

### ***The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): What is in it for young Africans?***

“Umoja ni nguvu, utengano ni udhaifu”. The African Continental Free Trade Area founded in 2018 and launched in January 2021 is not only the continent's biggest trade union but also one of the most significant actions taken by its member states in the faith of solidarity and Ubuntu. Although controversial rumors still circulate about the actual intent of the European Union to fund the creation of the trade block with over € 72,500,000, it is yet one of those true actions that the African Union has effectively collaborated in realizing. Some young Pan Africans express their enthusiasm and positivity about the union, stating that it is bringing the Pan African heritage dream to reality. On the other hand, other more pessimistic individuals make the case that the union will, in the long run, favor the European Union more than it will young Africans. However, it goes without saying that the institution of this trade area is indeed grand, and will affect the future of the continent in many ways – its young people, for the most part. From the elimination of trade tariffs between neighboring countries within the trade block to the promotion of the free movement of goods and services around the continent to the facilitation of the movement of labor, the trade agreement shows several promising prospects in sight for young people all over the African continent. AfCFTA has a reach of 1.3 billion people in 55 participating countries. It has a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) valued at US\$3.4 trillion and promises to alleviate 30 million Africans from extreme poverty.

In June 2021, the World Bank released a paper titled “Entrepreneurship and Free Trade: Africa’s Catalyst for A New Era of Economic Prosperity” which promulgated the claim that for Africa to attain growth in its economic prospects, it has to adopt, abide by, and seek to thrive in entrepreneurship. Recovering from a pandemic, the continent is at a strategic inflection point. Entrepreneurship, slowly becoming a culture across multiple countries on the continent, accounting for the creation of more than 5000 jobs each year has been a tool in the hands of young people to craft for themselves the futures they seek. In recent years, young entrepreneurs have adopted the start-up culture. Rwanda, which has one of the continent’s fastest-growing economies has created a conducive environment for the propagation of the start-up culture, encouraging hundreds of young graduates to run start-ups. Several Unicorns (tech companies worth a billion dollars) have also sprouted in Africa, such as Jumia, Flutterwave, and Interswitch, run mostly by a workforce of young entrepreneurs and graduates. The AfCFTA will facilitate the boom of start-ups in the continent by regulating tariffs on the movement of goods, services, and labor within the continent, necessary for these start-ups to flourish. These startups will require more labor, thereby employing more young people.

Sometimes, traveling between most African countries is unnecessarily more difficult than traveling between African states and non-African countries, especially for Africans. The unnecessary visa complications, travel restrictions, and expensive travel tariffs have impeded the movement of labor among African member states. A recent report from the African Union states that Africans can travel to only 22% of other African countries without visas. A young Cameroonian graduate, having obtained a job placement in, say, Tanzania, is riddled with a

plethora of challenges to overcome before they can travel to their destination, where they have been employed. It may even be perplexing to observe that Africans need visas to travel to their immediate neighboring countries, while Americans and Europeans are allowed entry without visas (You may be shocked. I know). Even Africa's richest man, Aliko Dangote mentioned that he needs 38 visas to travel within the continent on his Nigerian passport (BBC News). Not only does this discourage the smooth movement of labor, but it also deprives young people of potential employment opportunities, and places a geographic barrier to such a process. The creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, with one of its aims to eliminate these restrictions, will favor young people, especially graduates and professionals to seek, obtain and travel for jobs in different parts of the continent, thereby facilitating integration. This intracontinental movement is "what's in it for young people". Although a similar strategy was instituted by the African Union in 2016 called the "borderless Africa", its implementation failed. However, the African Continental Free Trade Area, with concrete prospects such as the single African Passport coupled with the elimination of visa procedures, there is much hope in sight for the success of this strategy.

In Cameroon, the rate of unemployment has increased by a staggering 0.4 percent between 2019 and 2020. Although the anglophone crisis has a magnanimous role to play in this occurrence, it is also true that it is a result of the isolation of the job ecosystem from that of other neighboring countries. Reasonably enough, Cameroon is not the only African country experiencing this predicament. Neighboring states such as Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, to name a few, are locked in similar isolation. In 2030, more than half of the global youthful population will come from Africa, with over 60% contributing to the global workforce. It is therefore necessary that the labor markets of different countries be linked to ensure economic regional integration. The African Continental Free Trade Area with the prospects of implementing a Continental Customs Union will solve this problem. The creation of this union will not only serve as a tool for massive employment opportunities for this blossoming demographic but as a relay of various job markets under a single identity. This is the true future of the job market in Africa for young people.

Oftentimes, the difference between actual manufacturing and estimated manufacturing cost is usually very large, resulting in unemployment as a result of insufficiency of the system to estimate, with some extent of accuracy, the size of the labor force the manufacturing sector needs. However, experts predict that the African manufacturing sector could reach a net worth of 666.4 billion dollars by 2030, as reported by an article on AfricaNews, titled "Africa's manufacturing sector in 2021". With the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area and the convergence of different trade units in the continent, the manufacturing gap will therefore be reduced to a minimum, given that several states will contribute their expertise, collectively building a more accurate system. This will increase the rate of employment, creating a space not only for young people to create jobs, but to also obtain them more easily through a network of SMEs (Small and Medium Size Enterprises) from different countries within the trade block. This is a benefit that is greatly correlated with an increment in the movement of labor

between various member states. The institutionalization of this trade block, with the accuracy that it brings, opens

This essay will not be complete without mentioning the single most important facet of human society. “Education”, Nelson Mandela says “is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. Although the quality of education offered in most African institutions has gradually increased over the recent years, it is still lagging, as compared to global standards. Africa Renewal in a web publication titled “Africa grapples with huge disparities in education” makes the case that most of Africa’s education and training programs suffer from low-quality teaching and learning. The creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area will play an invaluable role in influencing education on the continent, given that it has the proclivity of influencing trade, transportation, and even employment. Given the size of the AfCFTA and how fast it is anticipated to grow, it will need not only a massive but well-skilled labor force in all member states to keep running and meet up with expectations. As such, it will depend on the government of the member states involved to produce a professional labor force that will serve this purpose. This will therefore cause the governments to invest in Technical and Vocational Education and Training, which is the type of education that trains students to take up professional positions. New institutions will be created, and existing ones will undergo an enhancement of the quality of education acceptable by the AfCFTA. This is a positive feedback mechanism that will inevitably lead to the creation of more Technical and Vocational Training institutions and increase the quality of education offered in these institutions, thereby giving young people better education, and the opportunity to secure a brighter future.

The recent pandemic has equally brought to our attention the necessary role that tech and IT play in the world. According to a study from the World Health Organisation, 12.8% of technologies developed globally in response to the pandemic come from Africa. From online shopping to working from home, digital services find their place in every sector of life, and as such should be invested in heavily. With a relatively young STEM sector, Africa is one of the fresh grounds for the growth of organic tech hubs, that will support the proper administration of the AfCFTA, as well as enhance the execution of its primordial purpose – promoting and eliminating trade barriers. e-Commerce is the trade of the future. Employing digital tools to effectuate the exchange of goods and services within the continent is one sure way through which the AfCFTA can ensure the sustainability of trade even when physical barriers prevail, such as the global lockdown as a result of the CoVID-19 pandemic. The success of the AfCFTA depends on the creation of institutions that will train a workforce in STEM, as well as tech startups that will employ them, and facilitate the integration of their acquired skills into the market. This will change the unsettling truth that only about 25 percent of African Higher Education students are in STEM, according to the African Development Bank. This will equally promote the adoption of FinTech (businesses using technology to execute financial services), and the creation of FinTech startups. Foreseeing the importance of e-commerce and digital services in the proper functioning of the AfCFTA, presidents of the African Union member states decided to include an AfCFTA Protocol on E-commerce in February of 2020. Given the unspoken

presumption that the digital sector is predominantly run by young people, this will place at their disposal, a plethora of opportunities.

Let me introspect for a moment. Born into a low-income family of 8, and growing up in a culture where my parents were always on the brink of being broke, the next meal and the next day were all I could ask for. Anything outside that was a luxury. I grew up in a small town, with my mother a farmer, and my father a taxi driver. I had no exposure to the outside world, and consequently, no big dreams to dream of, aside from becoming a farmer, taxi driver, or juvenile delinquent. I experienced severe financial challenges navigating through secondary and high school, as my parents struggled to educate, feed and shelter my 5 siblings and me with their low-income jobs. After graduating high school and joining Open Dreams where I am now a peer mentor, the world became bigger, and so did my dreams. Today, 3 years later, I have started an initiative to solve problems in the area of education in my country, won a national and international competition, been invited to national TV to inspire young people, obtained awards and recognitions, one from the Duke of Edinburgh, and defended an undergraduate degree. The African Continental Free Trade Area presents the world to me – as a promise. A promise that millions of young Africans who have grown up in conditions like mine rely on. In the spirit of Pan Africanism and Ubuntu, I, therefore, say “Umoja ni nguvu, utengano ni udhaifu”, which is Swahili for “united we stand, divided we fall”.

*Abongdoh Maluyane Titus.*

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