

Regional Integration in Africa: The Agriculture and Commodities Dimension

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According to different estimates, between a quarter and a third of Africans are undernourished; starvation is a frequent occurrence across the Continent; two-thirds of Africans depend on agriculture for their livelihoods; and over 80% of the poorest of the poor in Africa are peasant farmers. In an effort to change this sad economic reality, African countries have long engaged in complex processes of trade liberalization and economic integration at regional and continental levels.

If such efforts are to achieve their desired goals, agriculture must be a critical component. On the surface, at least, this also appears to be the case. For example, the treaties that established COMESA, ECOWAS, SADC and many others devote entire sections and chapters to the issues of agriculture, food security and rural development, with broadly-defined objectives that reflect the underlying challenges of low productivity, poverty and food insecurity. Regional and continental food self-sufficiency have been identified as critical objectives, and a host of production and trade-related measures are being promoted to achieve them.

At the Continental level, too, the 1991 Abuja Treaty identified food security as the first of its many objectives of cooperation in the field of food and agriculture. A number of pan-African initiatives have been launched since, including the adoption of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) in 2003, the decision by a summit of the African Heads of State to identify a number of agricultural products as strategic commodities and to fast-track trade liberalization commitments on those commodities at the level of RECs, and the ongoing effort to establish the African Common Market for agricultural products.

Beyond these treaty commitments and declarations, however, the reality on the ground is far from encouraging. While the reasons behind this are multifaceted, the objectives of this proposal are limited to an exploration of the legal and institutional challenges facing the Continent and its policymakers. The paper focuses on the agriculture dimension of the various regional and continental integration efforts underway in Africa particularly over the past three decades. It examines the production- and trade-related aspects of agriculture in the context of RECs, distinguishing between intra- and inter-regional agricultural trade within Africa and trade with the rest of the world. The barriers to Africa's agricultural trade at these two levels are largely shared. Inadequate supply capacity, widespread prevalence of animal and plant diseases and the lack of adequate scientific, technical and institutional capacity to deal with them, poor infrastructure and related services, and an unfavourable internal and external regulatory environment are some of the most prominent challenges that confront African agricultural trade. This paper analyses the driving forces behind the desire for regional and continental integration in this sector, describes the extent to which Africa's RECs are designed to address the above challenges and whether they have the necessary legal and institutional capacity to achieve their goals and, on the basis of relevant experience in other parts of the world, proposes options of realizing these objectives in a rules-based fashion

