges of implementation, low levels of industrialization and poor infrastructure will also require urgent attention. At the same time, broader efforts must continue at the national, regional, continental and global levels, because system-wide approaches will be required given the gravity and wide scope of these challenges. The AfCFTA provides an invaluable framework for meeting these challenges and existential threats.

This book is therefore timely. It advances the discussion and can form a basis for further work. Some key messages in the book are that Africa must aim to be internally stronger through progressively deeper and wider economic integration; affordable energy, rules of origin that support regional value chains, empowerment of women and youth, and free movement of persons are key priorities; and the future of Africa must be digitally savvy, technologically sound, and safe and healthy, and to this end the protocols on digital trade, intellectual property, investment, competition, and women and youth in trade will be pivotal, together with the protocols on trade in goods and services and dispute settlement. Due attention must be given to technology and public health. Finally, focused work is required in other pertinent areas, including conflicts climate change, inequality and exclusion.

We commend the editors and authors.



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Acknowledgements

In June 2021, spirited practitioners and thought leaders from Africa and beyond came together to develop this book on existential priorities for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). H.E. Dr. Vera Songwe, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa and H.E. Mr. Wamkele K. Mene, Secretary General of AfCFTA Secretariat provided encouragement, leadership, and support, from conception of ideas to the finalization of the book.

The work was guided by the editorial team comprising Dr Francis Mangeni, Advisor to the AfCFTA Secretariat and Senior Fellow at the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance; Diana Owuor, Graduate of Public Policy at United Nations University-MERIT; Dr Stephen Karingi, Director Regional Integration and Trade Division of the UN Economic Commission for Africa; Dr Joseph Atta-Mensah, Principal Policy Adviser for the Macroeconomics and Governance division at the UN Economic Commission for Africa; Professor John Ouma-Mugabe, Professor of Science and Innovation Policy at the Graduate School of Technology Management -University of Pretoria; Richard Humphries, Communication and Content Expert at the Ecosystem Development for Small Enterprise (EDSE) programme, Pretoria; Dr Frederick Mugisha, SDG Integration Advisor at the United Nations Development Program; and Dr Andrew Mold, Chief, Regional Integration and AfCFTA Cluster, Office for Eastern Africa, UN Economic Commission for Africa. Thank you for your passion, dedication and unwavering commitment. Special thanks go to the authors of the chapters contained in this book for their hard work, passion, diligence and commitment in ensuring that this book was completed.

Much gratitude is owed to Professor Seth Gor, Associate Professor of Economics at the School of Economics, University of Nairobi; Professor Issa Baluch, Member of the Dean's Council. Harvard Kennedy School; Associate Professor Chomora Mikeka, Director of Science, Technology and Innovation in the Ministry of Education of Malawi; Dr Albert Edgar Manyuchi, Programme Manager, Anova Health Institute; and Honourable Gyude Moore, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development, who contributed to the review process, sharpening the ideas contained in this book. Thank you for your time and service.

Thanks also go to a team at Communications Development Incorporated (CDI)—led by Bruce Ross-Larson and including Joe Caponio, Mike Crumplar, and Christopher Trott—for editing the book. The ECA Publications and Conference Management team, led by Ali Todaro, Chief of the Section, and Charles Ndungu facilitated the book's production. A big thank-you to Carolina Rodriguez, Danielle Ferreira, Mandy Kabasa and Massimiliano Martino of Dilucidar Pte. Ltd. for their support for this project and for design and layout. Special thanks to Senait Afework for her superb coordination of getting the manuscript to CDI, Dilucidar, the appropriate teams at ECA and ensuring the finalization of the book.

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