

Foreword

It is reasonable to assume that the most significant trend in this new millennium is global competitiveness. In the face of the opportunities and challenges posed by the new paradigm of the “global economy,” nations are moving to integrate their economies with those of their neighbors, to create larger and more competitive regional economic blocs, and to engage in international trade—not just as individual states but as regional powers.

This shift is nowhere more urgent than in Africa, where the combined impact of our relatively small economies, the international terms of trade, and the legacy of colonialism, mis-rule, and conflict has meant that we have not yet assumed our global market share— despite our significant market size.

The advantages of regional integration in Africa were recognized long before the term “globalization” was coined. The creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1964 reflected the awareness, by the leaders of the day, that Africa’s strength was rooted in Pan-African cooperation. The Southern Rhodesia Customs Union was established in 1949, and the East African Community in 1967. But while the intentions behind these early efforts to promote regional integration may have been genuine, the impact of Africa’s first regional economic communities was limited.

Much has changed. Across the continent Africa’s leaders and citizens have taken dramatic steps to open and transform centralized economies, to invigorate the African private sector, and to build the institutions that can sustain political stability and economic development. Regional economic communities now operate in West, East, Central and Southern Africa, and the treaty establishing the African Economic Community sets forth a vision of a continental community.

The OAU Charter and the Constitutive Act establishing the African Union define regional integration as one of the foundations of African unity. And the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty elaborate the specific economic, political and institutional mechanisms for attaining this idea. The adoption of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) provides an overall development framework for the continent which assumes regional integration as one of its core objectives. The establishment of the Commission of the African Union, and agreement on its priorities, makes it clear that Africa’s leadership is committed to move the regional integration process forward, effectively and efficiently. Indeed, the creation of the Commission of the African Union and the resounding commitment of Africa’s leadership to regional integration means that we are now poised to “fast track” our efforts.

The overview points the way forward. It reviews the benefits of integration—sustainability, increased investment, the consolidation of economic and political reforms, increased global competitiveness, the promotion of regional public goods, the prevention of conflict. But it also makes no secret of the direct and indirect costs. Most significantly, however, it sets forth—with precision and clarity—the immediate challenges and a blueprint for progress.

First and most prominent among our challenges is, indeed, to consolidate our success. Africa’s longstanding recognition of the needs and benefits of regional integration has spawned the proliferation of regional economies and protocols across the continent. But these have yet to be strategically consolidated. So, there is considerable overlap—of the 53 African countries, 26 are members of two regional economic communities, and 20 are members of three. One country belongs to four, while only six maintain membership in a single community. This leads to wasteful duplications of effort, increases the burdens imposed on member governments, and diminishes our collective success.

As the Third African Development Forum convened in Addis Ababa in 2002 emphatically agreed, now is the time to rationalize our institutions, our protocols, and our efforts.

With the clear mandate enshrined in the commitment of African leaders, the strategic framework provided by the Commission of the African Union, and the analytical support available from a revitalized Economic Commission for Africa, we face both the imperative and the opportunity to streamline and consolidate our efforts and transform the broad range of strong, regional economic institutions into a coherent, interactive, and strategic whole.

That Africa needs to move in this direction is without question. That we have committed ourselves to doing so is apparent. That we can achieve our goal is also evident. With this overview and with the full report, Africa’s leaders and institutions have a roadmap for change and transformation.

Now is the moment. A rapidly changing global economic environment demands that we move swiftly, and strategically, to achieve regional integration. Our longstanding commitments to cooperation across borders propel us. And the needs and aspirations of our people compel us.

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