Gender Mainstreaming in AfCFTA National Strategies: Why it Matters for the SDGs

Trading under the historic African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is scheduled to begin on 1 July 2020. Hailed as a game-changing agreement, with the potential to propel Africa’s socio-economic transformation, the AfCFTA will play a significant role in anchoring the 17 SDGs.

The UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) has recognized the unparalleled opportunities inherent in the AfCFTA, but is also cognizant that these opportunities will not accrue automatically. This article describes how UNECA is working to ensure that AfCFTA translates the benefits offered by the AfCFTA, especially the benefit of greater gender equality.

The AfCFTA framework agreement includes an objective of gender equality (Article 3(2)). Gender mainstreaming promotes this objective by advancing the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in an integrated continental market. Gender mainstreaming also supports delivery on range of sustainable development imperatives linked to the 2030 Agenda. Indeed, gender mainstreaming embodies the most important promise of the 2030 Agenda: to leave no one behind. The 2030 Agenda also makes clear that there can be no sustainable development without gender equality.

Confronted with deeply-rooted gender-based discrimination and pervasive inequalities across the region are disproportionately among the left behind. At the same time, African women are a powerful development partner whose strength and leadership remain critical to the ultimate success of the AfCFTA.

What does “gender mainstreaming” mean as part of implementing the free trade area? First, mainstreaming entails analyzing the gender dynamics for women in the formal and informal economy. This process offers a systematic approach to identifying gender-specific barriers confronting female farmers, traders, producers, entrepreneurs, and wage-workers in agriculture, manufacturing and services—sectors which are expected to gain new trade opportunities through the AfCFTA. It is crucial to consider the main factors leading to gender segregation in access to economic opportunities in priority economic sectors, together with gender differences in access to productive inputs (particularly finance).

In 2019, UNECA provided support to 15 African countries to develop national strategies for implementing the AfCFTA. Gender mainstreaming is central to the design of national strategies (see full UNECA working paper). In particular, gender mainstreaming is guiding the development of gender-responsive policies and context-specific interventions to drive female empowerment in the AfCFTA. This in turn directly supports the realization of SDG 5 (gender equality) as it promotes the full, equal and meaningful participation of women and girls in all the SDGs and targets. Because women are known to invest most of their incomes (90%) on average back in their families (notably in education and health) and communities, identifying interventions to boost their economic power of earnings through employment can raise living standards for all. Higher living standards in turn contribute to SDG 1 (no poverty), as well as to improved nutrition (SDG 2), good health and well-being (SDG 3) and quality education (SDG 4) for the benefit of women and those who depend on them.

Advancing women’s participation in agriculture under the AfCFTA directly supports increased agricultural productivity and food security targets in SDG 2. Likewise, drawing attention to gender-responsive effects of export-oriented industrialization could support opportunities for women to hold high-value-added employment in manufacturing. Raising gender-related concerns regarding the potential impact on women of trade in services liberalization supports the participation of women in higher-skilled services jobs. This in turn gives impetus to the decent work (SDG 8) and industrialization (SDG 9) agenda, as well as to SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

Highlighting the need for empowering women with the required ICT, technical education, skills development and training for access to higher-skilled manufacturing and services jobs further contributes to providing education opportunities (SDG 4) for the benefit of women and those who depend on them.

Women account for the vast majority of informal cross-border traders. If governments can identify the priority needs of female informal cross-border traders, they can also devise gender-responsive facilitation measures that respond to those needs, and then assist them to enter the formal sector (SDG 8).

Gender mainstreaming in AfCFTA National Strategies is the building block to operationalizing the transformative promise of the AfCFTA into tangible progress for African women. (SDG Knowledge Hub)

**Border closure may disrupt AfCFTA As task force set up**

With the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) expected to take-off in July, there are indications that it may be shifted over Nigeria’s continued refusal to re-open its borders with her neighbouring countries as the development would lead to trade distortions in the continent. Speaking in an interview with this newspaper in Lagos over the weekend, the Advisor, Borderless Alliance of the Border Information Centre, Seme, Caleb Osinyoja, explained that the border closure would impede activities of AfCFTA as Nigeria is already a signatory to the continental trade agreement.

Osinyoja, a former Assistant Controller, Nigeria Customs Service, said that the policy closure had not only affected the spirit of AfCFTA, but also, an infringement on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)’ Trade Liberalisation Scheme (ETLS) protocols. He pointed out that the impact of the continental trade agreement had been defeated as the closure has affected the objective of single market African trade with regard to breach of ECOWAS protocols, rules of immigration and the free movement of persons, goods and transport depending on region.

Speaking further, a former Assistant Controller, Nigeria Customs Service, noted that the continued closure would have also imperiled the continental trade revenue projection worth about $3 trillion.

Also speaking on the trade conflict among neighbouring countries, the Advisor, Borderless Alliance of the Border Information Centre, Seme, explained that the trade war was following the border closure that had led the trading partner countries rejecting Nigerian goods.

Particularly, he noted that Ghana Union of Traders Association (GUTA) has started shutting down Nigerian owned businesses even as far as Ghanaian officials closing down almost 70 per cent of businesses belonging to Nigeria in Accra, Ghana. He, however, added that the border closure had led to reduction in cross border trading activities along the region. His words: “The positives of the border closure are that there is mass reduction in foreign food, petroleum products, and vegetable oil and all non-leafy foodstuffs. In terms of improved internal security of the country, there is total reduction in the activities of terrorists and armed bandits since the beginning of the exercise.”

“Also, there is an increase in the activities of domestic farmers from cheap importation of foodstuffs,” he added.

Nigerian farmers are happy with the border closure because it has boosted their markets and provision of employment in the country.

“However, there are negative effects too. It has led to breach of the ECOWAS protocols, rules of immigration and the free movement of persons, goods and transport, depending on the region.”

“The closure of the border of the Nigerian border goes against the spirit of the AfCFTA signed by Nigeria to promote single market African trade. The AfCFTA has increased the continental market with the movement of persons, capital, goods and services. Nigeria signed the provision of the AfCFTA, which it committed only in five months ago.”

“The Nigerian border closure demonstrates the implementation gap that continues to resist the test of regional and international trade agreement and the actual desire that Federal Government has adopted.”

“Also, it has resulted to trade conflict among neighbouring countries in the course of the Nigerian border closure, Ghana Union of Traders Association (GUTA) has started shutting down Nigerian owned businesses and Ghana officials went as far as closing down almost 70 per cent of businesses belonging to Nigeria in Accra, Ghana.”

“The ECOWAS states have started denying Nigerian products possibly in retaliation to the Nigerian border closure and also bringing about reduction in cross border trading activities along the region. The consistency of demands and private sector investment would remain weak. Rise in inflation, it has resulted into rising in the prices of commodities in Nigeria.”

(New Telegraph)