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Armed Conflict as an ‘Undoing’ Force in Regional Integration and Its Impact on the Consolidation of AfCFTA Development Mission

Abstract: The paper examines the intricate relationship between armed conflict and regional integration, focusing on its role as an ‘undoing’ force in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) context. A significant element of development and economic cooperation in Africa is the perennial problem of violent conflict in almost all sub-regions. Moreover, organized crime is rising across the continent, coupled with the emergence of new forms of violence associated with today’s globalization and other post-Cold War phenomena. Globalization has led to greater interdependence among countries and fostered cooperation among states. However, a country’s internal conflict often has repercussions beyond its borders and threatens regional and global peace and stability. In addition, armed conflict can affect countries’ relations and state cooperation. Peace provides a good foundation for development and economic cooperation, while development ensures the permanence of peace. The central question addressed in this paper is whether constructive regional economic integration and cooperation can be effectively achieved while some African countries are experiencing armed conflict. A qualitative research approach is used to analyze how armed conflict will likely negatively impact the achievement of AfCFTA goals.

Keywords: *armed conflict, regional cooperation, development, trade, peace*

Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has been widely recognized as the largest free trade area in the world since the establishment of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It has the potential to transform the African economy and put the continent on the map of international trade, both as a market and as an engine of global growth. However, Africa’s development efforts are often derailed by various crises, challenges, and risks to peace, security, and development. One of the challenges that this paper believes poses a significant threat to the implementation of the AfCFTA is the prevalence of armed conflicts and the rise

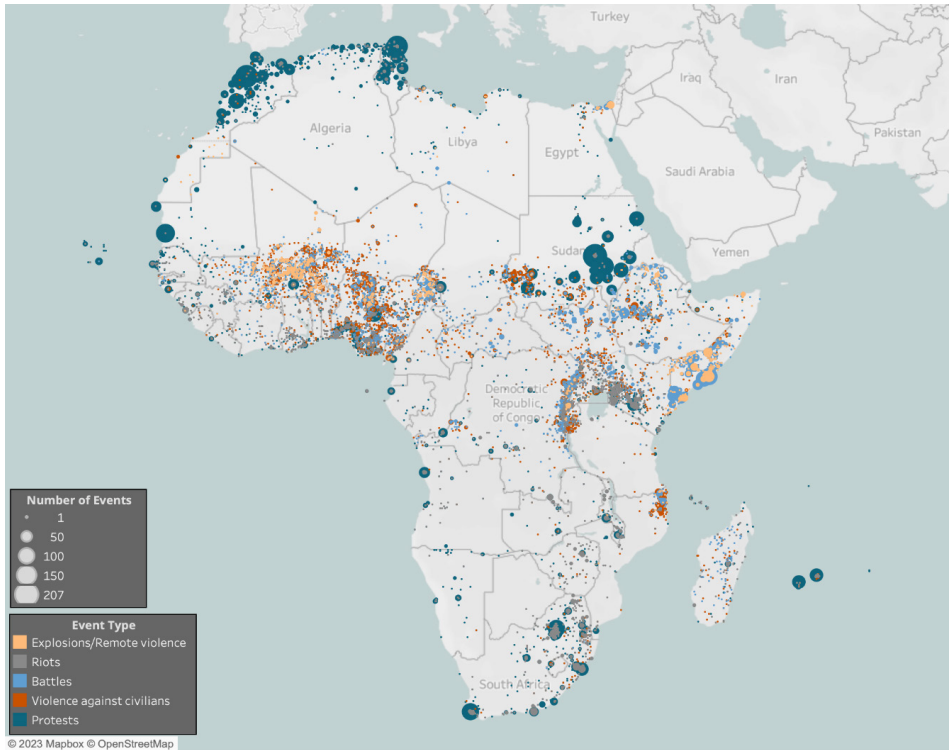
of violent extremism on the continent. There are armed conflicts in almost all sub-regions of Africa. The continent has long been the most conflict-affected in the world, hosting all the United Nations (UN) high-risk missions. Moreover, all the countries that were on the agenda of the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) in 2019 when plans to implement the AfCFTA started to pick momentum were African (Aly, 2019). In 2023, the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights reported that there were more than 35 non-internationalized armed conflicts in Africa (Geneva Academy, 2023).

The discussion on armed conflict is guided by numerous academic definitions, especially from international law, which may differ slightly in their formulation. There is widespread agreement that an armed conflict occurs whenever there is a resort to armed force between states or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a state (Geneva Academy, 2017). Some of the definitions go further by specifying the number of combat-related deaths that must occur for a violent situation to be classified as an armed conflict. Some definitions set 25 deaths as appropriate, while others suggest 100 deaths up to 1000. However, this paper uses definitions that are consistent with the above but state that armed violence results in at least 25 deaths in a year (Harbom et al., 2006; Themnér & Wallensteen, 2011; Drozd & Smolarek, 2013). The given definitions explain what the African continent has been experiencing in the post-Cold War period, with little success in putting a stop to the problem in many cases. More so, the continent has witnessed the emergence of new forms of violence that can be attributed to a combination of factors, including political instability, economic disparities, social tensions, and the proliferation of weapons. These factors have contributed to the rise of various types of violence, such as ethnic conflicts, religious extremism, terrorism, and cyber warfare across Africa. Additionally, competition over resources, land, and power, along with the influence of external actors, have also played a role in shaping these new forms of violence. It is important to note that the specific dynamics and causes vary across different regions of the continent.

In 2019, when the operational phase of the AfCFTA was launched, 25 state-based conflicts were recorded in Africa, as Palik et al. (2020) state, most of which were armed conflicts. According to the World Bank, as Hippolyte & Ndikumana (2021) state, 21 African countries are contending with high institutional and social fragility or are in either medium or high-intensity conflict. The last few years have been the most particularly bad in terms of fatalities, with the number of conflict deaths averaging 14,000 per year since 2014 versus 2,200 annually in 2010. The achievement of peace and security provides fertile ground for development initiatives to prosper, yet most countries' current state of affairs is far from that. This paper discusses how the prevalence of armed conflict on the African continent will likely negatively impact the implementation of the AfCFTA. The paper will draw out the effects of armed conflict on trade, economic development, and cooperation while also looking at African institutions' capability to deal with the causes of armed conflict. The central argument is that in the absence of peace and security, the AfCFTA development

mission will not bring the desired results, of which the continent has failed to stop armed conflict over the years.

Figure 1. Map showing incidences of armed fighting, violence, and protests in Africa



Source: ACLED (2023).

Methodology

This paper utilizes a secondary research methodology, where the researcher did not directly engage in primary data collection. Instead, reliance was placed on secondary data to derive conclusions. The secondary data was drawn from diverse sources, including the internet, peer-reviewed journals, textbooks, government archives, and reports by international organizations, all focusing on armed conflict and security in Africa. The synthesis of these secondary sources formed the basis for the conclusions presented in this paper. As noted by Johnston (2017), employing existing data is a practical approach for researchers facing limitations in terms of time and resources. Additionally, Smith et al. (2011) highlight cost-effectiveness and convenience as crucial advantages associated with secondary research.

Research Outcome

Qualitative research findings, while not inherently conclusive for broad generalizations are crucial in delving deep into complex themes and providing a robust rationale for informed decision-making. Accordingly, this paper underscores the significance of tackling armed conflict and its underlying causes as a preliminary step before implementing regional economic integration endeavors such as the AfCFTA. The paper will expound on the impacts of armed conflict on African economies and trade, shedding light on the potential hurdles posed by conflict before the AfCFTA can be effectively executed. Moreover, the research underscores Africa's formidable challenge in concurrently addressing armed conflict while endeavoring to implement the AfCFTA, primarily due to resource constraints, notably financial limitations. Within this context, the paper will offer recommendations to guide the African continent in sidestepping a repetition of the pitfalls that have hindered well-conceived strategies. In broader terms, the paper aspires to influence policy discourse surrounding conflict and economic advancement in Africa, focusing on the intricate process of AfCFTA implementation.

Literature Review

The existing literature on AfCFTA acknowledges that the development mission is faced with a myriad of challenges. One of the most undeniable challenges likely to hinder the success of the development initiative is armed conflict, which Collier et al. (2008) consequently describe as reverse development. According to Collier (1999), this happens through five mechanisms: destruction of resources, disruption of social order, diversion of public expenditure, "dis-saving", and shifting assets out of the country. The outbreak of armed conflict creates 'new' responsibilities and diverts the government's and other actors' attention from other development initiatives. To facilitate cooperation and free movement of goods and services in such scenarios is undoubtedly a brick wall to the AfCFTA. Cilliers (2021) acknowledges that many obstacles remain in implementing the AfCFTA, the most apparent being simply the lack of ambition and diversity of its members.

Zahonogo (2016) posits that trade liberalization works only to benefit countries when they actively manage levels of openness to trade. Countries grappling with armed conflict often do not have effective institutions that can be expected to manage the levels mentioned above of openness to trade. This challenges a "blanket" AfCFTA development mission to be implemented on a continent where some countries have relative peace and functional institutions while others are down on their knees. The consequences of armed conflict and/or war go beyond mortal fatalities and create a development gap between those countries that have experienced armed conflict and those that have not (Gates et al., 2012). As such, implementing the AfCFTA has to be so that it does not widen the development gap between countries facing conflict and those experiencing relative peace. There should also be political

will to cooperate with countries undergoing armed conflict, which is highly unlikely, as Cilliers (2021) argues. Whether or not it will be possible is another issue, but armed conflict, in this case, is undeniably an undoing force in regional integration.

According to Gnanguénon (2020), significant security problems and their trans-regional dimension have generated a rise in African regional organizations, with various actors seeking to respond to issues as they emerge and external donors agreeing to fund them. This is evidence that security problems, including armed conflict, are among Africa's top agenda. The challenges to achieving peace on the African continent are complex and immense, involving multiple cross-cutting issues, including socio-economic development and resilience, promoting access to resources and economic opportunity, and promoting and entrenching democracy and good governance. The complexity and magnitude of the challenges faced by the African continent need to be confronted through strong partnerships established at both local and international levels (Pandor, 2020).

Armed conflicts have devastating effects that affect economic growth and cooperation, and these include casualties, displacement of populations, and the destruction of public infrastructure. In the long term, re-establishing peace after a conflict appears to be very difficult. A World Bank report (2003) showed that wars' economic and social costs are high and persist for years after the end of the conflict. In recent years, there has been substantial literature in which researchers debate the long-term negative consequences of armed conflicts. Despite the above debates, existing literature does not disagree on whether short-term or long-term armed conflict affects economic growth. Of course, some analysts have mooted that economic cooperation is the one that ends the armed conflict. However, this paper points out how economic and trade cooperation is difficult to achieve when an armed conflict outbreak occurs.

Discussion

Typical of the situation in other regions, intra-African trade has relatively higher industrial content than African countries' trade with the rest of the world, which speaks to the advantage of regional trade over international trade (Cilliers, 2020). In other words, African countries first need to trade with one another until their products and services are competitive while steadily expanding their participation in regional and global value chains. However, armed conflict can challenge intra-African trade as it is likely that countries experiencing relative peace might fear conflict spillover. Borders must be strictly monitored to ensure belligerents do not move freely. As it is difficult to distinguish between genuine travelers and agents of armed conflict, measures to filter out conflict spillover affect the efficiency of the free movement of goods and services as can be desired by the AfCFTA. As history shows, armed conflict spreads from country to country, especially to neighboring countries. Looking back in history, as Carmignani & Keller (2016) cites, in the aftermath of the Rwandan Civil War and subsequent genocide of 1994, militant sections of Hutu refugees fled to Zaire and

from their camps in the eastern part of the country carried out raids against both local and Rwandan Tutsi. These raids eventually triggered the First Congo War (1996), in which several other Central African countries were directly or indirectly involved. Fear of conflict spillover can deter how African neighbors relate during the implementation of the AfCFTA, and it is not certain if there will be trade with other African nations facing armed conflict.

The effects of armed conflict on economies can never be understated. For example, wars result in the destruction of infrastructure, which is a drive for economic growth. Physical infrastructure brings the needed connectedness of markets for economic transformation and industrial production and ensures the smooth distribution of goods. The current African markets are fragmented, even between countries not facing armed conflict. It is one of the reasons why the continent has continued to lag in economic and industrial development. Other regions, such as Europe, are examples of how physical infrastructure is the bedrock of connectivity and productivity growth, enabling countries from such regions to leverage their resource endowment fully and better integrate into global supply and industrial value chains. African regions that are hit by armed conflicts have the worst physical infrastructure, and besides, the movement of goods and people in a war zone is strenuous. To successfully implement the AfCFTA, Africa needs to improve the infrastructure that will facilitate the movement of goods and human resources and stop armed conflicts that continuously damage both the social and physical infrastructure.

Cilliers (2021) supposes that countries become more peaceful as they become more prosperous and, above certain levels of income and development, democracy is the most stable form of government. Cilliers (2021) cites that structurally inclusive economic development coupled with substantive electoral accountability offers the best prospect for greater peace and stability. A similar position is advanced by Gates et al. (2016), who posits that poor and underdeveloped countries are more likely to see conflict resumption because groups opposing the state have little to lose; lack of democracy prevents peaceful resolution of conflict; settlements without a clear victory create incentives to continue fighting to improve one's position; and a lack of a security guarantee provokes resumption as a means to avoid marginalization by antagonistic groups. Generally, without advancing the debates surrounding democratic principles and their application in Africa, it will take time for the African continent to become more peaceful and less violent, partly because of the slow rate at which the structural changes needed for stability occur. Most African countries continue to witness divisive politics, lack of rule of law, contested elections, and unfair distribution of resources, among other factors that 'undo' the setting up of strong democratic and stable governments. The noted factors also account for some of Africa's significant drivers of armed conflict, which, for a long, have not been successfully addressed, as witnessed by the continued prevalence of conflict in most parts of the continent. Marc (2021) notes that insurrections are typically rooted in local grievances, which include competition for local resources, poor governance, and the lack of capacity by governments to deliver services. The

continent does not only experience armed conflict but continues to house active drivers of armed conflict, which continue to fuel armed insurrections.

Almost 60% of Africa's population is under 25, making Africa the world's youngest continent. This growth is attributed to high fertility and declining child mortality (Kariba, 2020). It has been widely noted that the youth constitute the majority in most groups involved in armed conflict, leading to an argument that conflict-affected countries typically have much younger populations than more stable regions. Bearing that population structures shift very slowly and the failure to address the above-discussed drivers of armed conflict, the African continent faces a vast challenge derailing efforts for economic cooperation. According to *Brooking.edu* (2020), a history of armed conflict and its social, political, and economic legacies, a youthful population, high levels of unemployment, and inequality render societies vulnerable to further conflict. This is the African case, and despite efforts by local and international actors, Africa continues to be gripped by armed conflict.

There has been consistency in high levels of unemployment among the youth in most parts of Africa, thus leaving some of them vulnerable to joining armed groups. This occurs although the causes of violence evolve; for example, the political, economic, and social dynamics that drove instability a decade ago may no longer do so today. This discussion is brought up to forward an argument that the continent has long failed to deal with some of the issues that serve as the root of armed conflict. The energy the continent's youth has is channeled towards the negative because of the poor governance structures, which brew frustration in the continent's population. It has to be noted that although the causes of conflict in Africa are complex, this issue under discussion is shared across the continent. Aina (2021) suggests that the AfCFTA, through promoting more labor-intensive trade, can produce more jobs for the estimated 30 million African youth entering the jobs market each year after 2030. The potential of the AfCFTA is not doubted, but what should come first: addressing the current problems that have fuelled conflict on the continent or implementing the trade agreement first to address the existing challenges? The paper argues that the latter is difficult to achieve, given the challenges armed conflict poses to regional economic cooperation and trade. It will take time for the continent to realize the results of the AfCFTA, yet a disgruntled youthful population and critical drivers of armed conflict remain active. Thus, conflict is likely to continue with all its devastating effects.

Unfortunately, a challenge even more significant than the perennial armed conflict in Africa is the lack of institutional capacity to deal with conflict, which undoubtedly blocks development initiatives to be successful. Amid efforts to improve regional cooperation, there are also efforts to capacitate African institutions, such as the African Union, to proffer solutions to problems facing the continent, such as armed conflicts. The central debate arises as to whether the continent can concurrently achieve its goals for trade, economic growth, peace, and security, given the commitment required. Undoubtedly, development without peace is not sustainable, and peace without development is not durable. However, given that African institutions work with strained resources, it indeed becomes a challenge for Africa to implement successful

development initiatives simultaneously with conflict. According to Gnanguènon (2020), the security agenda is, in principle, meant to go hand in hand with development measures, according to African regional organizations' mandates. However, security has come to dominate over other considerations. Amid vast security threats and armed conflict, the implementation of the AfCTA may be overshadowed and be less preferable, especially to countries experiencing or facing greater risk from armed conflict. There is a greater demand for financial and human resources in response to armed conflict, and some countries may be forced to focus less on AfCFTA. The scale and magnitude of the challenges involved and their intersectionality regarding the state of security and development in Africa require not only the availability and allocation of significant resources but also the establishment of firm, sustainable, and vibrant partnerships at national, regional, continental and international levels (UNSC, 2019).

Mutisi (2016) posits that the role of regional mechanisms in conflict intervention is necessitated by the reality that conflict in the region provides a setback to regional development and can impact beyond the region. Besides, there is another reason for increased efforts to own primary responsibility towards conflict resolution (even with little or no success) in Africa by African institutions, which is the disillusionment with "Western interventions", double standards, and the conditions that come with such, as Mutisi further notes. As much as it is admitted that conflict slows development on the continent, there has been less success in curbing it. The African Union (AU), established in 2002 to respond effectively to the problems of contemporary Africa, including armed conflict, is currently unable to provide for Africa's peace and security, especially in contexts where the UN is unwilling to deploy (Omorogbe, 2011).

The AU, the leading continental actor in responding to armed conflict, heavily relies on external assistance as it cannot raise the needed resources, which signals the institution's weakness. All the critical activities in responding to armed conflict heavily depend on external partners' financial support, with more than 95 percent of such activities funded by external partners, including conflict prevention, mediation, special envoys, and special political missions (African Union, 2016). Efforts are there to fight continental challenges, but most of them have been in vain. In 2013, the AU adopted a declaration to silence the guns on the continent and end wars by the year 2020. However, of the 34 cases of armed conflict the world over in 2020, most of these were concentrated in Africa, which had 15 cases, followed by Asia with 9 cases, the Middle East with 6 cases, Europe with 3, and lastly, America with one case (Milián et al., 2021). Violent extremism is on the rise, internal insurrections are increasing, and some of the continent's economic powerhouses, such as Ethiopia, are degenerating into fighting zones. The African Union established a standby multinational force known as the African Standby Force (ASF), which Neethling (2006) regards as an ambitious plan owing to the lack of funding and the operationalization of the force. Though troop contribution has been widely regarded as excellent, the force has not been able to put a stop to armed conflict. Lack of resources, as discussed above, may render African initiatives for development a fairytale.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Armed conflict and its effects present a significant challenge for implementing the AfCFTA, affecting regional cooperation and integration. Its devastating effects complicate economic cooperation and hinder intra-continental trade. Given the current armed conflict trends in Africa, the AfCFTA will not realize its desired results. More so, if not all countries will benefit equally from the trade agreement, peaceful and stable countries are the ones to benefit from AfCFTA, and trade between such countries will increase at the expense of those countries experiencing armed conflict. Instead, implementing AfCFTA under current affairs will widen the economic gap between more stable countries and those gripped by armed fighting, rendering the initiative unsuccessful.

The challenge to realizing the AfCFTA's desired results is beyond the prevalence of armed conflict. It is vested in why the continent has continuously been infested with conflict. As discussed above, development without peace is unsustainable, and because of the devastating effects of armed conflict, regional economic integration becomes challenging to achieve. In agreement with Gates et al. (2012), the paper's overall recommendation is that sustainable economic development must consider the risk of armed conflict. The continent does not only have to act to stop armed conflict but also to create fertile ground for implementing development initiatives such as AfCFTA. It also has to address the root causes of conflict, which SIPRI (2021) traces to a combination of state weakness, corruption, ineffective delivery of essential services, competition over natural resources, inequality, and a sense of marginalization. More so, election violence has also contributed as a cause of armed conflict. Africa must invest in good governance and strong institutions that create peace and security for economic development. When governments prioritize the social sector, it signals to the population that lasting peace has returned, which raises confidence in the civil peace needed to boost investment (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002). More so, Somé (2018) points out that policies and support of a national governance that invests in the quality of institutions and provides policy certainty is essential.

To realize the full potential of the AfCFTA development mission, Brookings.edu (2020) states that African countries must actively carry out complementary structural and policy reforms to foster long-term peace and security, address the supply-side constraints, and mitigate the short-term fiscal adjustment costs of the trade agreement to set the continental trade-integration project on a successful implementation path for a win-win continental trade-integration outcome. As such, the trade agreement's success will result from a commitment to action by African governments, not only in terms of complying with the agreement but also in tackling challenges facing the development mission. Giving too much focus on development initiatives such as AfCFTA before addressing the issues mentioned earlier is likely to fail.

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