

THEME 01

Pan-Africanism today

africa

trade

culture

Pan-Africanism is an old idea of African unity. Today, African leaders are working on bringing into reality the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, the first Pan-African trade deal. These efforts by the African Union answer today's wish for African continental socio-economic and political unity. And not only is this remarkable in a world of increasing protectionism and nationalism, it is also of vital importance to the progress of the continent to integrate its economy and to face today's new scramble for Africa.

Our observations

- Pan-Africanism is a global cultural and political movement aiming at strengthening bonds of solidarity between all indigenous and diasporic ethnic groups of African origin. Its basic premise is that unity of all those of African descent is needed for economic, social, and political progress.
- Multiple scholars argue that Pan-Africanism is rooted in the African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which decrees that "I am because we are", a Sotho humanistic epistemology that connects all Africans in an ancient communal bond.
- Today, Pan-Africanism is embodied in the African Union (AU), the organization of African states which includes the entire African diaspora as its "sixth region". The intergovernmental organization aims to promote unity and solidarity of African states, to spur economic development, and to stimulate international cooperation. Its [Agenda 2063](#) is a "concrete manifestation of the Pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity". Currently, the president of the AU is facing criticism for firing the AU's envoy to the U.S. for [publicly disapproving](#) of France's occupation of its former African colonies. Critics [say](#) this shows that the AU stands with its foreign donors instead of with Africans, and that AU's dependence on external powers keeps the organization from independent decision-making.
- The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is the first Pan-African trade deal that could embody a combined GDP of \$2.5 trillion. It is designed to create an integrated continental market for goods and services and to support the movement of capital and natural persons. The AfCFTA raises new hopes as a flagship project promoting Africa's transformation and development agenda.
- The AfCFTA could help the continent form its own economic growth. Today, Africa is home to several of the world's fastest-growing economies, according to the IMF. Ethiopia, Rwanda, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Benin, Kenya, Uganda, and Burkina Faso take the lead. Africa's GDP has grown by 4.6% annually on average since 2000, the second fastest rate in the world, driven largely by domestic demand for processed goods. Africa will count a population of 2 billion by 2030.
- However, the ambitious trade agreement [faces challenges](#) on the way to implementation. Negotiations over tariffs, which are crucial to the agreement, have not been completed.
- African diaspora (people of African birth and heritage living elsewhere) around the world maintain cultural, political and economic ties with the continent in the form of remittances, Afrocentric philosophies (Ubuntu), practices (such as the annual celebration to honor African heritage, Kwanzaa), music (such as hip hop) and popular culture (*Black Panther*). Shared African values are thus being kept alive even among generations that may never set foot on African soil.



Connecting the dots

There is no single story of Pan-Africanism. In Pan-Africanism: [A History \(2018\)](#) Hakim Adi describes the complex history of the countless individuals and organizations that have sought to enhance this unity as the basis for progress and liberation. Adi views Pan-Africanism as a mighty river with many streams and currents (many iterations and different strands) seeking to address the common problems Africa and the African diaspora face in different places and time periods. Pan-Africanism began in the 18th century with the fight against slavery and today takes shape in, among other movements, reparations activism (for apologies and payments to black citizens whose ancestors were forced into the slave trade). Adi describes how Pan-Africanism historically represented the quest for self-assertion and resistance to oppression and discrimination in the form of enslavement and colonialization. However, in the postwar phase, decolonialization confined anticolonial activists to the nation-state, undermining the international ideas of Pan-Africanism. In the recent past, the Pan-African ideal of integration of African countries gained relevance. The Organization of African Unity (OAU, 1963), which later became the African Union (AU, 1999), was an answer to a call for continental socio-economic and political unity and renewed the continent's commitment to Pan-African ideals. As Adi points out, Pan-Africanism was much more than a vague idea or a mere dream. Like most political ideals, it helped galvanize generations and political leaders into action. The fact that the African Union brokered the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, the first Pan-African trade deal, is a strong example of that. In times of a global crisis of free trade and globalization in the form of protectionism, trade wars and sanctions and [the rise of nationalism](#), the AfCFTA gives an even bolder signal to the world. As the [future largest free trade area](#), AfCFTA can have global impact by showing unity and multilateralism. At the same time, the AfCFTA is no more than a bare necessity for the development path of the continent. Although Africa is home to several of the world's fastest-growing economies, Africa's intra-continental trade makes up less than 15% of total African exports (in com-

parison to 67% for intra-European trade). The agreement could boost intra-African trade by 52% by 2022. Moving people across the continent is a challenge as well. Today, it is often easier to transit through Europe to get from one African country to another than traveling directly between the two. Also, visa procedures are costly and time consuming.

Another rationale for further integration relates to the [new scramble for Africa](#). Africa has again taken center stage when it comes to the interests of different superpowers. China, most notably, has arrived as a new superpower on the continent. The growing presence of China as a foreign aid power on the African continent has created an [alternative to the conditionalities of the Western powers](#). Still, the continent sees China bargaining with African leaders individually. If African leaders could manage to align more, they could show the unity needed to come out on top in this scramble for Africa. This holds especially true when it comes to technology, as China and the U.S. are competing to dominate the [African Stack](#). This also applies to food. Superpowers are aware that the African continent is the world's biggest food import market and that this market will only grow. At the same time, there is great agricultural potential in the fertile continent. While Western countries cannot increase production much further, 60% of the world's unused agricultural land is in Africa. Superpowers China and the U.S. are fully aware of this. China has ramped up agriculture land purchases in African countries. The African Development Bank is trying to break the trend of exporting food commodities and importing food products. It is creating [Staple Crops Processing Zones](#) to develop agricultural value chains and agro-allied industries that process and add value to local commodities. If the AfCFTA turns out to be successful, it could become the landmark of a new phase in the historic journey of Africa to realize the dreams of the Pan-Africanism movement for a peaceful, prosperous and integrated Africa, even if it was only born out of the necessity to survive and thrive in today's global economy.

Implications

- Although the AfCFTA can greatly benefit those African economies that are capable of expanding their exports of goods and services to the rest of the continent, there are concerns about the more vulnerable economies. Some argue that the European "free trade" approach to regional integration is not appropriate for African developing countries. They argue for a regional integration referred to as "[developmental regionalism](#)" that includes fair trade; structural transformation; cross-border investment in infrastructure; and democratic governance.
- Increased connectivity is key to the success of the AfCFTA. Africa's [first cross-continental, high-speed train](#) is now in the making and African Union experts envision a high-speed rail network by 2063 (as part of AU's Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, 50 years after the formation of the AU), linking all African capitals and commercial centers. These shifts towards improved infrastructure and increased trade will boost the African continent by making it more autonomous and independent of other superpowers.
- Whether these Pan-African aspirations become reality will also be strongly determined by how the [young generation](#) identifies itself. The fact that most of them no longer [identify](#) themselves primarily as being part of a tribe or specific ethnicity, could open doors for something like a shared African identity.