

Consultative meeting on AfCFTA in Dakar

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With a temporary exit from Addis Ababa on June 23, 2019, a day after the reported coup attempt in that country, I arrived in Dakar late afternoon on the same day. The last time I was in Dakar was on May 14, 2014 as I took my leave from West Africa to return to East Africa, specifically Darfur from where I retired in the quest for peace under the flag of the African Union coupling with that of the United Nations in the only joint operation (mainly in name only) by the two organizations. Being back in the land of la Teranga was nostalgic. From late 2009 to 2014, when I served the United Nations as Chief of Staff of a complex peace operation, I had to transit Dakar to travel home and in fact to most places. This was aside from meetings associated with the UN office for West Africa.

However, my return to Dakar this time was to serve on two panels in the discussions centered around the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that had been signed in Kigali on March 20, 2018. Some 52 African countries, excluding Nigeria, Benin and Eritrea have since signed and 24 have ensured that their respective legislatures have ratified the trade agreement. With the current number of ratifications, the AfCFTA was deemed to have come into force on May 30, 2019. This is a major agreement that has been constantly heralded as a major boost for economic integration and development in Africa.

The UN ECA has been at the forefront of popularizing the AfCFTA. And it has not been wanting on this task. ECA, once led by Nigeria's Adebayo Adedeji, who had championed the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty, has consistently been pushing the course for economic prosperity in Africa through the integration of the continent into a formidable market able to hold its own in the world. But alas, the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and IMF), were opposed to the aspirations of Africa as championed by the African brains that Adebayo Adedeji had assembled. On the contrary, they pushed their preferred structural adjustment programmes that the Adedeji led team provided alternatives to. Infrastructure developments meant to open up Africa for internal integration and cohesiveness to meet the world on equal footing were definitely opposed and not supported by those who often and to date claim to be friends and "partners" of Africa.

What is painful is not that people who are/were eagerly exploiting Africa put themselves forward as friends, the main problem is that most African leaders did and continue to see the designers of their underdevelopment as friends. The recent debates on the Central and West African francophone currencies are instructive. That is not to suggest that those subtle neocolonial tendencies are limited to the francophone zones. They are very rife across all the colonial lingua zones of the continent of Africa. The structures in place make it easier for the exploitation of Africa to continue by all powers with the connivance or acquiescence of African leaders.

What does one make of the challenges posed to international trade by the use of trade tariffs or threats of them for political reasons that are now changing the orthodoxies we were taught throughout the 20th century and through to now? What about xenophobia even in Africa against the free movements of people?

In spite of clear problems, when African leaders embrace measures to boost intra-African trade as a way to spur on economic development, one cannot but welcome such measures. The meeting examined many possible economic impediments to the implementation of AfCFTA. Deficits in infrastructures for a successful implementation were rightly emphasized. Energy and transportation deficits of the continent were of prime concern.

The fact that Africans continue to focus on agricultural products - whether for food or cash was noted. The need to add value before exportation and efforts towards manufacturing to go beyond some of the noted positive developments in the provision of some services like banking were rightly welcomed. Most of the participants sang today's orthodoxy about the private sector as the solution to Africa's development as if this was a magic wand.

I challenged these ahistorical arguments that fail to see the abundant examples of world class companies in Africa that were eaten up by corruption and are today dead or rendered a minuscule fraction of what they could have been if corruption and incompetence in the private sector were not there. These entities like the United African Company that existed before even Nigeria came into being are as much a failure as Nigeria itself. The tragedy of entities like this are also the case in other parts of Africa perhaps with an exception with beer brewing companies in Nigeria, South Africa and East Africa. In effect, we need to develop leadership in the private sector on corporate governance as their counterparts in the public sector are being constantly harangued on good governance.

That Nigeria has continued to be reticent about signing the agreement that she led into fruition remains of concern. Nonetheless, there was expressed hope that Nigeria, probably with a lot of reservations, may soon sign. An analysis on the reticence of Nigeria to signing requires a different full treatment. Suffice it to note that President Muhammadu Buhari stayed away from Kigali at the last minute after he had sent an advance team to prepare for his arrival. The official claim was that in spite of the support of the Nigerian National Association for Commerce, Industry, Manufacturing, Mining and Agriculture, President Buhari aborted the intent to give leadership to the continent was due to the failure to consult the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria and Nigerian Labour. This is difficult to accept. When did President Buhari and the cabal around him start to listen to advice from others? Time will tell on that. However, an elaborate consultation process that has since been embarked upon, according to Segun Ajayi, the Director-General of the Manufacturer's Association of Nigeria will soon be completed and we'll know if Nigeria, followed by Benin Republic, would sign.

For me, these issues that were debated over two days on implementation suggestions that pulled together people from ECOWAS, the Economic Community for Central African States and experts from far and near were mainly economic analysis. I have no doubt that a political economy approach to the analysis would be necessary for a comprehensive effort. For instance, what interests within and without Africa have been making it impossible for Africa to move forward? A proper analysis on this would provide shocking answers and proper solutions could then be proffered if possible. I say if possible because many African leaders are daft and lack the capacity to understand the forces that are making it impossible for the African continent to move forward. Even smart ones, for selfish reasons and fear of being pushed aside by the intelligence communities of powerful countries would rather partake of crumbs and store away stolen wealth in safe havens of Europe and Americas as they turn their eyes in a different direction.

In effect, determinedly uncompromising and dedicated leaders with visions and strategies for development are a sine qua non for Africa to move forward on integration for efficient intra-Africa and world stage trading by Africans.

Shocking also is the fact that the AfCFTA did not pay attention to corruption and several underhand methods that make developmental integration arduous in Africa. The women trying to bring farm produce into Nigeria from Benin Republic and have to pay toll rates to different uniformed Nigerian officials at over ten different supports on a short stretch of roads inside Nigeria know the truth about what I am saying. What about immigration officials who know that ECOWAS allows free movement but daily generate additions to their salaries through extortion. I recommended that the ECA needed to organize a serious two-day

meeting on the challenges of corruption for a viable implementation of the AfCFTA and how to ameliorate beyond the farce of the African Union declaring 2018 as anti-corruption year and making President Buhari (thanks to his effective Ambassador in Addis Ababa), the champion.

Other issues requiring close attention under a viable implementation would be environmental pressures that continue to be drivers for some conflicts in Africa. No-one argues against the importance of peace for developmental production. Definitely, without produce, there will be little or no trade. The age long farmers and herders conflict is worsening on the continent and reducing production for trade and development.

ECOWAS is normally put forward as a great example to be scaled up in Africa. I largely agree, after all, without ECOWAS successful freedom of movement in the sub-region, I wouldn't have been able to pack my brief case and proceed to Dakar for the meeting. If it were like my lot on trying to obtain visa from South Africa, I would have been locked out. However, what has been the experience in movement of goods? Better still, where are the goods moving in ECOWAS, I had asked a friend who went into details to tell about all the tradeable goods listed on the ECOWAS website with their customs codes etc. I asked the Senegalese friend to give me two products being sold in Dakar that were produced in Ghana or Nigeria. He went quiet. Most goods in Dakar continue to come from France and where this is not the case, it is from outside of West Africa. Dr. Songwe, the ECA boss pointed out that maize consumed in Senegal is from Brazil. Of course, reverse the situation to Ghana and Nigeria. Most goods are not from Senegal or Cote D'Ivoire. So, even ECOWAS needs to do a lot more beyond its relative success in the uninspiring land of the blind.

The other side of the problematic coin is the complacency of producers in ECOWAS countries to only aim at meeting part of national needs. Which country has maize to sell to Senegal in West Africa in spite of arable lands all over? Which pretender companies giving themselves false titles of conglomerates in Nigeria is able to meet the needs of the nation not to talk of selling all over West Africa? All these are in spite of corrupt policies to give advantages for private production. Protected and captive markets have helped some accumulate capacities that are in many cases gouging consumers as much cheaper products of similar qualities from the world are deliberately kept out.

A different issue of concern. As African economies are continuing to be opened up for exploitation, what stops a company to set up anywhere in Africa, exploit some raw materials and process this with labour from outside and use the territorial presence in one country to trade with the rest and cart away 100% of profit?

The ECA, rightly continues on a major task. I am returning to Addis Ababa to further examine the need to implement AfCFTA using the pharmaceutical industry as focus. However, I have no doubt that we need to build independent Think-Tanks in Africa that are not constrained by being intergovernmental entities like the ECA?

Apologies for a very long piece as I focus on the second Conference on the same issue that is just beginning in Addis Ababa, this 27th day of June 2019.

Return to Addis Ababa

Returned to Addis Ababa on June 18, 2019 for meetings. Today, June 19, 2019, I had a useful meeting with a Slovenian delegation that is looking at the relations of the Republic of Slovenia with African States. This is subsequent to an earlier meeting I had with the International Trust Fund (ITF) Project Manager in Abuja early April this year.

Slovenia is providing support in many countries, especially in demining as well as building Early Warning capacity for conflict prevention at ECOWAS etc., and looking at possible support to the African Union as well as economic relations with African countries.

I also spent some time in the Mandela Hall at the African Union where a Continental Commemorative Meeting on The Implementation and Supervision of the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention is taking place. The two-day meeting ends on June 20, 2019.

The finalization of the Operationalization of the African Humanitarian Agency remains on course with discussions on the final couple of validation meetings soon.