

**The Prospects of International Relations in Africa in the COVID-19 Era: An
Analysis of Sustainable Development and Trade Integration**

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the paper **The Prospects of International Relations in Africa in the Covid-19 Era: An Analysis of Sustainable Development and Trade Integration.** that I have submitted to the University of Limpopo for the Doctor of Philosophy in International Politics degree is entirely original and has not been submitted to any other institution of higher learning.

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Date: 19/04/2024

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late grandfather, Mr **Jack Tshivhasa Sikhwari**, and my late father, Mr **Boy Sikhwari**, who both hoped to see me succeed in academia, but due to unforeseen circumstances, God took them before they could see or read my doctoral work.

Abstract

International relations play an important role in tackling global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on international relations, creating uncertainty that diplomacy should closely monitor. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on Africa's economy and development has raised doubts about the continent's potential for rapid trade integration and sustainable development in a global context. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to provide a comprehensive overview of the prospects for international relations in Africa in the COVID-19 era, with a focus on sustainable development and trade integration. The study's research methodology was qualitative, utilizing both primary and secondary data collection methods as well as an exploratory design. Semi-structured interview questions were used to collect data during the interview process. In addition, the study made use of secondary data, which included gathering relevant publications from the library online database, examining the patterns and growth trajectories of research projects, and assessing the optimistic and pessimistic post-COVID-19 perceptions. Thus, the chapter is the outcome of a careful and exhaustive review of the literature on breaking the discussion of COVID-19, especially in relation to trade and related sustainable topics. Modernization theory serves as the theoretical foundation for the research. The AfCFTA emerged as a focal point for argument, offering insights that could prove beneficial in the process of restructuring Africa's economy and promoting sustainable development. Beyond the opportunities and challenges presented by the AfCFTA, the study identified key counter-solutions that should be prioritised for Africa's post-pandemic strategies for trade integration and sustainable development. These strategies can help Africa play a more constructive role in global restructuring and regional integration. Some of the study findings suggest that transparency among politicians, as well as integrity and honesty, should be considered important variables in any African economy in order to achieve strong trade integration and permanent development. Further research is needed, however, to determine how nationalism may impede the advancement of intra-African trade and the role of international migration when addressing AfCFTA.

Keywords: AfCFTA; Trade Integration; Sustainable Development; COVID-19; Africa

Abbreviations List

ADB	African Development Bank
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
ANC	African National Congress
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
COVAX	COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CPC	Communist Party of China
DA	Democratic Alliance
EAC	East African Community
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GVC	Global Value Chains
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IATF	Intra-African Trade Fair
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development

IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPE	International Political Economy
IT	Information Technology
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MERS	Middle East respiratory syndrome
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGEU	Next Generation EU
NTB	Non-Tariff Barriers
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RoO	Rules of Origin
SACU	Southern African Customs Union
SADC	Southern African Development Communities
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SME	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
UN	United Nation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
REC	Regional Economic Communities
PLA	People's Liberation Army
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WB	World Bank
WHO	World Health Organization
WEF	World Economic Forum
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution

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Published Articles / Book Chapters

This following publication is based on or include of, this research:

- 1) Tshedza, S. T., & Lee, K. S. (2023). How will AfCFTA Impact on South Africa's Socio-economic Position?. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs*, 10(3).

Chapter One

1. Introduction and Background

1.1. Background and Motivation

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a significant concern in the field of international relations and politics. According to Harvey-Jenner (2020), COVID-19 is the acronym for Coronavirus Disease, 2019. The year 2019 indicate when the virus was discovered among human beings. COVID-19 is highly infectious and rapidly spreads among people if proper hygiene and physical distancing are not observed. That is one of the major reasons it quickly spread across the world after its discovery in China. COVID-19 was first identified in China's Wuhan Region in December 2019 (Scott, 2021). Since its discovery, it has infected and afflicted tens of millions of people all across the world.

Its devastating effects are economically and socially felt worldwide, with Africa being among the most affected continents in this respect. This is realised through the prolonged individual country lockdowns, the ravaged labour force due to COVID-19 related death and illnesses, company closures, and reduced working hours, among other effects. Considering the above, it is worth it to be concerned about Africa's international relations given the lockdowns and economic recessions that have followed COVID-19 outbreaks, particularly in Africa. That is, several foreign operations have been halted temporarily in this region, despite the continent remaining united in its fight against this deadly pandemic.

To date and still counting, COVID-19 cases reported worldwide are 51 325 755, with 1 270 624 deaths and 36 133 998 recoveries (Worldometer, 2020 estimates). In comparison to other continents, Africa is the least affected given the COVID 19's global statistics records. According to the Worldometer (2020), Africa has 1 904 101 total cases, 45 698 overall deaths and 1 604 319 general recoveries. South Africa appears to have the most COVID-19 cases in Africa and Africa in general, followed by Morocco and then Egypt. Other countries have modest figures.

This means that Africa has a low COVID-19 infection rate, yet the continent has suffered the greatest socioeconomic and political crises when compared with other continents. As a result, most African countries find themselves in a precarious economic situation. These now rely on Western donors and China for humanitarian assistance, financial aid, political support, and technological development. It is within this context that this study aimed to unpack the issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic's disruptions of Africa's economies and, its sustainable growth and trade integration. This was be supplemented by African Union Constitutive Act Articles 3, 10, which aims to promote sustainable development at the economic, cultural, and social level, and the integration of African economies and the emergence of African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

COVID-19 poses immediate risks to the global economy, not least the disruptions of global value chains (GVCs), which are essential for the manufacture of basic commodities. For example, China's production slowdown due to lockdowns negatively impacted the supply chain of several goods throughout the world, including Africa (Lawrence, 2020). Vidya and Prabheesh (2020) claim that COVID-19 resulted in several of the major trade reductions and output volumes for both manufacturing production and commodities trade since WWII. Moreover, if COVID-19 had occurred in 2008, it would have dealt a huge blow towards both international trade and financial markets; similarly, the present pandemic crisis may cause disturbance in both demand and supply. Therefore, the study examined all international relations perspectives that were heavily damaged by the emergence of COVID-19, as well as existing mechanisms, to determine how these strategies can operate to preserve and restore the weak African states.

1.2. Problem Statement

COVID-19 has become a severe issue in Africa's international relations and economic development, as the continent is not immune to COVID-19's negative endogenous and exogenous effects. It is now the world's most lethal pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Africa is perceived as a developing continent with weak, fragile, and failed states, poor socio-economic background, poverty, unresolved armed conflicts, and limited democratic

space (Mills, 2010). COVID-19 has exacerbated these concerns due to limits on domestic and foreign travel and in-person contacts, the pandemic has temporarily suspended economic activities and could disrupt delicate peace processes and conflict prevention programs., notwithstanding the fewer number of cases recorded in the continent so far.

Africa, due to the global pandemic, owes itself the obligation to resume trade and revive its stalled economy. Before the pandemic, however, African countries had come up with progressive ideas for enhancing the continent's sustainability and intra-African trade through the AfCFTA. Thus, this agreement is regarded as one of the tools that would help strengthen Africa's economy in the post-COVID-19 era. However, the pandemic has created a slew of issues that calls for more decisive innovation, as inequality and unemployment persist.

COVID-19 is alleged to have a negative impact on the diversity of Africa's country-to-country international relations and economic activities. On the other hand, the COVID-19 outbreak brought up a range of serious issues due to border restrictions, including trade, ineffective disease control along borders, partial diplomatic intervention in peace and security talks, illegal migration, food insecurity, and political instability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020). The above issues contribute to Africa's political and economic developmental failure. This study interrogated such issues as resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the potential strategies meant to improve Africa's sustainable development and trade integration

1.3. Preliminary Literature Review

1.3.1. COVID-19 on Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to Africa and its people. It is, therefore, vital that African leaders closely cooperate with scientists, policymakers, and medical experts to create practical solutions to COVID 19 related problems. Yaya, Otu, & Labonté (2020; 1) conducted a study titled "Globalisation in the context of COVID19: repositioning Africa to meet immediate and distant challenges" and asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic brings a challenging task to African leaders. They argued that it is critical that African

leaders they work closely with scientists, policy experts, and medical specialists to develop formative assessment instruments. Moreover, Lone and Ahmad (2020) estimate that COVID19 will result in the loss of around 20 million jobs, causing African countries' unemployment rates to rise further, potentially leading to societal instability and increased crime rates in countries with a history of sectarianism.

COVID-19, according to Bizoza and Sibomana (2020), will have a negative impact on the world economy in a variety of ways, both on the demand and supply sides of economic sectors. This means that the size and duration of the economic harm caused by the coronavirus will be determined by government actions, regional integrations, and intergovernmental cooperation in dealing with the crisis. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2019), the COVID-19 shock to African economies comes in three waves: decreased trade and investment from China in the short term; a demand slump connected with the European Union (EU) and OECD lockdowns; and a continental supply shock hurting domestic and intra-African trade.

1.3.2. Trade integration and African economy

According to Africa Renewal (2020), significant disruptions in the global world's economic integration have resulted in the slowing of major industries that include air transportation and tourism, as well as a drop-in trade, remittances, and investments. In the face of declining official development support and capital flight, however, unemployment and food insecurity are likely to worsen across the continent. AFCFTA, according to Matheson (2019), is the answer to sustainable development and trade integration in Africa because it eliminates tariffs on 90% of goods and promote trade in goods and services among African countries. This agreement should be triggered, and stimulus packages offered to stimulate cross-border trade across the continent, despite its economic benefits being exaggerated (Yaya *et al.*, 2020).

The OECD (2019) indicated that the effective implementation of the AFCFTA and the African Union's constructive transformation agenda could strengthen the regional value chains, reduce vulnerability to external shocks, advance the digital transition and build

economic resilience against future crises for immediate response. Although the international community has offered additional means to African economies, Lakemann (2020) states that African governments' economic support has been significantly less milder than elsewhere during this pandemic. Although trade has decreased significantly, there are significant variations in export products. In 2020, foreign direct investment was expected to drop, particularly in areas that are critical to Africa's economic development. Multilateral and bilateral attempts to increase budget capacity for African governments have been significant (Lakemann, 2020).

1.3.3. The prospects of Africa in consideration of COVID-19.

Africa was already struggling prior to the worldwide pandemic's disruptions. According to the 2019 Africa Regional Integration Index, the continent's overall level of integration was poor, particularly in terms of productive and infrastructural components. Van Nieuwkerk (2020) pointed out that South Africa, as a leading African and Global South voice, should investigate the regional and continental implications of these seven prospects. The seven opportunities mentioned above include reshaping manufacturing to emphasize self-sufficiency, maintaining momentum in regional and pan-African cooperation, closing the skills gap, addressing infrastructure deficiencies, financing infrastructure, establishing infrastructure management systems, and improving integrated decision-making. It should build on its significant expertise working with a variety of partners at the AU and UN levels. It should pursue these prospects with a diverse group of regional partners in the near and medium-term (Van Nieuwkerk, 2020).

On the subject of sustainable development goals (SDG), Africa confronts a difficult option on the SDGs under COVID-19 (Nwuke, 2021). Reaching the SDGs' ambitions has been a major issue for African countries since their implementation in 2015 (Nwuke, 2021). The epidemic has made the implementation task considerably more challenging since March 2020. The AfCFTA could bring additional growth impetus (Nwuke, 2021). However, the continued weak export performance limits growth opportunities.

1.4. Role of Theory in the study

A modernisation theory underpinned this study. Modernisation theory arose from the ideas of German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), which served as the foundation for the development of the modernisation model. Gwynne (2009) stated that modernisation theory gained hold in the 1950s and 1960s for understanding and implementing policies related to economic and social development. Modernisation, according to Crossman (2019), is a process that includes industry, urbanisation, rationalisation, bureaucracy, mass consumption, and democratic adoption. The modernisation theory depicts development as a unified evolutionary path followed by all civilizations, from agricultural, rural, and traditional civilizations to post-industrial, urban, and modern forms. The modernisation theory emphasises internal reasons and sources of socio-economic advancement such as formal education, a market-based economy and, democratic systems (Ynalvez & Shrum, 2015).

Thompson (2017) posits that the most significant barriers to development in poorer countries are internal. Put simply, developing countries struggle to develop because they have unstable cultural and social institutions and, unsuitable attitudes and behaviour, which prohibit them from developing. The modernisation theory is one of the most important theories in terms of impact on global politics, notwithstanding its limitations. The United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were founded in the spirit of the modernisation theory. These are global financial institutions through which wealthier countries continuously provide financial and material aids to developing countries (Thompson, 2017). Crossman (2019) emphasizes that modernisation theory has long been used as a basis for adopting the same processes and structures in "underdeveloped" or "developing" areas around the world.

The theory drove this study's analysis and unpacking of developmental approaches in which Africa might advance in terms of socioeconomic features. The study used modernisation theory to build a development process in the post-pandemic era and to inculcate internal and external objectives that African states must undertake in order to advance collectively as a continent. Both modernisation theory and AFCFTA policies integrated to create the optimal development strategies for Africa.

1.5. Purpose of the study

1.5.1. Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to examine the prospects of International Relations in Africa in the COVID-19 era focusing on sustainable development and trade integration.

1.5.2. Objectives of the study

This study's objectives are;

- To examine Africa's plan of action and its implementation in the context of sustainable development and trade integration before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To appraise the implications of COVID-19 on the diplomatic relations and economic development on the African continent.
- To determine what needs to be done to address the issues that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to consider Africa's future in the light of the pandemic.

1.6. Research Methodology

The study took a qualitative methodological approach. This helped to grasp the body and certain global relations circumstances, as well as evaluate and analyze African sustainable development and trade integration. The COVID19 topic is a new and unexplored subject, so the research was exploratory in nature, as it is typically done to gain a better understanding of the existing problem.

1.6.1. Research Design

This study followed an exploratory study research design. This is to assist the study in gaining a full understanding of the topic, and data can be acquired from a variety of resources. Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, and Sheikh (2011) identified case studies as a helpful technique for explaining, describing, and examining occurrences or

phenomena in their natural settings, as the study intends to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted African economy. These might be used, for instance, to explore causal links and pathways that emerge as a result of a new policy initiative or service development. Exploratory analysis allows researchers to pinpoint critical aspects, processes, and interactions in the pursuit of sustainable development and trade integration in the post-pandemic era in Africa.

1.6.2. Sampling

This study used the purposive sampling technique, a sub-type of non-probability sampling. This sampling technique entails discovering and selecting individuals or groups of individuals who are particularly knowledgeable or experienced about a topic of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). These selected individuals or groups included government officials, intergovernmental organisations, civil society organisations, International Relations and Politics scholars and Diplomats. The sampling approach for this study was logically derived from the conceptual framework as well as the research questions being addressed by the study, resulting in a comprehensive database on the topic and allowing for unambiguous conclusions and reasonable explanations to be taken from the data (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2015)

1.6.3. Data Collection

This research relied on primary and secondary data sets. There are different forms of interviews. These include, among others, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured face-to-face interviews. This study used semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen over unstructured interviews because the interviewer will be allowed to ask only a few pre-determined questions, with the rest being unplanned, whereas unstructured interviews are not planned. The study can gather diverse viewpoints on the phenomenon under study via a semi-structured interview. The face-to-face interviews will be conducted from the participants' workplaces as this would provide a relaxed atmosphere, thereby making them comfortable during the interview process. In the event that the researcher is unable to reach the participant, whether due to COVID19

regulations or personal reasons, the semi-structured interview will be conducted via email, phone, or WhatsApp.

This researcher also collected data from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and AU publications, Newspapers and Newsletters, among others. Furthermore, secondary data was gathered through an assessment of published papers followed by an analysis of articles written on the topic. All datasets in the research database systems, as well as comprehensive publicity from Google Scholar and university library, will be used. Definitely irrelevant publications would be excluded.

1.6.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in this study as a common method of analysis in qualitative research. Thematic Analysis can primarily be exploratory in nature; through it, the study will learn about the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of the sampled participants. As a result, the process of data collection includes understanding participant perspectives on AfCFTA, sustainable development, and trade integration, so conducting thematic analysis is relevant to this content. The goal of thematic analysis is to think about how the reported data responds to a specific research question or invites a new conceptual or theoretical understanding (Lochmiller,2021). This analysis technique enables the researcher to arrange data according to categories and related themes. Irrelevant data will thus be discarded. In other words, it enables the researcher to sieve data according to the research questions.

1.6.5. Quality Criteria

Cameron (2011) defines quality criterion as the researcher's level of confidence that their qualitative data and findings are credible, transferrable, and dependable.

1.6.5.1. Credibility

Credibility refers to a scholar's belief in the veracity of data gathered in words rather than in statistics. The researcher collected data that directly answers to each of the research objectives in this study and analyse how accurate the findings are in comparison to reality.

The study was credible because it is relevant, accurate, and purposeful, and the citations in the paper were trustworthy and appropriately interpreted.

1.6.5.2. Dependability

In dependability, the researcher ensured that the research procedure for this study is specific and detailed enough that other researchers applying the same methodology in a different setting would most likely obtain identical results.

1.6.5.3. Conformability

The step towards impartiality for study conclusions is conformability (Shuttleworth, 2015). The researcher draws conclusions based on the information provided by the respondents without adding or subtracting anything.

1.6.5.4. Transferability

The qualitative researcher uses transferability to show that the study's findings can be applied to other situations. Similar conditions, populations, and occurrences can all be considered "alternative contexts" in this circumstance (Cameron, 2011). The study gives enough context and information on the state of international relations during the pandemic on sustainable development and trade integration for the audience to decide whether the findings may be applied to other events and situations.

1.7. Significance of the study

This study's significance was to examine Africa's developmental and integration prospects post the COVID 19 era, with an emphasis on sustainable development and trade integration in Africa. Africa has generally struggled to restructure its development in order to facilitate efficient trade flows since the outbreak of the pandemic. As a result, this research will help Africa regain its economy after the pandemic is finished. The findings of the study may be used in the formation of policies and development programs by international organisations such as the African Union, Southern African Development Community (SADC), and other regional integrations. The study will help the general public

since it will be on the verge of establishing ideal strategies for eradicating poverty during and after COVID-19, and, more crucially, to determine whether the AFCFTA will work in developing Africa.

1.8. Ethical Considerations

Since the study included secondary data, all sources were correctly cited and referenced in full, in accordance with established research methods. Bell and Bryman (2007) stated that research participants should not be subjected to any kind of harm in any way, and that respect for the dignity of the research participants should be emphasised, and that full agreement should be sought from them prior to the study. Researchers have the freedom to explore and, seek truth and knowledge. But they cannot do so at the expense of other people's rights.

1.8.1. Permission to conduct the study

The researcher applied for ethical clearance and permission to proceed through the University of Limpopo's Research and Ethics Committee.

1.8.2. Informed Consent

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), it is critical to obtain consent from participants after explicitly, honestly, and thoroughly telling them about the research's purpose. This means that the researcher has no right to collect information from participants without first obtaining their agreement and explaining what is and is not required. As a result, the researcher emphasized the need of signing an agreement or providing informed consent before participating in the study.

1.8.3. Anonymity

The researcher ensured that the participants' identities, residences, and phone numbers are kept confidential. At no point will the researcher ask for any personal information; instead, code names such as letters of the alphabet will be used to represent each

participant. Moreover, the researcher recognized participants' privacy rights in order to protect their rights and maintain the study's integrity.

1.8.4. Ensuring No harm during participation

The researcher is strictly responsible for ensuring that no participant is harmed or mistreated in any manner during the data collection process. All COVID-19 guidelines and precautions, such as keeping social distance, wearing a mask, and sanitizing hands on a regular basis, will be properly enforced. Each responder must be kept safe until the data collection is completed.

1.8.5. Potential Risks

The researcher was concerned about a potential risk of a lack of essential resources for participant communication, such as language translation services. This risk applies to those participants who do not speak or know how to communicate with English.

Chapter Two

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter described the study's research proposal, which examined the introduction and background, problem statement including the goal of examining the prospects of International Relations in Africa in the COVID-19 era, with a focus on sustainable development and trade integration. Furthermore, the research proposal included all research techniques to be employed as well as a clear scope of the study ethics, including the trustworthiness potential application. So, this chapter discusses the theoretical framework and the study's literature review. The modernisation theory is used to drive this study as well as outline the condition of Africa prior to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and even current. The chapter also looks at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), diplomatic relations, and trade integration issues in Africa.

The stances of several African intergovernmental organisations such as the African Union (AU), the Southern African Development Communities (SADC), and the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) will be discussed. Furthermore, the study anticipates that the AfCFTA will be a key component of the recovery strategy for economic development, thus it will be discussed alongside its objectives, economic development, and intra-African trade. Finally, the literature review will go deeper into the position of global diplomacy and COVID-19, the European Union (EU), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

2.2. Contextualisation of the Modernisation Theory

Modernization theory serves as the theoretical framework for this study. In the 1950s and 1960s, modernization theory was the preeminent paradigm in the social sciences. Seymour Martin Lipset made one of the theoretical underpinnings, the claim that modernizing processes eventually lead to a need for democratic institutions, in 1959, and

it has been the topic of vehement and ongoing discussion ever since (Rogov, 2018). After 1991, when Francis Fukuyama talked about the end of the Cold War as validation on modernization theory and more widely of universal history (Hodge, 2015).

Gel'man (2015) share the similar view with Francis Fukuyama that Sovietology has adopted modernization theory, which maintains that development moves in a single direction toward a competitive economy and political democracy, as a way of dealing with its failure. The Soviet Union's impending collapse, according to modernization theorist, was caused by advancements in technology, education, and urbanization. Modernization theory, which is relevant to trade integration and sustainable development, contends that as societies advance, they get to be more open, socioeconomic accomplishments become less correlated with social background and other external characteristics, and education becomes more important to socioeconomic effects (Rogov, 2018).

The idea behind development is that the political and economic problems in the so-called Third World can be remedied by replicating Western economic modernisation in these nations. Modernisation theory may be traced back to the end of second World War. COVID19 has led to a significant imbalance, hampered health diplomacy, and exacerbated poverty in today's world. However, we have seen how one's notions of social and material 'needs' determine the form of this disadvantage, and therefore how a society should 'develop' to solve these 'shortfalls'.

Many strategic plans and programs of organised social change that are currently being implemented to address such issues are founded on nineteenth-century ideas of socio-economic change and development. According to modernization theory, poor countries can improve their status by boosting their economic growth and changing their ideas, values, and attitudes about work (UKEssays, 2018).

The modernisation theory elucidates the social development process. According to theory, by giving adequate support, marginalised and undeveloped societies can progress at the same rate as other industrialised countries (Marsh, 2014) The modernisation concept arose from the concept of progress, which promoted the idea of

self-development as a means of societal advancement. It pioneered the idea that technology and economic advancements can alter people's perspectives.

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, established a firm foundation for the development of modernisation theory. He compared the evolution of a civilization to that of an organism. The organism becomes more advanced as it evolves. Similarly, as a culture evolves, its complexity increases. The theory of modernisation is used to explain the progression and progress of societies. The theory's findings are founded on the notion that western countries epitomized modernity because they were able to progress from the early stages of underdevelopment (Obadia, 2014). The impoverished countries, on the other hand, tend to adopt the developed culture of the West.

Furthermore, Shareia (2015) claims that development support from powerful nations is tied to modernization theory. It places a high value on externally sourced support while neglecting the oppressive conditions that accompany it. Africa has benefited from modernisation theory as well. Hybrids, greenhouse technology, herbicides, tractors, and the application of other scientific information, for example, were introduced to replace traditional agricultural techniques as a result of modernisation (Chipo and Nyoni, 2020).

Because of the huge infrastructure created by modernisation, it is now possible to transport commodities and people over long distances with ease. The internet created a virtual world that benefited the entire world by removing physical barriers and enabling e-business. According to Kotler (2005), the internet produces new winners and creates impediments for the losers. People can now conduct business all over the world without having to fly there because of modern information and communication technologies. It has, however, brought with it its own set of obstacles, such as the spread of the western way of life. (Chipo & Nyoni, 2020).

2.3. Criticism of Modernisation Theory

Over four decades ago, a scientist by the name of Dean C. Tipps argued that the idea of modernization was inadequate to explain social processes, but he also asserted that

there was still no viable replacement that fully transcended the limitations of modernization theory (Mücen, 2018:173).

Modernisation theorists argued that for traditional societies to advance, the West was necessary (Thompson, 2017). The latter argument, however, runs counter to the Afrocentric historical perspective because Herodotus, who praised Egypt's developments and successes without the help of the West, also provided extensive documentation of African achievements in ancient (Chawane, 2016). Furthermore, according to Caporaso and Zare (2019), the dependency theory contends that development is not about supporting emerging nations at all. In reality, the purpose is to enrich Western businesses and nations while marginally modifying society to make simpler to exploit for cheap labor and natural resources.

Hobbes' realism theory (Douglass, 2020) critique the modernization theory's presumption that, as economies and technologies advance and living standards rise, societies transition toward lifestyles which are more contemporary, pluralistic, considerate, and open, where vertical structures of oppression give way to horizontal relationships of competition and cooperation (Rogov, 2018). Hobbes realism believes that material inequality limits the quantity of effective actors. However, unless one is manifestly superior to all others.

The amount that modernisation theory emphasizes the significance of foreign aid is criticized by neo-liberalism, yet corruption (Kleptocracy) frequently hinders aid from reaching its intended recipients (Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy, 2016). A large portion of aid is stolen by dishonest government officials and elites rather than going to the planned initiatives. In other words, aid promotes inequality and helps the ruling class maintain power. Furthermore, post-development thinkers argue that modernization theory is flawed because it assumes that nations require outside support (Thompson, 2017). Local expertise and initiatives play a reduced role because the focus is on outside specialists and parachuted money.

2.4. Conceptualisation of COVID-19 in brief

The disease brought on by the new coronavirus was formally referred to as Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) on February 12, 2020, by WHO. COVID-19 probably originated from a "wet market" in Wuhan, China (Strzelecki, 2020). Coronaviruses are a virus that infects that can induce mild to major respiratory tract infections such as the common cold, SARS, and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS).

According to Ettang (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic is both a political issue and a disaster for public health. Politics played a significant role in how governments planned for and responded to the crisis (Khor, 2020). Political actions can impact outbreak management, regardless of the health system's strength (Kluge et al., 2018). This highlights the importance of political factors in public health. At the onset of the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) began preparing guidelines for developing nations considered fragile during pandemics (Makau, 2021).

The call to action has been built on three fundamental activities for individuals to minimize the spread of the virus: keep social distance from others, wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth, and stay at home unless absolutely essential (WHO, 2021). During the epidemic, many industrialized countries employed successful methods such as limited and complete shutdowns and prohibited travel into and out of their nations (Yiu, Yiu, and Li, 2020).

COVID19 has had a particularly negative impact on the field of diplomacy, as summits, conferences, and other key events have been canceled. However, global cooperation is more than necessary during times of crises. Travel restrictions have frequently caught countries off guard. For instance, the United States' restriction on travelers from the Schengen area came as a shock, affecting airlines on both sides of the Line (Qingbin, Zhao, Kitsos, Cannella, Wang, and Lei, 2020).

2.5. Africa prior COVID-19

Africa occupies approximately one-fifth of the planet's land area, making it the second largest continent in the world after Asia (Elbarbary, Abdel Zaher, Saibi, Fowler, & Saibi, 2022). The evidence reviewed in this section state that COVID-19 has had a severe impact on the African economy, although it is not to blame for all of the continent's economic problems. Prior to COVID-19, most African countries' economies were considered underdeveloped, with increased political instability, poverty, humanitarian, and health crises (Kanyenze, Chitambara, & Tyson, 2017).

Makau (2021) avers those African countries, in particular, are regarded as vulnerable in terms of health-care systems, and it was predicted that they would be quickly overwhelmed, with disastrous consequences. Furthermore, the poor economic status of most African countries has been exacerbated by high population growth, which has kept per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) low or, in some cases, led it to drop (Dickson, McMaster, Nicol, Kröner, Steel, Gardiner, Mabogunje, & Middleton, 2021).

Mishra (2020) holds a similar view, claiming that before to the COVID-19 epidemic, African countries were steadily expanding their economies through continental efforts and collaborative processes. The pandemic has temporarily altered these growth patterns. It also underlined the value of internet connectivity, accessibility, and affordability. The fragile and overburdened public healthcare systems, as well as an over-reliance on pharmaceutical and medical protective equipment imports, exacerbate the situation. However, according to Soy (2020), several African countries learned the necessary actions in a pandemic after dealing with diseases such as Ebola and could act promptly and quickly.

Therefore, any chance of improving economic conditions in most of Africa depends on two things: controlling population growth within individual nations to support economic growth, and organizing state groups into regional economic blocs to generate sizable internal markets to support growth (Dickson et al, 2021). COVID-19 has sparked a call for further international assistance to Africa. Roimen (2021) enunciates that the pandemic has had a different impact on each African country, and it need long-term solutions now

more than ever. The first step should be to establish a single, long-term economic recovery plan for Africa.

Most analysts believe that African agency and influence in international events has increased over the last decade, both on a continental and bilateral scale, in connection with advancements in peace and stability, development outcomes, and governance capabilities. According to interesting literature, Africa was quick to mobilize for response the week before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic (Kapata, Ihekweazu, Ntoumi, Raji, Chanda-Kapata, Mwaba, Mukonka, Bates, Tembo, Corman, & Mfinanga, 2020). African states have stressed unity in their international messaging on COVID-19, with African leaders leading the charge for international leadership, collective political resolve, and multilateral cooperation (Donnelly & Sidiropoulos, 2020).

This is because they recognize that, no matter how well they cooperate among themselves, their countries are still vulnerable to external shocks and the vagaries, and frequently viciousness, of more powerful nations' competitiveness. As a result, African countries will need to be even more strategic in their use of influence, network building, agenda setting, innovation, problem solving, and ensuring that collective interests take precedence over bilateral interests. If African countries are to recover and achieve true socioeconomic transformation, they must be able to influence global governance systems to build rules and norms in their favor (Donnelly & Sidiropoulos, 2020).

Africa is a major actor in world affairs, and it has long been at the center of international relations, offering ideas, resources, and knowledge on a variety of global concerns. Chipaike and Knowledge (2018), for example, emphasize Africa's contributions to global discussions on women's rights, development, human security, landmines, migratory flows, the environment, counterterrorism, and anti-piracy operations, among other issues. Schussler (2020) identifies a few important steps that African governments should take as part of a Pan-African response to poverty reduction, including opening neighboring markets, expanding sectors across the continent, carefully developing Africa's food industry and demand, and establishing informal markets.

African countries have also worked with the OECD on profit shifting and tax avoidance, and their contributions to the G20 have been coordinated through South Africa, the continent's lone member. The COVID-19 crisis will continue to deplete resources and capabilities, necessitating coalition-building, coordination, and a sensible division of work among African states in order to preserve collective African agency (Donnelly and Sidiropoulos, 2020). According to Yaya, Otu, and Labonté (2020), African leaders must work with scientists, policymakers, and medical professionals to design appropriate economic recovery and development plans and policies.

The literature on Africa's history before to COVID-19 reflects the first objective, which is to study Africa's action plan and its implementation in the context of sustainable development and trade integration prior to the establishment of COVID-19. Therefore, the literature assessment that follows will focus on Africa's sustainable development goals.

2.6. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa

In recent decades, there has been a significant change in the planning and activities for global development. With the introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) to the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), a shift from a disjointed strategy to a more integrated and linked one has occurred (Gabay, 2015). One of the reasons for the shift from MDGs to SDGs is that the MDGs' failure to thoroughly look at the root causes of global poverty, as well as the constantly increasing concentrations of regional imbalances in wealth, employment, infrastructure, food security, and education within the global South and between the global North and South, was perhaps their most serious flaw. Because they were only applied to emerging nations, the objectives looked to be identifying the core causes of poverty inside the internal policies of countries in the Global South.

However, the MDGs accomplished some positive things, such as fostering new and creative collaborations, stirring public opinion, and emphasizing the critical relevance of setting aspirational goals (Kumar, Kumar, & Vivekadhish, 2016). The MDGs altered how decisions are made in both rich and developing countries by prioritizing people and their

immediate needs. More than one billion people were lifted out of extreme poverty, hunger was reduced, more girls than ever before were allowed to go to school, and our planet was safeguarded. However, inequities persist, and development has been erratic (Kumar *et al*, 2016).

Lomazzi, Borisch, and Laaser (2014) argue that the MDGs were replaced by SDGs since some regions of the world continue to have an overwhelmingly high concentration of poor people. Numerous women still pass away during pregnancy or from complications associated to childbirth. Women and those at the bottom of the economic scale or who are at a disadvantage due to their age, handicap, or ethnicity frequently get left behind in the advancement of society. Rural and urban disparities are still very noticeable.

The SDGs are a set of 17 interconnected goals with 169 targets that aim to make the world a better and more sustainable place for everyone by 2030. The United Nations (UN) launched the SDGs in 2015, but practically all African countries are falling behind in the race to meet the targets by 2030 (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune & Fuller, 2019). Behraves and Rocha, (2020) comprehensive review concludes that economic stagnation in Africa, combined with the present global recession brought on by COVID-19, is expected to make COVID-19's effects more severe and long-lasting than those of the global economic crisis of 2008–2009.

For Africa, the new decade began with the promise and potential of meeting the 2030 deadline for the SDGs and Agenda 2063 objectives. COVID-19, on the other hand, has revealed vast amount of literature on the weakness of current systems in dealing with external shocks all around the world. Mishra (2020) claims that the pandemic is posing a severe impediment to progress on the SDGs in Africa. Africa has made significant progress toward SDGs 3 (good health and wellbeing), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 10 (reducing inequalities), and 14 (protecting life underwater).

However, the pandemic's overburdening of health services has jeopardized progress on SDG 3. The section will place more emphasis on the details of SDG 3 and how it was affected by COVID19. Some countries are also having difficulty achieving SDG 16

(peace, justice, and strong institutions), with elections being postponed and core constitutional rights (such as freedom of movement) being restricted (Mishra, 2020).

According to Min (2021), Africa has made incredible strides in many areas of development over the last two decades. Maternal and child deaths have decreased significantly, as have Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), malaria, and tuberculosis incidence rates. The global pandemic of COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on people's lives and livelihoods (Min, 2021). Although COVID-19 infection rates in Africa are lower than in other regions, the pandemic's economic decline and social turmoil are threatening the continent's decades of development gains.

The first five months of the pandemic have seen levels of violence that have not lessened, or even increased, and social discontent brought on by COVID-19 has expanded beyond of countries that are experiencing conflict (Polo, 2020). The primary COVID-19-related variables that could have an impact on the African economy are a decrease in the importation of Chinese goods to the point where it inflates the African markets (Lone and Ahmad, 2020). As a result, local products prices will rise, putting additional pressure on small-scale traders in growing markets.

Most recent attention on COVID19 by Naidoo and Fisher, (2020) has indicated that the primary goals of the SDG agenda are jeopardized due to the ongoing epidemic. In addition, most importantly, the goal of assuring global residents' health and well-being through effective funding and access to healthcare systems, as well as improved sanitation and cleanliness (Filho, Brandli, Salvia, Rayman-Bacchus & Platje, 2020).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2020), tens of millions of people lack health insurance, unemployment insurance, and financial security, notably in emerging and least-developed nations. A wide and rising body of research indicates that the pandemic will intensify these deplorable living conditions, which is regarded as a significant setback to the key ideals of sustainable development, which are inclusion and leaving no one behind. When combined with pre-existing food insecurity, the pandemic will undoubtedly push more people into poverty (Runde, Metzger, & Abdullah, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to postpone and possibly imperil the execution of several of those goals in the majority of member countries (Naidoo & Fisher, 2020). Indeed, multiple studies have found that the pandemic has exacerbated global inequities, necessitating strong government engagement to address these challenges (Ashford *et al.*, 2020). Hawke, (2020) enunciates that UNICEF has been in the forefront of organizing remote networks of youth volunteers inspired to rise to difficulties peculiar to their areas to meet these needs.

Food insecurity has arisen in Africa as a result of travel and export limitations on rice and wheat, resulting in a steep spike in food costs, as well as rising hunger and malnutrition (Save the Children's Resource Centre, 2020). According to reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 21.5% of Africa's 1,288 million people are food insecure. Similarly, according to the World Food Programme's 2020 projection, over 73 million people in African countries will face food crises and insecurity (Odey, Alawad, Atieno, Carew-Bayoh, Fatuma, Ogunkola, & Lucero-Prisno, 2021). The widespread view is that the continent's present strategic trajectory, with COVID-19, stifles effective implementation of the SDGs and jeopardizes the achievement of 2030 targets (Odey *et al.*, 2021). The available literature closes the knowledge gap about the changes that SDGs aim to make in response to COVID19 effects. In light of the COVID19 situation, the next subsection will address the diplomatic relations between African nations.

2.7. Diplomatic Relations and Globalisation

Diplomatic relations, as defined by Denza (2016), are the usual diplomatic exchanges between nations. It entails ongoing communication and contact between independent nations. Two nations send diplomats to work in each other's countries and conduct formal business as part of their diplomatic ties. In order to gauge the potential for contacts among African nations during the COVID-19, the discussion of diplomatic relations is a crucial component of the prospects for international relations in Africa.

According to Mesfin (2014), whether or whether African countries profit from globalisation is heavily influenced by the West's particular interests and policies, which drive

globalisation and determine the shape and dosage of its advantages. The West's dominance is evident in international relations, where scholars such as Nkiwane (2001) allege that the field has repeatedly disregarded Africa, while Neuman (1998) asserts that conventional international relations theories are Eurocentric. The ubiquitous bias known as eurocentrism can be found in modernity's self-consciousness. Such Eurocentrism appears clear when Lewis claims the uniqueness of Western culture with its intrinsic qualities and justifies its so-called "successes" on the basis of these qualities (Mücen, 2018).

The globe has had to adjust to a new normal as a result of COVID-19, and being a worldwide phenomenon, the pandemic has diplomatically re-ordered the whole world, forcing each country to select which side of the diplomatic coin it belongs to. Adetiba's (2021) comparative study found out that the pandemic has the potential to divide the globe into two groups: the wealthy, who have strong and efficient health and political institutions, as well as scientific knowledge and innovation, and the impoverished, whose economies are unable to support their inhabitants.

Because of the pandemic's catastrophic impact on the global economy, COVID-19 has tested modern diplomacy, forcing every state to prioritize the pandemic (Adetiba, 2021). Thus, according to Kanu (2020), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Report for 2020 notes that, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy is undergoing its worst recession since the Great Depression. Following the IMF's example, Oxfam International warned in a 2020 report that the COVID-19 epidemic might push nearly a billion individuals into poverty (Kanu).

In Africa, particularly in Southern African Development Community (SADC), where common liberation history constituted the glue, health scares prompted nations to close borders, shattering SADC cooperation and reframing history (Matthew, Chingono, Mangezi, & Mbazangi, 2020). The potential of xenophobic behavior is also expected to resurface as countries such as South Africa struggle to provide for its residents as well as a large number of foreign nationals living in the country. The world is heading toward an economic and military conflict that could culminate in the creation of a new world order

(Matthew *et al*, 2020). The next subsection will address trade integration issues that developed during and before COVID-19, as well as the importance of trade in Africa's growth.

2.8. Trade Integrations Problems

Cotton, Remy & Nicholls (2020) recent analysis of trade integration provides a strong critique that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of African countries' reliance on imports of key products including food, fuel, machinery, and other manufactured goods, as well as their susceptibility to disasters and external shocks. Due to a shortage of intermediate inputs from external sources such as China, factories all around the world have slowed or stopped output (Baldwin & Tomiura, 2020). This has brought the discussion on regional value chain development and increased domestic and regional industrialization to a new level in Africa.

Africa is confronted with serious trade issues. The limited level of formal trade, the overconcentration on natural resource exports, and the deteriorating terms of trade have all been sources of concern. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Africa's proportion in global commerce has remained relatively steady at 3% to 4% since 2008, with intra-African trade increasing by 15.2% between 2015 and 2017. Between 2001 and 2011, the "Top Five" countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Algeria, and Angola/Morocco) accounted for 33 to 63% of African exports and imports (Mutambara, 2013).

Furthermore, the research on economic integration shows that Europe is Africa's most important trading partner, yet trade between the two regions is declining while trade between Africa and Asia is expanding (Ismail, 2017). China's share of global trade with Africa has increased considerably (Sindzingre, 2016). Taxes on small-scale informal companies penalize labor. Workers are paid less because the owners' profit margins are diminishing (Murphy and Carmody 2015). These taxes are also discriminatory, as they do not apply to major firms. Non-tariff barriers, including as travel restrictions within Africa and around the world, make things even more difficult. Therefore, according to Obeng-

Odoom (2020), traveling to other parts of Africa is more difficult for Africans than it is for Europeans and Americans visiting Africa.

Governments can keep trade flowing during this crisis by ensuring access to pharmaceuticals, services, and critical food supplies, preventing blanket export restrictions or tax increases, and providing transportation and logistics to maintain cross-border and international value chains (Mishra, 2020). Border closures and non-tariff barriers are substantial impediments. Border closures limited transit of PPEs even when they were available. Countries can create trust corridors to allow the transit of crucial products and services while maintaining proper security, ensuring that critical supply chains remain operational (Mishra, 2020).

In all of these African trade integration initiatives, the AU has many more strategies that must be incorporated with these plans. As a result, the next subtopic will review the African Union's perspective on COVID-19 solutions.

2.9. African Union (AU) Position on COVID-19

Much of the current literature on AU position pays particular concerns that Africa was predicted to suffer in responding to COVID-19 since it has the highest number of least developed countries and, as a result, the weakest public health systems. The African continent's lesson is to strengthen the AU's worldwide efforts and participation on issues affecting its member countries. In actuality, the African Union has been fairly proactive, thanks to its long-standing institutional commitment to regional public health via the Africa Centre for Disease Control (Alden & Dunst, 2021). Moussa Faki Mahamt, the AU Commission chairperson, called on the international community to go beyond "good intentions" and provide massive aid to Africa, estimating that between "\$100 and 150 billion" would be required not only to combat the pandemic but also to offset the economic consequences (Alden & Dunst, 2021).

According to the African Union report (2020), AU member states should collaborate to achieve high-level political dedication and leadership across all COVID-19 response sectors, including Peace and Security, Trade and Industry, Economic Affairs, and Rural

Economy and Agriculture. The primary purpose of COVID-19 in Africa will be to avoid transmission and reduce effect. Given that transmission across the continent is unavoidable, delaying and reducing the peak of epidemics can help health services manage the surge of patients and communities adapt to disruptions in social, cultural, and economic activities (African Union report, 2020).

Ighobor (2020) avers the African Union Development Agency's post-COVID19 recovery plans, which include a focus on reforms of the continent's food systems by prioritizing regional value-chains, consumer health and wellbeing, reducing food waste, and promoting a culture of sustainable food use; a focus on skills development and employment provides an opportunity for national governments to reflect on prioritizing entrepreneurship and innovation; and an intention to implement an AU-led initiative.

Furthermore, to carry out a plan to provide technical support to nations to mitigate the social and economic effects of school shutdowns during the COVID-19; to prioritize national planning and data structures, that is, to use sound data and evidence for planning developmental initiatives and to mitigate unforeseen future crises such as epidemics and natural catastrophes; and, finally, to create the first reference system, syncing good practices and responses (Ighobor, 2020)

The African Union developed a COVID-19 Response Fund. The African Development Bank (ADB) has established the COVID-19 Response Facility, which would provide up to \$10 billion in funding to African governments and the corporate sector to provide immediate liquidity to nations (Mishra, 2020). The facility contains US\$5.5 billion for larger, oil-exporting economies, US\$3.1 billion in grants for small, poor, landlocked economies, and an additional US\$1.4 billion for private-sector projects. The European Union has allocated €60 million to help Horn of Africa countries deal with the pandemic's health and socioeconomic repercussions (Mishra, 2020).

All of the available financial assistance has attempted to mitigate the COVID-19 in the majority of African countries. Some of the COVID-19 money, however, have been plundered in other parts of Africa. AU appears to be doing well and is making every attempt to combat the epidemic and curb its spread by purchasing numerous vaccines.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the African Union held its first virtual summit on February 7 and 8, 2021. The 2021 summit subject was inspired by Agenda 2063, an agreed-upon framework for equitable growth and sustainable development and aspiration, which believes that an Africa with a solid sense of culture, values, and ethics will benefit it, according to Singh (2021). The conference also discussed the need for economic and social regeneration, as well as the long-awaited establishment of the AfCFTA. Despite efforts to silence weapons, the frequency of violent conflicts within countries, as well as the issue of displaced persons, has kept cross-border tensions high (Singh, 2021).

According to Odeyemi et al. (2020), Africa's industry of manufacturing ought to contribute more to the development of home-made remedies to supplement present health capacities during the pandemic. Because of the pandemic's impact on education, the ADB and AU provided and spent \$300 million from the African Education Fund to expand and improve human resources in technical and vocational training and education (Mayakasi and Nkengasong 2020).

The evaluation of the African Union's position on this problem is critical because it reveals views on how Africa may manage the spread of COVID-19 and plans that can be made to sustain its economies and trade integrations. As a result, the following section will concentrate on regional integration, specifically SADC and its role in this topic.

2.10. Southern African Development Communities (SADC)

In a landmark paper published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2020, COVID-19's negative socioeconomic effects were linked to challenges in human progress due to its triple manifestation in health, education, and income, all of which are key components of the Human Development Index. The information available during this Rapid Assessment showed that most SADC countries were already dealing with the pandemic's negative socioeconomic implications, having experienced a considerable setback in their efforts to meet key SDGs (UNDP, 2020).

The SADC faced comparable issues as the rest of the world as a result of the COVID19 pandemic (Nyaruwata & Mbasera, 2021). The SADC regional response to COVID-19 highlights the COVID-19 Partners and Supply site, a platform developed by the United Nations (UN) to facilitate stakeholder participation in the COVID-19 response (SADC Secretariat, 2020). A variety of COVID19-related difficulties continue to impede cross-border road transport in SADC regions. The trucking sector plays a significant role in various African nations because the transportation of commodities is vital to the economy. Concerns about the new coronavirus disease's current global expansion have crept into practically every business, including the transportation sector.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some businesses make an effort to make sure the drivers are fed, rested, and healthy, but this is not usually the case (Michalopoulos, Ncube, Simona, Kansankala, Sinkala, and Raidoo, 2016). In certain instances, COVID-19 has made it more difficult for commodities to be smoothly transferred for trade because the majority of countries were under lockdown and their borders were closed.

Another factors is that cross-border migrants, especially those without proper papers (irregular migrants), deal with issues that make them more susceptible to infection and make it difficult for them to get or maintain treatment (Mushomi, Palattiyil, Bukuluki, Sidhva, Myburgh, Nair, Mulekya-Bwambale, Tamuzi, and Nyasulu, 2022).

Masina (2021) indicates that the annual summit of the 16-member Southern African Development Community was held in Malawi's capital, Lilongwe, on August 17, 2021, to discuss pressing issues of the COVID19 pandemic and to pace ways to combat it, including recovery plans. Lazarus Chakwera, President of Malawi and Chairperson of SADC, has urged Southern African leaders to increase efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic and urged wealthier countries to avoid hoarding vaccine. Furthermore, the summit intends to encourage regional trade and the formation of a regional defense force after its initial deployment to combat militants in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province (Masina, 2021).

Moffat (2021) demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the limits that states have in appropriately responding to new dangers such as pandemics. States must

be more creative in devising smart solutions to the plague of insufficient service delivery, which was worsened and highlighted during the pandemic. Furthermore, Moffat (2021) contends that SADC member states should use the crisis to develop their capacity to provide basic services while maintaining human rights, the rule of law, constitutionalism, and transparency.

2.11. The Introduction of African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of the AfCFTA as a COVID19 recovery system. The AfCFTA's long-awaited trade began on January 1, 2021, marking an important milestone in African trade. The AfCFTA creates a unified continental market for goods and services with the purpose of increasing intra-African trade by cutting tariffs by 90% and standardizing trading standards at the continental level (Mafongoya, 2021). By 2022, the AfCFTA has the potential to increase intra-African trade by 52.3%. According to the United Nations report, the AfCFTA might be a long-term chance to enhance pharmaceutical trade and contribute to the long improvement of African healthcare systems.

However, according to research by the Afro-champions Initiative (2020), countries are less than 50% committed and equipped to execute the AfCFTA, with Rwanda, Togo, and Mali being the most committed and Eritrea, Libya, and Burundi being the least committed. South Africa, Rwanda, and Botswana are the most prepared for the AfCFTA, while South Sudan, Seychelles, and Cape Verde are the least prepared AfCFTA (Year Zero Report, 2020).

The AfCFTA has the potential to promote change and aid in the continent's economic recuperation following the deadly coronavirus pandemic, according to Stephen Karingi, Director of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) Regional Integration and Trade Division. Furthermore, the AfCFTA, spearheaded by the private sector, will be crucial in unlocking Africa's potential, given that the continent lacks the budgetary space for trillion-dollar stimulus packages as it works to 'build forward better' from the impact of COVID-19, according to the ECA Director (Economic Commission for Africa, 2021).

As a result, focusing on the AfCFTA is critical. The AfCFTA shows little regard for the continent's massive inequality and debt difficulties, and it may exacerbate looming ecological crises. Pursuing truly free trade, as George (1886) envisioned, may help shift the continent's focus away from its expansion obsession and toward the need to solve social stratification and environmental devastation. To be successful, the AfCFTA would need to prioritize making African land common through land rent taxation, further decolonizing the African trading system (Obeng-Odoom, 2020).

Evidence suggests that since the AfCFTA, the deal has played a key role in accelerating recovery. The continent now has the opportunity to demonstrate the advantages of unity, regional cooperation, and connection in the post-COVID period. As a result, conversations must continue using online and video-conferencing technologies, and once the agreement is in place, early trade must focus on critical and vital items such as pharmaceuticals and food supplies (Mishra, 2020). AfCFTA could contribute to the study objectives that intend to improve trade integration in the post-COVID-19 period. The following themes for AfCFTA include objectives and economic development plan.

2.11.1. Objectives

The AfCFTA is intended to be a lever for a solidarity-based approach to the continent's development (African Union Directorate of Information and Communication, 2018: 2). Not only is African development discussed, but also African development as a whole. Integration and development in Africa are mutually reinforcing. Article 3 of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area lays out the AfCFTA's broad objectives (AU, 2018).

This seeks to create a liberalised market for products and services; Streamline the issue of overlapping and various memberships; utilise industrialisation to diversify and generate regional value chains, promote agricultural development, and ensure food security; make the economies of the AfCFTA signatories more competitive both within Africa and beyond the world. Through structural reform, promote inclusive socioeconomic development; create the necessary circumstances for the formation of a Continental Customs Union.

Facilitate intra-African capital investment and remove barriers to the free flow of capital and people, while maintaining national oversight and collaborating with Regional Economic Communities; and establish a single market for products and services that is compatible with human mobility. AfCFTA, dubbed Africa's own free trade ideology, promises to provide Africa resource autonomy. The nation state, or "state parties," is a key component of this trading regime (AU, 2018).

Several line of evidence by Apiko, Woolfrey & Byiers, (2020) articulates that AfCFTA's preamble recognizes the importance of international security, human rights, democracy, gender equality, and the rule of law for the development of international trade and economic cooperation, implying that these non-trade policy objectives could be addressed during the AfCFTA's implementation. Freer trade under the AfCFTA is also expected to help alleviate gender inequality in Africa by increasing women's employment opportunities and closing the continent's wage disparity. Given its potential, the AfCFTA is being hailed as Africa's stimulus package to address the continent's economic disaster caused by the COVID19 pandemic.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) predicts that once import levies and non-tariff barriers are removed, the AfCFTA will boost intra-African trade by 52.3%. The African Continental Free Trade Agreement will cover a market with a GDP of \$2.5 trillion. The trade initiative will also diversify intra-African trade by supporting more industrial commodities rather than extractive and natural resource-based goods. Historically, extractive commodities accounted for more than 75% of African exports outside of Africa but only 40% of intra-African trade (Lin, 2021).

2.11.2. Economic Development

Given that AfCFTA has the potential to substantially mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19, particularly if the scenario worsens, leaders ought to speed up rather than delay its implementation; they should also include every economic actor in the identification of goals for trade facilitation reforms and enablers to ensure the agreement's rapid and ambitious implementation (Oulmane, Jallab, & Zidouemba, 2020). Fast-tracking

imports and exports by creating green lanes for the medical, pharmaceutical, and food industries, as well as developing a better rebuilding strategy with a strong emphasis on climate-resilient and green regional value chains, are both sectoral priorities (Oulmane *et al*, 2020).

Indeed, an effectively implemented AfCFTA will allow the area to better address its economic issues. Furthermore, if all African nations implemented the AfCFTA procedures immediately, with 90% of intra-African tariffs abolished, Africa's GDP would fall by -5.2% points, rather than -7.9% points, assuming a 4% reduction in global GDP (Oulmane *et al.*, 2020).

2.11.3. Intra-African Trade

The COVID-19 pandemic, according to Augusto & Abogo (2020), has posed serious difficulties to Africa's social, economic, and political resilience. Countries are at different stages of the crisis, with varying levels of preparedness, protection, and prevention, and policymakers are rethinking trade-offs between short-, medium-, and long-term objectives. While the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the continent, as it has on countries all around the world, it has largely survived (Augusto and Abogo, 2020).

According to Mishra (2020), many African landlocked countries rely on trade corridors and big ports to stay connected to the regional and global economies. During the lockdowns, most countries locked their borders and imposed restrictions on air travel and transportation. These shutdowns, combined with export restrictions on medication and food, have increased the cost of basic necessities, putting the poorest and most vulnerable people at a disadvantage. Small-scale cross-border commerce in agricultural and animal products is a significant feature of food security in many countries; it creates jobs and promotes livelihoods, particularly for women (Mishra, 2020).

Trade between African countries is projected to soar in the coming year as economic restrictions are removed, paving the way for the AfCFTA to take hold. Almost every country, including those in Africa, has invoked national emergency powers in response to the COVID-19 situation. The commercial disruption and hardship caused by

uncoordinated responses to the epidemic may have been avoided, and the repercussions of unilateral action mitigated, if cooperative action, or at least consultation, had been taken (Erasmus, 2020). The COVID-19 virus impacted negatively on the African continent's southern regions. In terms of continental commerce, Africa, according to Russon (2020), lags behind other regions of the world. Intra-Africa exports account for only 16.6% of overall commerce, according to the African Development Bank.

Another issue affecting intra-African trade is poor communication and a lack of suitable transit facilities between African states. When you throw in a pandemic, everything goes to hell. The majority of intra-African trade is done by road, and there have been delays at border posts, with lines stretching for kilometers during the lockdown, since all nations had imposed border restrictions (Russon, 2020). There are still numerous obstacles to overcome in order to establish an African free trade zone, such as the necessity for countries to export products rather than raw materials in order for other countries to desire to acquire more African-made goods. However, this will take some time to do.

Gina claimed at the Intra-African Trade Fair (IATF) conference in Durban, South Africa, that the South African government had imported over 1000 firms from various African countries for local businesspeople to form links, partnerships, and joint ventures with (Dludla, 2021). Furthermore, Gina states that business will play a critical role in ensuring that the AfCFTA agreement's objectives, such as increasing intra-African trade, promoting industrialization, infrastructure development, job creation, and improving the competitiveness of African industries on the global stage, are met (Dludla, 2021). The following subsection will review the role of SACU and its intra-states arrangements.

2.12. Southern African Customs Union (SACU)

One of the sad ironies is that, despite the fact that regional integration makes perfect sense on a continent with many small national economies and landlocked states, member states of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have failed to establish the institutions and inter-state arrangements required for effective cross-border governance (Erasmus, 2020). The SACU, the world's oldest organization of its sort, was founded in 1889 and

brings Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa together to promote economic development through regional trade cooperation (Stuurman,2020). The 16-nation SADC includes all five SACU members.

The Customs Union collects customs and excise duties from member nations and deposits them in a revenue-sharing pool, which is divided once a year (Ngatane, 2020). Customs duties collected by each country when importing from outside the bloc and from each other, as well as excise levies, contribute to the revenues. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted this governance gap in striking fashion. Article 9 of the SADC Protocol on Trade provides for broad exclusions. To some extent, the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) Agreement accomplishes the same thing. Moreover, Erasmus (2020) claims that the same strategy is being used in the AfCFTA.

In addition, the SACU reported that its member states were losing an estimated R7 billion in monthly customs revenues that they collected and shared, and that trade flows had decreased to 1% in some countries as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ngatane, 2020). According to SACU, eSwatini and Lesotho had growth rates below 2% for the preceding four years, and South Africa and Namibia—apart from Botswana, which had seen robust growth rates—were already experiencing a recession before the COVID-19 outbreak.

SACU claims that during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, the common income pool decreased by 21%, and that the COVID-19 pandemic will have considerably more disastrous effects on the global economy. From 2004 to 2018, some of the significant industries in the member states included manufacturing, wholesale and retail, business services, tourism, finance, and mining and quarrying (Ngatane, 2020).The organization also predicts that obstacles will likely arise in the process of finalizing SACU's offer to the AfCFTA. Paulina Elago reports that the work plans of the SACU Customs Modernisation Programme will be disrupted. However, she also believes that the program needs to be expanded in order to boost IT connectivity and automation, which will enhance commerce while reducing direct contact and paper-based transactions.

2.13. Global Diplomacy and COVID-19.

The generalizability of much published research on the global diplomacy and COVID-19 issue is problematic, since Drezner (2020) support the view that the consequences of COVID-19 have altered the status quo at the heart of international politics. For ages, diseases have influenced global politics. Second, pandemics and politics are mutually reinforcing; changes in the international system have an impact on disease dissemination. Third, according to Drezner (2020), a succession of economic and ideational improvements over the past two centuries have reduced, but not eliminated, the impact of pandemics on global politics.

Diplomacy, according to Triwibowo (2020), is required when tough situations develop, and a solution is required. States typically use it to negotiate and reach a compromise over competing interests. Diplomats must talk in order to reach a compromise. As a result, communication is always regarded as a crucial part of diplomacy. Sharp (2016) held a similar opinion, stating that when a difficult task must be completed, or when a settlement or general improvement in international relations is imminent, more and better diplomacy is generally required.

Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized that a virus has no holidays during a period of public restrictions in Germany to combat the spread of coronavirus. She stated that to emphasize the necessity of staying at home during the German Easter vacations (Triwibowo, 2020). In a recent interview, Shi Ting Wang, the Chinese Ambassador to Ghana, stated that COVID-19 respects no national borders, social boundaries, political systems, or cultural conventions (Citi Newsroom, 2020). A paramedic in the United States even claimed that the coronavirus pandemic in New York was worse than 9/11 (Alemejera, 2020).

COVID-19 has been one of the generation's most significant worldwide challenges. COVID-19 has tested the international community's readiness to collaborate. Pandemics are especially vulnerable in today's globalized, interconnected society, which features integrated supply chains, constant trans-border flows of commodities, services, and money, and seamless people-to-people communication (Basrur & Kliem, 2021). Both big

powers, China and the United States, have failed to provide the necessary global leadership and are now embroiled in a rising great power rivalry (Rudd 2020).

At the very least, the World Health Organization and the United Nations have played supporting roles. No accountability can be assigned to the United Nations or its health department because international organizations can only be as effective as their members allow them. Even the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been stymied by nationalist eruptions and unilateral actions. It was realistic to expect the two most connected regional bodies to play a more prominent role in regional coordination of a cross-border mutual problem. The second subtheme will look at the literature on European Union (EU) countries and their participation in global development and COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

2.13.1. European Union (EU) Countries

The COVID-19 issue is also a diplomacy crisis for the international community world in general, and the EU in particular. Western Europe is suffering from the COVID-19 epidemic at a significantly higher rate than the rest of the world. The increased peak daily fatalities, on the other hand, were 10 to 20 times lower than expected by the models and occurred after half the time projected by the models. The United Kingdom, or Belgium, had substantially higher peak daily fatalities per million after around the same number of days, thanks to a strict, widespread lockdown, than countries adopting more sustainable tactics, such as the Netherlands or Sweden. In the Netherlands, "intelligent lockdown" is used to indicate but not enforce social distance. There is no such thing as a lockdown in Sweden (Boretti, 2020).

On a global scale, it is clear that countries tend to act in isolation, without properly coordinating their efforts, and based on nationalist prejudice (Herszenhorn, 2020). One of the instances is European countries. In March 2020, the European Union placed a 30-day ban on non-EU nationals entering the Schengen area. Although the regional grouping continues to avoid closing internal borders, several European countries continue to impose border checks and sometimes close their borders (Rettman, 2020). Nine

countries, including the Czech Republic, Poland, and Spain, have decided to restrict their borders to all foreigners, while Germany, Austria, and Hungary have agreed to a partial closure and have implemented a border check.

As part of the 'Team Europe' strategy, the European Union, its Member States, and financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development pool their resources and expertise to address COVID-19's negative impacts. Since then, EU leaders have agreed in the European Council on a comprehensive recovery plan to aid economies affected by the coronavirus outbreak (Gralki & Gharib, 2020). The EU's global response to COVID-19 includes assurance and liquidity measures for local banks through International Financial Institutions and European Development Finance Institutions, with funding from the European Fund for Sustainable Development (European Commission, 2021).

When the EU's long-term budget is coupled with Next Generation EU (NGEU), an immediate stimulus plan designed to spur economic growth, it will represent the largest stimulus package ever backed by the European Union. To help reconstruct Europe following COVID-19, a total of €2.018 trillion will be needed, based on current values. Europe will be stronger, more digitally savvy, and greener. After COVID-19, a more digital, resilient, greener, and better-equipped continent will face present and future challenges.

2.13.2. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

ASEAN was created in 1967 by Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, and it later grew to include Brunei, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. These ten countries comprise the current ASEAN, which fosters intergovernmental cooperation and facilitates economic, political, security, military, educational, and socio-cultural integration among its members and other Asian countries (Chong, Li, & Yip, 2021). ASEAN has a total GDP of \$2.6 trillion, making it the world's seventh-largest economic powerhouse and Asia's third (World Economic Forum, WEF, 2016). The ASEAN-5 (Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Brunei) are the ASEAN

countries with the fastest GDP growth and the most active economies (Munir, Lean, and Smyth, 2020).

COVID-19 has had a direct impact on the region's economy. COVID-19 has damaged the economy, halting business and daily activity. When going out to get their requirements, people are advised to stay indoors and practice social isolation. COVID-19's aftermath has already disrupted demand and supply chains in the food and non-food industries, as well as the service industry and commodity exports, due to the shrinkage of production and distribution networks (Srinivas & Sivaraman, 2021).

Several ASEAN states described their challenge as one of preventing the spread of COVID-19 while also safeguarding jobs. The effects of initially omitting marginalized populations from COVID-19 response measures, or paying them less attention, have proved disastrous in certain countries. In Singapore, for example, the second wave of the virus was connected to overcrowding in migrant worker dormitories, where they were reportedly denied access to the same level of medical care and contact-tracing measures as the general population (Noel, 2020; Karmini, 2020; Lindsey & Mann, 2020).

Many host governments were also unsure if migratory workers could utilise health and welfare systems in their host countries during the early phases of the pandemic (Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2020). Furthermore, government assurances of material support, as well as screening and testing, were greeted with mistrust by civil society networks.

The Southeast Asian association's most important diplomatic task under COVID-19 is to maintain strong relations with both China and the United States, the two foreign countries from which it must seek help. The pandemic has hampered the management of ASEAN's external relations by sparking a new round of diplomatic spats between Beijing and Washington. However, ASEAN's diplomatic partners extend beyond to China and the United States, and the Southeast Asian association has found it harder to handle relations with these two than with its other partners, such as Japan and Australia, as a result of the aforementioned diplomatic conflicts (Katsumata, 2021).

China's diplomatic actions toward ASEAN states have evolved in response to shifting local and international situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic. China's support to Southeast Asia reflected the close ties that exist between China and ASEAN countries on all levels (Yao, 2020). China's central government and regional governments worked together to give aid. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China contributed medical equipment and offered experience with its Southeast Asian counterparts through military-to-military channels. Through inter-party procedures, Communist Party of China (CPC) groups provided medical gifts and hosted seminars discussing China's experiences. Chinese businesses, social organisations, and individuals all contributed significantly (Yao, 2020).

Europe and Southeast Asia are especially vulnerable to pandemics due to their significant interconnection in terms of integrated supply chains, commerce and investment, tourism, and intra- and inter-regional people-to-people connectivity. Such great ties have strengthened regional integration but, regrettably, are now exposing both regions to COVID-19. Pandemics always transcend the nation state, connecting domestic public policy sectors and transforming national public health into a regional problem (Kliem, 2020).

2.14. Conclusions

To conclude this chapter, evidence reviews shows that the COVID-19 pandemic will only be eradicated if it and its socioeconomic implications are addressed globally, including in Africa. Taken together, these studies support the notion that the international community must move quickly to save lives and livelihoods in low-income, low-consumption countries while also establishing a viable post-development strategy for the entire world. All African states should band together and put their revenues aside in order to help everyone, particularly the underdeveloped. The majority of the research revolves around AfCFTA as a critical tool for African countries to quickly recover from the pandemic.

Because the entire world is connected and various states rely on each other, leaving one part vulnerable can be a threat to other parts of the world as well, all coronavirus

development should be conducted globally on equal scales by detecting, preventing, and curbing the deadly virus and thus achieving the COVID-19 negative world. However, for some in the globe, COVID-19 has revealed that diplomacy is not a system of international standards that contribute during times of crisis, but rather a set of communication between countries. This is because most African countries are dealing with the pandemic on their own.

Chapter Three:

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The most important aspect of research is the methodology. It is also known as the main body or a section of the research format. This chapter explains the selection of the research method used to conduct the research, which is qualitative methodology. As a result, the chapter goes over the overall research strategy as well as the study's research design. The chapter explains and justifies the sampling methods used to choose the target population for the study. Data collection methods, pre-testing, and interview guides are thoroughly explained as well as trustworthiness, data analysis method, and ethical consideration. This methodology chapter also demonstrates how the research outcome will be produced in accordance with the study's objectives.

3.2. Research Approach

A research approach is a plan of action that provides guidance for conducting research in a systematic and effective manner (Mohajan, 2018). There are three fundamental research approaches: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies. Different forms of research are classed based on a variety of characteristics such as the application of study, the objectives of the research, and the information sought. However, researchers should not regard qualitative and quantitative methodologies as incompatible, dichotomous, or rigid categories (Taherdoost, 2022). A mixed-method study combines these approaches to reap the benefits of both.

In another explanation, when a study question calls for textual data, researchers typically employ the qualitative approach; when a research question calls for numerical data, they typically employ the quantitative approach; and when a research question calls for both textual and numerical data, they typically employ the mixed methods approach (Mohajan, 2018). The research methodologies are expounded upon below.

3.2.1. Quantitative Research Approach

Quantitative research is described as the systematic study of phenomena using numerical data and statistical, mathematical in nature or computational tools (Adedoyin, 2020). This approach employs both procedures and empirical claims, which are descriptive statements regarding the situations' meanings in real terms rather than their ought. It also employs empirical assessments to determine the extent to which a standard or norm is met in a given program or effort.

Quantitative research involves randomly selecting participants from a study population, administering standardized questionnaires or interventions, and testing predetermined hypotheses about the relationship between variables. In quantitative research, the researcher is viewed as separate from the actual investigation, and the findings are expected to be replicated regardless of who conducts the research.

Therefore, since this current study is not numerical, it did not apply quantitative research and hence did not analyze utilizing statistics. The study focuses on a small number of participants, and these participants provided more thorough responses on the open-ended format during data collection without being limited to response categories that are "closed-ended" or fixed. As a result, quantitative research is not the best fit for your current study.

3.2.2. Mixed-method Approach

Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri (2021) define a mixed-methods study approach as one with its own philosophical presumptions and methods of research. As a methodology, it incorporates philosophical presumptions to offer guidelines for gathering and analyzing data from multiple sources in a single study. Since mixed methods research incorporates interpretivism and post-positivism philosophical frameworks, it has various advantages when applied to complex research difficulties (Fetters, 2016).

Furthermore, high-quality mixed methods research necessitates mixing at all stages of the study, from research question formulation to data collection, analysis, and

interpretation. Mixed method researchers take a non-purist, compatibilist, or mixed approach, allowing them to incorporate many research design characteristics to discover the best solution to their individual research challenge (Hafsa, 2019). Thus, mixed-method research is not fitting for this study since it combines qualitative and quantitative research approaches. In contrast to using quantitative research methods, a large portion of this study is qualitative in nature.

3.2.3. Qualitative Research Approach

This research followed a qualitative approach to exploring the prospects of international relations in Africa in the COVID-19 era, with a focus on sustainable development and trade integration. Qualitative research, in which field sites develop into a network of social relationships over time, can be a profoundly interpersonal process (Butcher, 2022). Ezer and Aksüt (2021:16) describe qualitative research as a long-term and flexible in-depth investigation of specific things and information in their natural environment. In short, qualitative research approach is the study of specific cases and events in their natural settings using data collection tools and a process to comprehend people's experiences and perceptions.

So, this methodology improved the quality of research because it mainly centered on the methodological expertise that the participant brought forward, and this was achieved because the researcher was truthful to the research approach. Furthermore, the subjects of this study required precise data to ensure that the findings help Africa grow in economic and political progress in the future. As a result, Patton (2014) contends that obtaining relevant and trustworthy qualitative findings requires not only observation, interviewing, and document analysis, but also learning, data, practice, creative thinking, discipline, and hard work.

3.2.3.1. *Exploratory Research Design*

As explained by Boru (2018) there are three research design types: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. Therefore, this research is guided by an exploratory design. When the researchers know little about the chance or issue, an exploratory research

design is appropriate. The exploratory research design is not limited to a single framework but may employ both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Burns, Bush, and Sinha, 2014). Moreover, exploratory research is undertaken when a phenomena or problem is not well-defined (Boru, 2018). This study does not attempt to provide definitive answers to research issues, but rather to explore the topic in depth.

The study, however, used a qualitative exploratory design. The goal of qualitative exploratory research is to explain constrained portions of reality by proposing a causal order and chain of events. This had an impact on the study by presuming causal essentiality for Africa's sustainable development and trade integration in order to propose an useful and valuable way to explain the collected data. Furthermore, this design actively pursued to provide previously neglected explanations, and it can do so by actively involving the researcher in the procedure of amplifying his or her conceptual tools, allowing him or her to raise interesting questions and provide innovative explanations of a given reality, from a new angle (Reiter, 2017).

3.3. Research Paradigm

Research paradigm, as defined by Khatri (2020), is the theoretical or philosophical foundation for the study that guides the researcher through the entire investigational process, including problem selection, research question formulation, identification of the nature and varieties of reality, knowledge, methodology, and research work value. Moreover, research paradigms are described by Park, Konge, and Artino (2020) as guiding scientific findings through their presumptions and tenets.

There are several research paradigms; some are supplementary to one another, while others, such as positivism and interpretivism, are diametrically opposed. One of the most prominent research paradigms is positivism, which maintains that only knowledge demonstrated via the senses is valid (Bryman, 2012). However, the study favored the interpretivism paradigm over the positivism paradigm. The study chose the interpretivism

paradigm because it respects the interpretive theme of social activity and aims to understand and interpret sociological phenomena (Dawadi, Shrestha, and Giri, 2021:26).

According to Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2011), interpretivist research reveals actual fact through participant viewpoints, as well as their own experiences and knowledge. In response to the current study, the researcher used the participants' perspectives on the prospects of International Relations in Africa in the COVID-19 era, focusing on sustainable development and trade integration, to build and interpret his comprehension from data gathered. One of the reasons the researcher chose the Interpretivist paradigm was to better grasp the world of human experience.

Because the research is being undertaken in an African context that depends on sustainable development and trade integration in the post-COVID-19 age, data interpretivism is critical. Therefore, the researcher did not seek information for the study in rigid ways; rather, the researcher interviewed reality through subjects, typically through selected participants who own their experiences and are of the research topic.

3.4. Area of the study

The study area covered the entire African continent. Neri, Parajka, and Toth (2020) defines study area as a geographical or political area that is available for research, encompassing its history, geography, language, and general culture. The study topic seeks to investigate international relations prospects following the COVID 19 era, with a focus on sustainable development and trade integration in Africa. Below is a map of the world's continents including Africa.

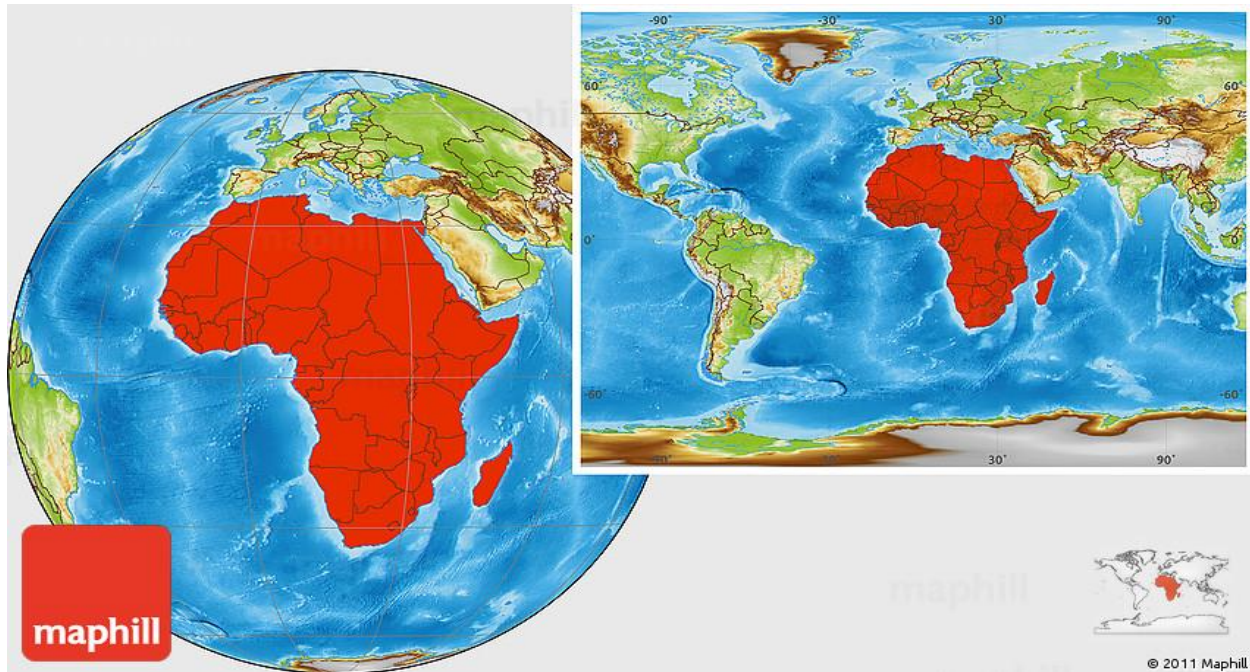


Figure 1 - Data source: Africa in World Map

In light of the above map, according to Kröner *et al*, (2021), Africa is the second largest continent (after Asia), accounting for approximately one-fifth of the total world's land. The total land area of Africa is approximately 11,724,000 square miles (30,365,000 square km), and the landmass takes approximately 5,000 miles (8,000 km) from north to south and estimated 4,600 miles (7,400 km) from east to west.

Each African country is autonomous and may not fit the African economic stereotypical view, but except for South Africa and the countries of North Africa, which all have diverse production practices, the majority of Africa's economy can be classified as poorly developed. (Mogaji, 2021). HIV/AIDS, malaria, Ebola and now COVID-19 are deadliest diseases, ravaging many African countries and leaving orphan children and widespread poverty in their wake. Furthermore, many politicians are corrupt, and provided foreign aid money usually does not reach where it was intended.

Africa is one of the world's richest continents due to its known mineral wealth. According to Makhubela (2018), Africa must take measures to ensure its own share of the global economic growth. The most important opportunity for recognizing Africa's growth potential

is constantly overlooked, despite the fact that it exists within the continent: Africa's ability to trade and do business amongst itself. When it comes to socioeconomic development, Africa tends to struggle behind the majority of the rest of the world. In reality, a report released by the Sustainable Development Goals Center for Africa, "Africa 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Three-Year Reality Check," uncovers that there has been little progress and, in some cases, complete stagnation (Begashaw, 2019).

3.5. Study Population and Sampling

3.5.1. Sampling

According to Rai and Thapa (2015), sampling is the process of selecting a part of the world to study in order to make inferences about the world. The sampling method refers to how observations are selected from a population to be included in a survey study. The sample method is used when a small group is chosen to represent the entire population. The purposive sampling technique was used in this study. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling, also known as a judgmental sampling. Nonprobability sampling, also known as judgment sampling, is based on subjective judgment and a process in which scenarios cannot be delegated to units objectively, making it difficult to determine the probability of sample results (Leal, 2018).

Purposive sampling groups are chosen based on their intended use (Singh and Masuku, 2014:3). Purposive sampling produces estimates and is not statistically recognized. This technique should only be used for special purposes. The researcher utilised expertise of the population to choose a sample of elements that reflects a cross-section of the population in a non-random fashion. Therefore, this sampling procedure concentrated on people who have extensive understanding of international relations, COVID-19, and diplomatic viewpoint on Africa, and who hold similar opinions to those required by the subject, and who are ready to share that information.

In accordance with the target population, the selected sample was based on knowledge of the research problem in order to choose the right people for participation in the study. The study includes a judgmental selection of useful cases for study that are suitable for

exploratory qualitative research. Because generalization (rather than analytical generalization) is not a concern, participant selection was done at random. As a result, the participants were chosen based on their ability to employ critical thinking in their career field and offer information on the subject.

3.5.2. Target Population

The target population is the collection of all individuals, families, groups, organizations, or events from which we want to learn more (Moazzam, 2014). Furthermore, it is the population from which the researcher wishes to collect data. The target’s population was ascertained using non-probability purposive sampling. The non-probability sampling procedure described above is less unbiased than probability techniques. It involves the researcher using a type of sampling in which participants are either self-selected, chosen by the researcher, or members of the target population who are referred to the researcher in order to participate in a study (Stratton, 2021). The researcher ensured that the study's target population is available and willing to participate.

The selected population of the study is detailed on the table below:

	Selected Participant	Number of participants
1	Diplomats	01
2	International Relations and Politics scholars	03
3	Economist	01
4	Students	02
5	Historians	02
	Total	09

3.6. Data Collection methods and Interviewer Guide

The following basic techniques were used for data collection: secondary and primary data collection with an emphasis on qualitative methodology.

3.6.1. Face-to-face Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews were broadly based on the semi-structured qualitative in-depth interview with individuals who are regarded to be notably knowledgeable and experienced of interest. The semi-structured interview is typically conducted face-to-face, allowing the researcher to pursue unique insights, pose questions, and appraise phenomena from various perspectives. The researcher worked hard to gain a thorough understanding of the current COVID-19 situation in Africa's sustainable development and trade integration. Furthermore, the study provided opportunities to improve data collection initiatives and the interpretation process.

3.6.1.1. Fieldwork Experience

The researcher firstly selected a location with the least amount of distraction and then explain the purpose of the interview to the subject. The researcher also made certain that all participants in the study followed and consented to the ethical consideration process, and that the qualitative approaches were based on the original study protocol clearance. The researcher explained the confidentiality provisions and emphasized that participants have the ability to share their opinions while knowing that their identity is safeguarded.

Again, researchers sought informed consent from interviewees to participate in the study (Annexure A). Participants were not briefed about the entire study, but were educated about the interview process, the roles of the researchers, and the format of the interview. All interviews had been recorded with the participant's permission in order for the participant to record the interview for the purpose of transcribing. The researcher assured all participants that the recordings would be stored for 5 years and then erased.

The researcher specified the average length of the interview, which was between 45 and 60 minutes. Finally, the researcher shared the interviewer's contact information and allow the interviewee to clarify any questions concerning the interview. Before the interview,

practically all of the participants were eager to participate. During the interview, participants provided in-depth information regarding COVID-19 and its impact on international relations in general.

3.6.2. Secondary Data Collection

Regarding secondary data collection, data was also gathered from already published sources such as books, records, biographies, newspapers, published censuses or other statistical data, data archives, online articles, research articles by other researchers (journals), and the University of Limpopo library database. For more secondary information, the researcher used Google Scholar and Sabinet.

3.7. Reflexivity

Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio, and Kahlke (2023) characterized reflexivity as a continuous process that lasts the whole time a research project is being conducted. According to Patnaik (2013), reflexivity recognizes researchers as active participants in knowledge generation, rather than passive observers of a phenomenon. According to Subramani (2019), academics use reflexivity in their study by drawing on various traditions, and there have been numerous variations of reflexivity. In the study, the researcher explains a variety of kinds of reflexivity that emerged during the data collection procedure. This is based on the researcher's strategy to engaging participants and how they behaved in terms of consenting to be a part of the study.

As the researcher becomes involved in the process of generating themes from the transcribed data, the researcher gains experience to a variety of perspectives, making the study process more open and transparent. COVID-19 is more than just a research topic; it is a phenomenon that has affected social life all across the world, as well as the researcher's emotional and personal well-being.

Therefore, the researcher has demonstrated bias, particularly when dealing with COVID-19-related questions. In carrying out this bias, the researcher was an active participant who attempted to control the situation and propose answers to participants. However, the

researcher eventually changed his technique and allowed participants to be free while discussing the negative and positive aspects of COVID-19, because bias could have influenced data quality.

3.8. Pretesting

Hurst, Arulogun, Owolabi, Akinyemi, Uvere, Warth, and Ovbiagele (2015) state that pretesting is a very well-liked method for increasing the validity of qualitative data collection methods and result interpretation. Pretesting, by definition, involves replicating the formal data collection process on a smaller scale to identify real-world problems with data collection tools, procedures, and methods. Pretesting can assist in identifying potential flaws in survey measuring variables as well as issues with word ambiguity and cross-cultural language application (Hurst *et al.*, 2015).

In this study, two individuals were selected for pretesting purposes. Before the interview process began, all participants were given a complete participant information document and had their full written agreement to participate. Furthermore, as pretesting progresses, greater clarity is supposed to be established regarding responders' interpretation of the questions. In preparation for the semi-structured interviews in the main study, the pretest process helped the study alter questions and data gathering techniques. The researcher undertook pre-testing of the instrument to ensure that the predefined questions perform as expected and were also altered research questions and the estimated length of the interview as needed. The results of the pre-test were analyzed and interpreted as part of the main study.

Pretesting, according to Buschle Reiter and Bethmann (2022), can provide advance notice about how or why a main study project might fail by highlighting where research procedures are not observed or are not feasible. The researcher asserted understanding of how pretests should be completed systematically and include exercise for all individuals who were involved in data collection methods for the eventual main study.

Only minor issues arose as a result of the pretesting process, the first of which was the change of questions by combining two into one. Question 4 of the interview asks, "*What*

is the AfCFTA and how well do you understand it?" Question 5: *"Do you believe AFCFTA can help African countries recover from the epidemic?"* was consolidated into one. This is because both of the pretest participants answered these two questions as one. The combination of these two questions caused the participants in the main interview to focus less on describing AfCFTA and more on how it will impact Africa in the post-COVID-19 era.

Another key aspect discovered during the pretest was the exceeding of the time limit during the interview. The two participants had a lot of knowledge to share, which resulted in exceeding time restrictions; however, some of this was caused by the researcher deliberating too much background while asking questions instead of being precise. Even the process of building the rapport contributed to exceeding time restrictions. As a result, the researcher changed his method of asking questions and emphasized the importance of participants being direct and to the point during the main interview.

3.9. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is the most popular and widely used method of data analysis in qualitative research. It is the process to identify and emphasize patterns and sequences in large amounts of data (Rafiq, Sajjad, Iqbal, Naqvi, & Razzaq, 2022). Thematic analysis is a technique for detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes in information (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). It is defined as a descriptive analysis that diminishes data in a flexible manner that integrates with other data analysis techniques. This method of data analysis was used in the study due to the wide range of research questions and topics that can be answered with it.

Thematic analysis is a separate approach for qualitative data analysis since it combines analysis and interpretation, as well as data collection and analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis method is an iterative process comprised of six steps:

- **Phase 1: Becoming familiar with the data**

Transcribing or (re)reading the data may be necessary to become familiar with it. Sanders and Scharp, (2019). This stage, common to all forms of qualitative analysis, involves immersing oneself in the data by repeated reading of textual materials (such as interview transcripts or responses to qualitative surveys), audio recordings, or video footage. If the researcher has audio data, this step will advise him or her to listen to it at least once before reading the text, especially if the data was not collected or transcribed (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The researcher in this current study made notes from the obtained data and highlighted items that were of interest. Making notes aided the study in beginning to read the information as data. The purpose of this step was to become extensively acquainted with the dataset's content and to begin spotting items relevant to the research questions among the collected data.

- **Phase 2: Generating coding categories.**

According to Scharp and Sanders (2019), coding requires noting important data properties in a methodical way and then collating them. Braun and Clarke (2012) define codes as analytical building blocks. Codes identify and categorize a data attribute that could be relevant to the study problem. Codes can go further than the meanings of the participants to provide an understanding of the data quality. Such interpretive or latent codes identify ideas that deeply affects the semantic surface of the material. The researcher noticed that certain codes reflect the dialectal and conceptions of the participants, while others reference the researchers' conceptual and theoretical frameworks. This stage of the technique ends once the data has been completely coded and the data relevant to each code has been compiled.

- **Phase 3: Generating themes.**

The researcher must collate initial codes into emerging themes before gathering all data related to the specific theme. As the research progress from codes to themes, the analysis will now start to take shape. A theme highlights something significant about the data in relation to the research question and demonstrates some level of structured response or interpretation within the given dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006:82). Furthermore, at this

step, the researcher reviewed the coded data to discover areas of resemblance and overlapping between codes. The researcher also began to investigate the link between themes and how themes work together to build an overall story of the data.

- **Phase 4: Reviewing themes.**

The technique for reviewing themes entails determining if the themes operate in relation to the patterns and the complete data set (Scharp & Sanders, 2019). This step involves a cyclical process in which emerging themes are assessed in relation to coded data and the entire dataset. It is primarily focused with quality control, and it is especially valuable for inexperienced researchers and those working with huge datasets, as it is simply impossible to 'keep' your entire dataset in your head (Braun & Clarke, 2012). At this point, the researcher analyzed the themes in relation to the entire dataset. This necessitated a last re-read of all the data to determine whether the themes covered the full dataset or only a portion of it.

Finally, the researcher was mindful that mismatch is probable if selective or insufficient coding occurred, or if coding developed across a dataset and data were not re-coded to use the final set of codes. As a result, modification at this point entailed developing new themes or altering or rejecting old ones.

- **Phase 5: Defining and naming themes**

The process of establishing and naming themes entails determining what each theme expresses: what it is and is not. When recognizing themes, one must be able to define what makes each topic distinct and unique. Being able to summarize the essence of each theme in a few phrases is an excellent indicator of this. The researcher performed the deep analytic work required for thematic analysis, as well as the critical gearing up of the analysis into its fine detail.

- **Phase 6: Producing the report.**

Finally, finding exemplars necessitates the researcher selecting basis of facts that provide proof of the theme and are relevant to the research topic. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), producing a report, such as a journal article or dissertation, is the last stage of analysis and does not start at the end. From the informal note-taking and memo-writing

to the more formal methods of analysis and report writing, writing and analysis are closely intertwined in qualitative research. The report's goal is to tell a compelling "narrative" about your facts obtained on your research. The researcher made it certain that the report is compelling and clear, while also being complicated and immersed in a scholarly topic. Because it is commonly established that good writing requires practice, the researcher will strive to avoid redundancy, excessive complexity, and passive phrasing.

3.10. Quality Criteria

To assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research, four criteria are commonly used: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

3.10.1. Credibility

According to Polit and Beck (2012), credibility relates to the truth of the facts or the participant opinions, as well as the researcher's interpretation and depiction of them. Furthermore, a qualitative study is regarded credible if the representations of human experience are instantly understood by others who have had similar experiences. The researcher's credibility is improved by explaining his or her achievements as a researcher and confirming the research findings with the participants. To guarantee the credibility of the data collected and the subsequent outcomes, the researcher calibrated the level of mindfulness and knowledge of the research process. Training seminars, teleconferences, webinars, and pilot interviews will be held to gain fieldwork experience.

3.10.2. Transferability

Transferable findings are those that can be adapted to multiple situations or groups (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). The transferability criterion simply relates to how transferable the research findings are to other contexts. Therefore, the qualitative study was understood in the context of its particular qualities, the 'rich descriptions' on the context of the examined area, and the techniques for data collection in the study. According to Stenfors, Kajamaa, and Bennett (2020), transferability is a clear account of the context in which the research was conducted and how this affected the findings. To

ensure transferability, the researcher provided enough information about the informants and the research setting for the user to appraise the findings' transferability.

3.10.3. Conformability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data accurately represents the responses of the participants rather than the researcher's biases or opinions (Cope 2014). Furthermore, the researcher can give confirmability by explaining how conclusions and interpretations were reached, as well as establishing that the findings were derived directly from the data. This can be illustrated in qualitative study reporting by including detailed statements from participants that address each emerging theme.

To confirm confirmability, the researcher case reports were presented to academic publications for more general comments and subsequent publication. Furthermore, gathered information such written field notes, documentation, and interview transcriptions were used for an audit test to strengthen the confirmability of the study. Through extensive descriptions and the use of quotes, the researcher demonstrated how he arrived at his conclusions.

3.10.4. Dependability

Dependability is defined as the consistency of data under similar settings (Polit & Beck, 2012). This can be accomplished if a second researcher agrees with the decision made at each stage of the study process. To ensure dependability, the study documented all changes and amendments to the research protocol, as well as establish an auditable record of when and how adjustments were applied. To strengthen the study's dependability, the researcher firstly worked collaboratively with supervisors. Collaborating, the researcher gained extensive expertise of data selection and interpretation, as well as how to draw conclusions from the findings. The researcher took advantage of various formal and informal chances to discuss the research with other PhD students, researchers, and academic staff.

3.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research could be a pipe vision unless the researcher is cognizant of ethics and academic integrity. Knowing what defines ethical research is an important component of organising a research endeavour in order to grasp the language of academic research (Cacciattolo, 2015). According to Pritha (2021), ethical considerations in research are a collection of principles that influence one's study designs and procedures. When gathering data from people, scientists and researchers should always follow a set of rules.

3.11.1. Informed Consent and Voluntary participation

In order to perform ethical research, informed consent must be obtained. Informed consent can be provided orally or in writing by signing a consent form (Cacciattolo, 2015). If a subject is illiterate or is not present physically during the investigation, verbal consent is frequently used. To engage in this research project, participants were appropriately informed about the research, understand the material, and had the freedom to choose whether to participate or decline.

The participant's consent to participate in this study were obtained only after the participant had been given a complete description of the research process and protocols. The participants were given adequate opportunity to ask questions and address any complaints. Participants understood that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they could refuse participation or withdraw from the study at any time.

3.11.2. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Anonymity is an element of confidentiality that entails not gathering any data that could be used to identify subjects, including names (Fotrousi, Seyff, & Börstler, 2017). Furthermore, it promotes respect for persons rights and identifies many measures for safeguarding participant anonymity and privacy. The names and identities of the participants were kept private throughout the data collection, analysis, and publication of the study's conclusions to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The privacy and confidentiality of the interview setting were appropriately protected throughout the in-person interview session, data processing, and distribution of the results.

3.11.3. Plagiarism

There are other ethical considerations to consider, but perhaps the most obvious academic one is plagiarism. Plagiarism is defined as the use of another publisher's, writer's, or researcher's writing without appropriate references or citations (Khan, 2016:3). Furthermore, plagiarism is regarded as a violation of academic integrity because it is correctly believed to reduce or even destroy the true worth of a scholarly work. To prevent this unethical behavior, the researcher ensured that all sources or material obtained are properly acknowledged and that the work is properly paraphrased (Turnitin report that shall be attached).

3.12. Plan for dissemination.

There are several methods for disseminating research findings, but the most prevalent are publishing in international relations, foreign affairs, and political science journals, as well as presentations at academic meetings and conferences. Presenting a research dissertation at a professional meeting or conference allows one to swiftly distribute research findings because the time between completing the study and presenting at a conference could be brief (Edwards, 2015). The study data will also be made available at the University Library, an online database, and the National Library of Politics if possible.

3.13. Limitations of the study

Research limitations are defined by Akanle, Ademuson, and Shittu (2020) as the features of the research design or methodology that alter the significance and interpretation of the research findings. In this study, many participants were eager to participate in the study; yet, despite their willingness, the researcher found it incredibly difficult to schedule an interview because most of them kept postponing for pertinent reasons. Aside from the nine participant that were interviewed, the researcher proposed numerous people from NGOs and departments who are important to the study to participate, however, some declined, and some did not respond at all.

Moreover, the study's limitation was that, during the interview process, many of the participants were Africans from the southern portion of Africa, with very few coming from North Africa. The data gathered was extensive, but it could have been considerably richer if department members had consented to open their doors for interviews in the study, including AfCFTA committee members. Many of the first participants selected to participate in this study were uninterested, with some citing a lack of time and others claiming to be unable to attend the interview due to being outside the country. The interview procedure should have gone quickly, but many participants kept postponing it, while others did not show up on the scheduled day.

3.14. Chapter conclusions

In conclusion, this chapter covered the important basic procedures that were used to guide the process data collecting, data analysis, and interpretation through this qualitative research. The research supported the interpretivism paradigm over the positivist paradigm, and it span the entire African continent. The interview was focused on a semi-structured qualitative in-depth interview with individuals who are knowledgeable and experienced in the field of interest. This chapter makes the case that, although ethical issues are pertinent in all research fields, they are particularly important in qualitative research, particularly when participants are involved. Qualitative researchers have an obligation to safeguard participants' identities during the recruitment and dissemination process, give them the freedom to choose whether or not to participate in the study, and encourage transparent, truthful research reporting that doesn't mislead readers. Data collection and analysis are covered in the upcoming chapter.

Chapter 4:

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter outlined how data was collected. This chapter presents the data and its analysis guided by the research questions of the study. The chapter presents the data using the following themes: demography of participants, the COVID-19 pandemic overview; the state of international relations or politics since COVID-19's inception; COVID-19 effects on sustainable development and trade integration in Africa; the AFCFTA initiative; opportunities and challenges; post-pandemic strategies for sustainable development and trade integration; and South Africa's role in SADC. As previously indicated, the study is centered around modernisation theory, which is closely tied to the concept of re-creating the globe, including Africa.

4.2. Demography of Participants

The current study looked at the prospects of international relations in the post-COVID-19 age, with a particular emphasis on trade integration and sustainable development. The study enlisted nine participants who submitted data by responding to the following semi-structured interview questions:

- To examine Africa's plan of action and its implementation in the context of sustainable development and trade integration before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To appraise the implications of COVID-19 on the diplomatic relations and economic development on the African continent.
- To determine what needs to be done to address the issues that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to consider Africa's future.

In the light of the pandemic, the study participants had different perspectives and experience on COVID-19, as well as understanding of international relations and political

science, with an emphasis on Africa. Below is a demography table that shows the study participants.

Table 1: Demography of Participants

	Gender	Qualification	Occupation / Specialisation
Participant 1	Male	LLM and Diplomacy	Former South African Diplomat (1995-2019)
Participant 2	Male	PhD in History	Historian
Participant 3	Male	PhD in Development Studies and Community participation	Senior Lecturer
Participant 4	Male	PhD in International Relations and Political Science	Senior Researcher
Participant 5	Female	Masters in international relations	Student
Participant 6	Male	Masters in business administration	Senior Accountant
Participant 7	Male	Masters in African Studies	Student
Participant 8	Male		Researcher
Participant 9	Female	Masters in international relations	Student

The table above depicts the demography of the 9 participants. These participants are primarily master's and doctoral-level scholars from the fields of political science, economics, history, and international relations. The study interviewed 7 males and 2 females, and all of them responded enthusiastically to the questions.

4.3. COVID-19 Pandemic Overview

This theme is giving an overview of the COVID-19 pandemic, which started 2019 in Wuhan, China. On December 31, 2019, the WHO office in Wuhan, China, received the

first report of a pneumonia caused by a new strain of coronavirus. Since then, the new illness developed and spread rapidly over the world, hitting basically all countries by the end of April 2020, despite multiple containment attempts, social distance, and border closures (Hafner, 2020).

COVID-19 brought the entire world to a standstill, with many state organs failing to come up with decisive measures to quickly halt the spread of COVID-19 and other nations racing to produce a vaccine. Returning to the issue raised at the outset of this research, it is now possible to state that COVID-19 served as a wake-up call to the entire global health system, as well as demonstrating how Africa remains dependent on the Global North for aid and other human assistance.

It will be more crucial for the study to engage in a discussion overview of COVID-19 and emphasize the pandemic implication on the global health system. This overview discusses the gaps left by COVID-19, list the highest priority items affected by the pandemic and it thoroughly explored these under five subthemes: healthcare systems and infrastructure; vaccine distribution and access; economic impact; social and cultural impacts; and global cooperation.

4.3.1. Healthcare System and Infrastructure

This subtopic outlined a critical role that was brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, checking how it exposed the strength and weakness of the healthcare system and infrastructure. Evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the provision of health services, especially in nations with little resources (Haileamlak, 2021). The disruption was caused not just by the direct consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic, but also by indirect pressures on health systems and stretching others beyond their capacity. Some of the indirect consequences of COVID-19 have resulted in a considerable number of deaths and a significant amount of health inequality in Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed existing gaps in the health-care system and infrastructure. In support of the above claim, recent research by Baral (2021) indicate

that existing gaps in health systems and services were worsened, with marginalized groups and low- and middle-income countries bearing a disproportionate weight.

Participant Five (5) expressed that,

“COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of the worldwide health system as well as the strengths and weaknesses of governments around the world”.

The participant viewpoint appears to be accurate because, during the pandemic, the international and national media consistently demonstrated the African government's weakness and inadequacies in health resources in hospitals as a result of insufficient government investment in health, which consequently impacts the ability of healthcare professionals to fulfill their duties. Moreover, public health sectors in certain African nations were unprepared to handle COVID-19 due to inconsistent planning for healthcare facilities, inadequate funding allocation, and budgetary cuts.

This is supported by a report produced by the Health Action International (2020), which states that COVID-19 has highlighted weak health systems around the world, prompting health system strengthening. Even before the pandemic, Africa's health system had been identified as failing, with various issues arising from insufficient health budgetary allocation, relatively poor leadership and administration, and an insufficient health staff. However, Sharma, Borah, and Moses' study (2021) argue that increased investment in healthcare will promote the creation of understanding within the system, which can improve reactions to unforeseen scenarios like COVID-19. As investment grows, many layers of a healthcare system may integrate learning to support proactive testing of patients and the ability to treat them.

Participant Six (6) states that:

“Even the developed economies were harmed, despite the fact that their economies were developed with sufficient infrastructure, and even their health care system was up to standard, but COVID-19 devastated everything”.

The participant's perspective on developed economies being harmed is in some ways unjustified because it does not apply to all the developed nations. COVID-19 may have started in China, which has a vast economy and a large population, yet their cases and death toll were quite low. Yes, COVID-19 has devastated most of the European Union, with Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States bearing the worst of the repercussions.

During the peak of COVID-19, countries with strong hospital infrastructure, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, were reported to suffer bed shortages in hospitals (Sen-Crowe, Sutherland, McKenney, & Elkbuli, 2021). This data reveals that COVID-19 was harsh on both the rich and the poor, and it was extremely difficult to entirely stop it despite the country's strong economy. However, in spite of their relatively poor health infrastructure, public health professionals in Africa have accumulated a vast amount of expertise in handling outbreaks. Several researchers (Kapata, Ihekweazu, Ntoumi, Raji, Chanda-Kapata, Mwaba, Mukonka, Bates, Tembo, Corman, and Mfinanga, 2020) say that Africa was better prepared than ever before to deal with future pandemics. As a result, African countries have been on high alert to detect and isolate any imported cases of COVID-19. Africa's public health institutions responded quickly to the COVID-19 pandemic, even before any cases of COVID-19 were documented in Africa.

To summarize this subtheme, healthcare and infrastructure in Africa during COVID-19 had some shortcomings, but this did not prevent the government from fighting the pandemic's spread. One takeaway from this analysis is that COVID-19 calls for almost uniform improvement across Africa, as well as increased diplomatic coordination in exchanging skills and ideas for dealing with such a pandemic. As a result, African countries must take the lead, act proactive, and develop systems of surveillance that can detect such pandemics in the future. A well-planned long-term Africa Union policy will contribute significant value to cementing African leadership in public health capacity building, training, and research.

4.3.2. Vaccine Distribution and Access

The global discovery, development, and distribution of vaccinations were highly significant events. In December 2020, about 200 vaccine candidates participated in preclinical studies and assessments (Ali, Ali, & Iqbal, 2021). Several vaccine candidates from throughout the world were authorized for use in an emergency (Forman, Shah, Jeurissen, Jit, & Mossialos, 2021). This has resulted in a significant ongoing debate and concern over COVID-19 vaccination access and roll-out gaps in the developing and underdeveloped countries. Most vaccinations that have been approved for use have been created by companies and research organizations in China, Russia, and the United States. Vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, Johnson and Johnson, Sputnik V, and Sinopharm were given to people in over a dozen African countries (Felter, 2021).

Following vaccine trials in African countries, many of which are underdeveloped and developing, vaccination access was delayed. According to Nachega *et al.* (2021), this has highlighted global gaps in health care. These gaps must be addressed by the medical and global health communities through equal vaccinations access and supply.

Participant Four (4) states that:

“African countries suffered greatly since many European countries, which own the patterns for the majority of vaccinations, had to entertain their populations first before bringing them out for business, and there were rigorous regulations that managed the transfer of vaccination doses”.

The perspectives of Participant 4 add to the evidence that most powerful nations keep COVAX off the market, causing Africa to fall short of its vaccine targets. COVAX is the vaccination pillar of the availability of COVID-19 tools initiative (de Bengy Puyvallée & Storeng, 2022), which aims to provide worldwide vaccine availability. The massive vaccination equity gap was not narrowing fast enough.

Prior to COVID-19, Africa had a crisis that required vaccinations, but most African countries experienced delayed and unequal delivery of vaccines due to great demand, high costs, limited manufacturing capacity, and weak global and continental allocation procedures. Countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya have delayed further supplies of

their initial Oxford/AstraZeneca doses due to concerns that they will be unable to administer a second shot to those who have already received their first shots due to Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine shortages (Africa, W.H.O, 2021). Furthermore, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Chad, Zimbabwe, and some other African countries were hesitant to vaccinate their citizens with the Oxford/AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccines due to safety concerns fueled by reports of blood clots and associated deaths among people in the United States and some European countries.

Moreover, the prevalence of war and conflict in the majority of African countries presents practical challenges that may have impeded the equitable distribution of vaccinations. According to Ayenigbara (2021), access to essential medical treatments is frequently difficult for people living in war and conflict zones due to the destructive impact on medical infrastructures and supply chains, and infection spreads faster in this group than in other regions. For instance, conflicts in Ethiopia's Tigray region, conflicts between armed groups in Sudan, insurgents fighting in Nigeria's northeast, the Lake Chad basin, and the Sahel region, unrest in Libya, fighting between government forces and insurgents in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado region, Azawad fighting in northern and southern Mali, and the Al-Shabaab group in Somalia have all rejected the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine and other vaccines (United Nations, 2021).

Although Africa has had fewer cases and deaths than other continents, the delay in vaccine delivery has exposed the world's rich and poor countries' inequalities. In the event that the world encounters another wave of such a pandemic, countries must address the global imbalance that continues to exist, as well as the practical challenges that may impede the effective distribution of vaccines to the entire world population, in order to achieve a pandemic-free universe.

4.3.3. Economic Impact

The subtheme discusses the impact of COVID-19 on African economies. The imposition of lockdowns with the positive goal of controlling the spread of the pandemic, was one factor that led immediately to economic problems. Lockdowns imposed, cancelled local

and international flights, closed harbours for shipment procedure (no trade), blocking borders, stores, and restaurants. According to Adam, Henstridge, and Lee (2020), lockdowns have been catastrophic both in terms of halting economic activity that maintains livelihoods and in terms of the impact to public finances from decreased revenue and higher spending on health and social assistance. It is also obvious that the legacy of lockdowns, as well as the effects of the global crisis, will cause considerable hardship for an extended length of time.

Again, impact of COVID-19 on African economies and its transmission channels may differ from that on developed economies (Morsy, Balma, & Mukasa, 2020). Unlike developed countries, most African workers do not have access to unemployment insurance, the informal sector is more prevalent, and policy instruments are not readily available. The previous assertion mostly applies to workers in the informal sector, who have historically been disadvantaged given that employees who could work from home or were given paid leave were less affected than low-income workers like street vendors, whose livelihoods rely on daily encounters with other people. During the pandemic, African financial markets have shown heightened volatility; it appears that the markets were reacting to outside shocks brought on by the health crisis (Devereux, 2021).

Participant One (1) expressed that:

“The COVID-19 pandemic brought the world economy to a halt and had an unparalleled influence on worldwide economic activity. From a medical standpoint, there was a need for steps to limit COVID-19, for fear of economies grinding to a standstill. Moreover, to stimulate economic activity, countries around the world implemented countermeasures such as economic stimulus programs”.

Participant Three (3) pointed out that,

“COVID-19 was one of the worst global crises ever, and that as a global pandemic, it contributed significantly to underdevelopment, particularly in the Global South. Most of the Global South nations are still unable to

restore their economies, and many people have perished or lost their jobs. We lost human labour, we lost a lot of things, including the economy, and it was a really terrible position for the emerging nation.

Both participants 1 and 3 demonstrated strong similarities in the economic repercussions of COVID-19 lockdowns. To engage in this, yes, domestic economic activity stops, rendering individuals unable to work, production falls, jobs are lost, supply networks unravel, welfare and livelihoods suffer, and poverty and exposure to risk increase. However, not all economic space was closed by COVID-19; others saw this crisis as an opportunity to generate income; for example, there was an efficiency gain in the digital industry because everything was done virtually. Companies like Zoom and Microsoft profited from this lockdown as well as vaccine companies, though this may not be a direct African benefit.

COVID-19 caused substantially greater economic losses, which occurred much faster. Governments were under great pressure to provide immediate aid while simultaneously planning for and investing in economic recovery. COVID-19's economic impact continues to haunt African economies to this day.

4.3.4. Social and Cultural Impacts

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the social, cultural, and health domains as well as increasing human suffering, undermining the economy, and upending the lives of billions of people worldwide (Mofijur *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, this pandemic crisis has created widespread societal upheaval and significant changes in lifestyle, employment, and social connections. Certain social implications have resulted from the execution of policies such as social distancing and the closing of meeting and interaction areas such as parks, cafes, shrines, schools, and colleges.

The cultural impact of COVID-19 has altered the structure of burials and ceremonies, as well as religious activity in the majority of African countries. Omonisi (2020) ascertain that Africans believed that everyone who died deserved a "befitting" funeral, which was fulfilled through a variety of customary and religious rites and ceremonies as the departed

migrated to join their ancestors in the unseen realm. Again, during COVID-19, some African countries, such as South Africa, established regulations limiting the number of people allowed to receive burial presents to 50. Thus, while this was a positive action to respond to the pandemic, it had a tremendous impact on individuals who wanted to bury their loved ones in large numbers.

Participant Two (2), gave a detailed information about the COVID-19 social and cultural impact that:

“COVID-19 disease, which has caused unspeakable pain and has ravaged the world, is a pandemic that has paralyzed our movement, our association with one another as human beings, and has destroyed our social spaces. In terms of economics, it had an impact because businesses were closed due to the lockdown, but critical services remained operational. This hurt ordinary people who were relying on their wages; Imagine being instructed to stay at home for six months and wondering how you would exist”.

Furthermore,

“Due of the COVID-19, it was difficult for self-employed people to make sales in the street, salons, and taxi ranks because they were notified that everything was on pause. How do you feed your family and pay your rent if you're not allowed to operate? All of this was a devastating wave that ruined our socioeconomic life”.

To interpret the views of participant 2, yes, COVID-19 pushed national governments to implement policies that will quickly deal with its spread, some of which are lockdowns as discussed from the previous theme, but this severe isolation and cessation of some social interactions this disease causes challenges such as social anxiety, panic due to insecurity, socio-cultural a downturn, and severe psychological stress, especially for people who lost loved ones due to this pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis hit the self-employed severely (Blundell & Machin, 2020). This was a major problem because the majority of self-employed persons in developing countries rely on their daily earnings from their business to feed their family. According to projections from the African Development Bank (2021), nominal GDP per capita in Africa fell by 10% in 2020, indicating a severe decline in the continent's population's level of living. As a result of the deterioration in living conditions, tens of millions more people were predicted to live in extreme poverty in low-income countries in 2020 and 2021 (African Development Bank, 2021).

Moreover, Participant Six (6), explicitly referred that,

"COVID-19 has catalyzed significant social and cultural disruptions, resulting in business closures, job losses, increased poverty, educational disruptions, and other societal shifts worldwide. Because of the pandemic's global scope, international collaboration and coordination in areas including public health, economic policy, and scientific research have been required."

To further unpack participant's 6 view that poverty increased during COVID-19, this resulted from the fact that the lockdown precautions have devastated many poor families, for example, poor households have limited savings and food stocks, can rarely work remotely, and frequently rely on daily hands-on labour income. Furthermore, several industries, including large retailers, were obliged to alter their staff and increase the number of unemployed in order to cut expenses. The high unemployment rate induced by the COVID-19 outbreak has fueled worry. Sub-Saharan Africa saw the greatest increases in severe poverty, with an additional 24 million people living below the poverty line as a result of the pandemic (Azcona, Bhatt, Encarnacion, Plazaola-Castao, Seck, Staab, & Turquet, 2020).

Participant Four (4) commented on the COVID-19, saying,

"Many countries restricted inter border travel within two months, resulting in the government implementing strict measures to control the spread of

COVID-19. Families were separated, access to stores was difficult, food was scarce, and significant discussions were held among African countries about how to coordinate these prohibitions and laws. In several circumstances, security infrastructure was employed to control people's movements”.

Food scarcity was brought on by actions taken to contain the pandemic, such as lockdowns, quarantines, and restrictions on the movement of people and goods. These actions had unfavorable effects and had serious socioeconomic ramifications, particularly for poor rural farmers in many African countries (Mohamed, Abdallah, Ahmadi, & Lucero-Prisno III, 2021). Lockdowns across Africa had limited transportation and forced people to stay at home, reducing industrial and commercial energy use as well as garbage creation. However, these lockdown measures have had a major and considerable impact and appeared to be crucially effective, as the increase of new cases slowed significantly, and the overall number of new cases were potentially reduced.

4.3.5. Global Cooperation

The subtheme details how COVID-19 has affected international cooperation, whether or not it has strengthened global cooperation. Global cooperation, as used in this theme, refers to how countries cooperated to stop the pandemic's spread, particularly with the WHO at the forefront of this effort. This is because international cooperation was essential in paving the way for calls for immediate action to be taken against the COVID-19 pandemic on a worldwide scale. Basrur and Kliem (2021) extensively argued that the COVID-19 pandemic is a global threat that requires a global reaction. However, while states demonstrate significant international cooperation, their real behaviors are primarily competitive and self-centered.

Participant One (1) claims that:

“Global economies weakened because of COVID-19, with industries such as travel and hospitality bearing the brunt of the damage. The

COVID-19 outbreak offered a challenge in how to conduct international collaborations”.

Indeed, COVID-19 served as a wake-up call and a lesson to African countries about the importance of international cooperation. It demonstrated why regional coordination, cooperation, and integration are critical to Africa's future. In certain cases, Africa appears to be pushing for regional programs in order to create opportunities for a thorough resetting and reprioritization of key issues in the post-COVID-19 age. AfCFTA is one of the rehabilitation initiatives.

Participant Five (5) also believes that:

“It also questioned how nations interact with one another, highlighting the missing link of how the world lacked in terms of cooperations”.

The COVID-19 challenge, as a worldwide health pandemic, necessitated major international cooperation to mitigate its extent and impacts. Unfortunately, relatively lower international cooperation had formed through the end of 2020 (Pevehouse, 2020). The nationalism approach of countries was one of the factors that contributed to the weakening of international cooperation during this period. Despite WHO passing a resolution in response to COVID-19 on the importance of unity, many member states have chosen self-centered courses instead. Vaccine nationalism has emerged, despite WHO's strongest advice, with governments and regional blocs attempting to monopolize promising candidates (Buranyi, 2020).

Participant Four (4) alluded that:

“China began to close the world during the peak of COVID-19 to ensure that African countries begin to produce their own vaccine, and this has led to many African countries beginning to work together to focus on pandemic issues and health cooperation issues”.

Both great powers, China, and the United States, have previously failed to provide the required global leadership, instead engaging in an increasingly intense great power conflict (Rudd 2020). COVID-19 has exposed the flaws in global institutions and

international cooperation, as well as the dark underbelly of globalization's promise. Its time is 'auspicious,' with a self-centered hegemon, a rising competitor big power, and a rising rival great power.

In conclusion, COVID-19 showed the weaknesses in many national health-care systems, as well as the inequalities that exist around the world. The vaccine development and distribution demonstrated developing and underdeveloped countries' inability to be self-sufficient in developing their own medication by relying on developed nations such as China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic severely demonstrates why nations benefit from health cooperation and collaboration, as well as the dangers of their insufficient commitment to doing so. Nations have prioritized themselves by limiting WHO's meaningful control of national information, putting global health security at risk by competing for vaccines rather than providing them equally.

4.4. The State of International Relations or Politics Since COVID-19's Inception

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on international relations and politics all across the world. Several themes are discussed in this context, including global cooperation and diplomacy, nationalism versus globalism, public health diplomacy, the impact on international organizations, economic diplomacy, vaccine diplomacy, disinformation and information warfare, humanitarian challenges, security and geopolitical shifts, human rights and governance, and the future of multilateralism.

4.4.1. Global Cooperation and Diplomacy

Recently, the topic of international relations has been separated principally into International Political Economy (IPE), global health, international trade, and security. COVID-19 crises have slowed economic activity in the IPE, health system, and international trade. Free economy politics has proven to be extremely beneficial in Africa, particularly in terms of cross-border economic flows, including intra-African trade.

According to Lipsky (2020), crises are frequently sparked by factors over which politicians have no direct control, such as a natural disaster, asset market collapse, or the mutation of a new virus. The pandemic was distinguished by transnational spread and the disruption of domestic political systems by an externally originating threat. COVID-19 response came to be viewed widely in terms of national success or failure, with case and death numbers serving as national performance metrics notwithstanding their limits and susceptibility to falsification (Lipsky, 2020).

Participant 5 offered an explanation that,

“The world is evolving towards more multilateralism and global collaboration, particularly considering the importance of global organizations such as WHO in coordinating issues and disseminating information regarding COVID-19 all over the world”.

One Participant 4 argued that,

“In terms of health cooperation in the context of international relations, there was a major diplomatic engagement when addressing COVID-19 in the level of SADC, AU, UN, and WHO, South Africa became a major leader in terms of representing Africa in the international level, but within Africa in the regional level, all the subregions SADC, ECOWAS, EAC were all in search for solutions”.

According to Bahi (2021), the rapid spread of COVID-19 has sparked a "battle of narratives" in which China and the United States are accusing one another of not being up to par. The globe appears to be sliding into a "Kindleberger Trap," where the rising power is unwilling to take on responsibilities and the established power is incapable of leading. The loss of global cooperation is the backdrop to the COVID-19 crisis.

4.4.2. Nationalism versus Globalism

As countries become more prosperous, their values shift in predictable ways. This means that a country can change its course at any time, depending on how it wants to deal with

a particular crisis. Nationalism and globalism are relevant in the context of COVID-19 because they encompass decisions made by sovereign states in the pursuit of safeguarding their national interests. According to Haidt (2016), patriotism is a virtue for nationalism; they believe their country and culture are special and worth protecting. Yet, globalists regard nationalists as hopelessly parochial.

Participant 5 explained that:

“Nationalism and self-interest, as several countries enforced travel limits both in and out. Another concern was the competition for resources; some countries had self-interest in seeking greater resources, such as vaccines, without considering other countries”.

Many scholars have observed that a global surge in nationalism could be a result of the pandemic and nations' responses, given the apparent stagnation of the world (Tisdall, 2020; Rachman, 2020). The response looks to make nationalism more apparent as individuals seek to support their own communities, from the closing of borders and the challenge of organizing support and solidarity across them to the terror that many people feel.

Again, the United States has actively participated in nationalism self-help at the expense of others, in addition to its lack of leadership during COVID-19. The United States' President Donald Trump made an attempt to entice CureVac, a German company that was working on a promising Covid-19 vaccine technology, to move its COVID-19 research and development division to the US and to ensure that only Americans could purchase the company's goods (Die Welt, 2020).

It would be deceptive, however, to believe that this pandemic will move the focus away from the classic concepts of inclusive globalism and toward a new period of expertise-driven politics in a nationalist fashion. The pandemic allowed for extraordinary restrictions on civil liberties and freedoms all across the world, even though they were only temporary at the time. Since, after COVID-19 ended, nation-states have returned to globalism normalcy, where they have opened borders with new multilateral connections.

4.4.3. Public Health Diplomacy

Global Health Diplomacy, according to the WHO (2014), focuses on negotiations and influencing the global policy climate for health. It connects public health, legislation, international affairs, management, and economics. Working collaboratively in international fora to address public health concerns is the fundamental principle of global health diplomacy. COVID-19 has many instances of health diplomacy, although it is characterized mostly by disintegration. There is a great deal of evidence demonstrating the detrimental effects of inadequate leadership and cooperation among major countries. Leading throughout the COVID-19 issue has been a stressful experience for leaders.

Participant 6 commented that:

“COVID-19 has resulted in an increase of isolationist and protectionist inclinations as states focus on obtaining resources and defending their own populations. However, it also emphasized the global community's interconnection and the significance of international cooperation, as shown in the production and distribution of vaccines”.

COVID-19 has demonstrated universal qualities, affecting many sectors of life around the world. The pandemic dilemma in terms of the global health crisis appeared unsolvable, based on its lasting marks. Therefore, the global health crisis, was exacerbated by the pandemic, which necessitated a move from an individual response to a multilateral one through global health diplomacy, with a long-term and comprehensive vision (Gupta, Singh, Kaur, Singh, & Chattu, 2021).

Aside from poor decision-making, nationalism, and a fall in economic growth, COVID-19 has given an opportunity for collaboration that might potentially strengthen global solidarity in the healthcare system. A pandemic response based on strategic global health diplomacy, vaccine diplomacy, and science diplomacy can yield political and economic gains while furthering development, health security, and justice.

4.4.4. Impact on International Organizations

Crises are widely seen as pivotal times in organizational history because they provide opportunity to alter organizational processes (Boin, Stern, & Sundelius, 2016). COVID-19 is a good test case because it is clearly exogenous and necessitated an urgent response from numerous international organizations. The international community has reacted differently to COVID-19. Some have not participated at all, but others saw this situation as an opportunity. Some international organizations have been heavily criticized for their sluggish or insufficient initial reaction. The AU and the World Health Organization are two major examples of international organizations that many people expected to see more of.

Participant 6 state that:

“The pandemic revealed systemic flaws in many global organizations, prompting a rethinking of global health infrastructure, supply chain resilience, and international policy coordination. Furthermore, geopolitical power dynamics have been tested, with countries evaluating their interdependence, particularly in key infrastructure, medical supplies, and strategic commodities”.

The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have called into question the usefulness that international organizations bring when it comes to explicitly addressing challenges related to global governance. Regarding WHO, it faced some severe difficulties at the start of the pandemic, which were made worse by Trump when he cut off US funding to WHO. The management of human resources and the ability to solve problems are severely harmed by such financial uncertainties and fears. Nonetheless, the WHO established the Solidarity Response Fund to solicit donations from private stakeholders and individuals, and it successfully raised over \$200 million (Van Hecke, Fuhr, & Wolfs, 2021). This has made it easier for the WHO's governance structure to handle the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, these international organizations, which vary in scope and nature but are at the forefront of combating the pandemic, have not always been able to respond quickly, effectively, or efficiently because of the largely unilateral competition among member states rather than multilateral collaboration in the early stages of the crisis. Given the

limitations previously placed on the role of International Organisations and multilateralism in general, their starting point was less than ideal.

4.4.5. Economic Diplomacy

Pressing global issues, such as COVID-19, provide new challenges for African nations, and economic diplomacy is at the heart of all of these issues. The practice and institutional organization of economic diplomacy are changing dramatically as countries seek new and inventive approaches to promote decision-making in these domains. However, as a result of border restrictions and closures, as well as a dramatic decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) and other capital flows, global trade is undergoing an unprecedented level of crisis since 2020 (Vo & Tran, 2021).

Economists have always been interested in trade relations. According to Bems, Johnson, and Yi (2013), the reason of the 2008-2009 global recession's international trade collapse was a drop in overall spending. Furthermore, the impact on credit supply constrained the supply of exports, compounding the trade downturn. The majority of data suggests that prior crises had minimal effect on trade policy.

Participant 5 further argues that:

“In terms of economics, COVID-19 highlights current political rivalries, such as the United States and China's trade competition”.

According to Participant 3:

“Things have changed for the better because, following COVID-19, we witnessed most countries wanting to recover, but they did not want to heal alone; they wanted to recover with other countries, establishing new relationships. As an example, the African continent is attempting to increase intra-African trade as a means of strengthening connections among African countries in general”.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly having a major negative influence on the world economy, most African nations are primarily affected by the pandemic because of

their links to the global economy, notably in trade. While intra-African trade remains low, it is apparent that emerging countries will have very lucrative trade opportunities in the post-COVID-19 future. As a result, Oladele and Vieyra-Mifsud (2021) put forward that the prospect of harmonizing import and export regulations and policies through policy coordination across Africa's Regional Economic Communities could be game changers. If met with targeted effort, the recently approved AfCFTA gives an outstanding chance for intra-African and eventually global market integration.

Again, Participant 1 indicates that:

“COVID-19 slowed economic growth in some of Africa's important sectors, including tourism, air transport, and the oil sector, hampering economic growth and resulting to recession. The drop in oil demand slowed oil shipments, causing foreign currency reserves to dwindle. Limited air traffic occurred during COVID-19, impacting tourism and exports”.

The lockdown caused workplaces to close, resulting in less economic activities. The fear and stigma surrounding the virus, combined with the decline in demand brought on by the lockdowns, will probably maintain urban people's income flow in the informal sector far below what it was before to COVID-19 when markets reopen (Zipfel & Teachout, 2020).

Kumano (2020) contends that the COVID-19 pandemic-caused recession is distinct from other economic downturns, such as the Lehman Shock, in which individuals did not have enough money to buy goods. In the case of COVID-19's economic slump, there is widespread concern about the decline in exports and production, corporate profits, employment and wages, and consumption.

4.4.6. Vaccine Diplomacy

One of the biggest challenges in diplomacy in recent decades has been the response to the COVID-19 epidemic and in particular the fair distribution of vaccines. The multiplicity of actors is an obvious extra challenge in the case of vaccinations during COVID-19.

Although wealthier states were the dominant actors and traditional multilateral organizations, with the exception of United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), played a relatively minor role in vaccine distribution, private bodies were major players (Brown & Rosier, 2023).

Faced with unprecedented global vaccination demand, China, India, and Russia have distributed substantial quantities of COVID-19 vaccines to underdeveloped countries and even some high-income countries. Scholars and the popular press refer to it as "vaccine diplomacy," associating the rapid distribution of vaccinations with diplomatic aims (Su, Bennett, Egalo, Abbas, Cheshmehzangi, & Xiang, 2021). Although conventional Western donors such as the United States and the United Kingdom began distributing COVID-19 vaccines in June 2021, non-Western powers had already distributed millions of injections by that time (Duke Global Health Innovation Center, 2021).

However, According to Participant 1:

“The gradual arrival of COVID-19 in Africa allowed a time for African governments to build vaccine programs and preventative regimens”.

Participant 1 believes that:

“The COVID-19 outbreak put a major pressure on healthcare delivery. Improved healthcare is required to stop the spread. Vaccine nationalism had a significant impact on Africa, with the West hoarding accessible vaccines”.

The COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine diplomacy occurred during a moment of power transfer from the West to emerging powers, whose authority is mostly derived from their involvement in the global economy. In an increasingly interconnected world, a country can use its dominant position in the global economy to force other countries.

The research in this vaccine development and distribution reveals a high correlation between BRICS states and the effort of working together to influence geopolitics. According to Suzuki and Yang (2023), the BRICS countries are entangled in the intricate structure of the vaccine sector. Brazil placed a substantial order for Sputnik-V, and Russia

outsourced vaccine production to China and India. China has carried out clinical trials in Brazil and Russia, and it also provides API to Brazil and India for the manufacturing of the AstraZeneca-Oxford vaccine. Covishield has been exported from India to Brazil and South Africa (Suzuki & Yang, 2023).

4.4.7. Misconceptions, Disinformation, and Information Warfare

Amid COVID-19, information systems around the world were slow to respond, enabling the COVID-19 infodemic to propagate erroneous, contradictory, and conspiratorial ideas. The COVID-19 infodemic was a pressing issue that necessitated immediate information systems research. Untrustworthy information was fast spreading over the world via mobile phones, social media, the internet, and other information systems (Baines & Elliott, 2020).

Again, there were misconceptions regarding the coronavirus, such as the idea that COVID-19 cannot thrive in the African climate or that it does not infect Africans. Furthermore, a lot of people believed in myths that claim that recovering from a COVID-19 infection only requires blowing oneself with a mixture of chlorine and alcohol (Kármán & Besenyő, 2020) in Kenya, preparing neem wood to ward against coronavirus and consuming black tea in the morning were advised ways to treat coronavirus infections.

According to Participant 5:

“During the pandemic, all countries relied on WHO as a source of information”.

While WHO was doing a great job of informing the public, on the other hand, false information about the virus was spreading, which encouraged the WHO to issue a warning about a potential "infodemic," or an excess of information, particularly false information during an epidemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Disinformation about COVID-19 seems to be driven by goals related to white supremacist ideology, concerns about social and economic instability, unbridled capitalism, and the president's cult of personality (Fetzer, Hensel, Hermle, & Roth, 2021).

This stands in contrast to the mistrust that those who continue to be disenfranchised harbor due to inequity. In certain Black groups, opinions regarding the purposeful withhold of vaccinations and the deliberate human-made origins of SARS-CoV2 seem to have grown amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Romano, 2020).

To add to that, according to Van Hecke et al. (2021), the WHO has worked hard to increase public awareness of COVID-19's significance worldwide. After receiving information from the Chinese government regarding 'pneumonia of unclear cause' at the end of 2019, the WHO formed an Incident Management Support Team and communicated with all member countries in early January 2020. Despite criticism for not acting sooner (Nebehay & Kelland, 2020), the WHO was rather swift to declare an international health emergency on January 30, 2020.

4.4.8. Security and Geopolitical Shifts

The COVID-19 pandemic's most notable aspect is the way politics of the balance of power have influenced the ways China and the United States have responded to this global health emergency. The United States and China's geopolitical responses to the pandemic have influenced diplomatic politics in the post-COVID-19 era and aided in the cooperation of global health initiatives, particularly those centered on Africa.

Participant 6 considers that:

“Geopolitical power dynamics have been tested, with countries evaluating their interdependence, particularly in key infrastructure, medical supplies, and strategic commodities”.

According to Fidler (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has converted global health into a platform for Sino American competitiveness. China and the US have both weakened health cooperation by insisting that WHO actions serve their own national interests. This quarrel between large powers threatens to marginalize African countries in the emerging global health international politics.

Participant 4 indicate that:

“Because of the war between Ukraine and Russia at the end of COVID-19, the world has been divided in a very sharp way, with the USA-Western Europe on one side, which many countries represent NATO, and Russia-China and many developing countries on the other”.

The United States is clearly losing its leadership functions on the global space. It is critical to note that this US weakness has contributed to geopolitical shift in recent years; furthermore, the US's activities have had a substantial impact on this scenario (Grinin & Korotayev, 2020). The geopolitical shift has worsened long before COVID-19; it began after Trump took office, among other reasons, because of his desire to change long-standing connections.

Participant 8 observed that:

“BRICS had become stronger in the aftermath of COVID-19 and the wars in Ukraine and Russia. But the question is whether COVID-19 is to blame for such an occurrence or whether it is simply a normal occurrence or reaction change. International relations appear to be shifting away from unipolarity and toward multipolarity, with the BRICS in the vanguard of this effort to balance the international scale”.

Participant 5 mentioned that:

“After the COVID-19 pandemic, health security was evaluated since it was argued that the health system was not robust enough to combat the epidemic”.

According to Gupta *et al.* (2021), the most essential lesson COVID-19 taught world diplomats was the need of sacrificing short-term self-interest for long-term gains. In this regard, the resurgence of multilateralism was an important lesson to learn, as it was a long-overdue resurgence compelled by multiple crises such as terrorism, climate change, and other transnational issues. The exchanges between Africa and China in the run-up to COVID-19 demonstrate the dynamic of autonomy and emphasize how the driving factors of regime survival and African unity may overlap and underpin agency. Faced with

critical health-supply shortages, many African countries kindly welcomed the thousands of test kits, masks, and gloves given by China (Asiedu, 2020). This created new opportunity for African countries to capitalize on China's growing engagement in health.

4.4.9. Governance and Populism

The COVID-19 crisis has brought this aspect of populism to the forefront. Populist leaders and supporters frequently attack expert communities (Pevehouse, 2020). During COVID-19, populist leaders mobilized public opinion on issues like as lockdowns, measures, vaccinations, and government assistance. Vaccine reluctance is a condition that became more prevalent during COVID-19. In January 2021, former Tanzanian President John Magufuli questioned the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines and even disputed the existence of SARS-CoV-2 in his country (Adepoju, 2021).

Participant 2 believes that:

“The post-COVID-19 political environment in terms of inter-country contact has returned to pre-COVID-19 levels. Because South Africans are starting to engage again, we've seen the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), African National Congress (ANC), and Democratic Alliance (DA) working together to address social issues”.

According to Munzhedzi (2021), all political parties in South Africa were in charge of handling the COVID-19 pandemic to guarantee that the rule of law was upheld. However, the COVID-19 epidemic has had such a severe impact on governance processes particularly with regard to public participation that communities are unable to actively engage in government initiatives and programs.

Another attempt at collaboration came when the EFF submitted a request for the physical opening of parliament, citing ineffective and inefficient parliamentary supervision. Their argument was that there are instances where sessions are canceled due to connectivity issues or other disruptions (Munzhedzi, 2021). South Africa held the BRICS summit between August 22 and 24, 2023; this is excellent practice for demonstrating that South

Africa has reclaimed its political space; BRICS is a political phenomenon. Again, Russia sponsored a Rus-Africa political meeting, demonstrating that countries can now engage in cross-border politics to discuss political, economic, and social issues.

Participant 1 states that:

“On the education front, schools were closed for extended periods of time, with no in-person teaching or learning taking place. Employees had to take innovative measures for online teaching and learning”.

African governance systems are being put to the test by COVID-19. Health crises are also governance crises. Long-standing flaws in healthcare infrastructure and government delivery were exposed, and residents already fed up with political elites were poised to erupt in social unrest as long-term lockdowns depriving the most vulnerable of their means of subsistence began to bite. The July Unrest in South Africa is an excellent example; it occurred shortly after COVID-19, but it demonstrated how people became dissatisfied with the political system and poverty brought about by COVID-19.

4.4.10. Future of Multilateralism and Decoloniality

The COVID-19 has exacerbated global geopolitical tendencies, especially Africa's struggle to maintain multilateralism. Simultaneously, it has proved the importance of multilateral collaboration in the successful mitigation of cross-border dangers, such as health crises (Srivithaya, 2021). Global multilateral collaboration and solidarity are critical to responding to and minimizing the COVID-19 pandemic's health diplomatic and socioeconomic repercussions. Yet, in the context of Africa, the AU has strengthened multilateral diplomatic ties with the goal of advancing concepts linked to political economy, international cooperation and the environment, power and survival of the state, and international institution building.

Participant 4 gave a detailed data regarding that:

“The current polarization causes disagreement on many issues; for example, African countries are fighting for equal representation in

multilateral institutions such as the UN Security Council (UNSC), the World Bank, and the IMF. Again, African countries believe that Western countries have historically controlled international organizations and ignored Africa, and they now strive to assert their voice in these institutions. This polarization is deepening the divide while also providing an opportunity for African countries to raise their voices in international forums. Both countries desiring African assistance may lobby for Africa to be admitted to a major international agency. Africa may be represented in the G20 and UN Security Council in the next five years”.

Since everyone is bound by a global set of rules, there is less chance that Thucydides' observation that "the weak suffer what they must" will come to pass (Besenyő & Kármán, 2020). Africa is committed to multilateralism even though it believes the system needs serious reform. If COVID-19 serves as the impetus for the system's disintegration, the continent will be the hardest hit, particularly in areas like humanitarian aid and peacekeeping.

Moreover, Participant 3 reasons that:

“COVID-19 has fundamentally altered international affairs and the relationships that countries have with one another; countries will want to contribute to progress. It has influenced how countries rethink their relationships with other countries, such as how African countries view Russia and China”.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical need of global unity in confronting common public health problems that require increased multilateralism in public health diplomacy. Today, in the post-COVID pandemic era, it has gotten more challenging because international diplomacy has shifted to "virtual diplomacy" via teleconferences, which have replaced face-to-face sessions as the new means of multilateral diplomacy (Srivithaya, 2021). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the diplomatic context of informal conversations and interpersonal connections, which are essential processes of

multilateral diplomacy and negotiations, has been perverted. The theme discusses the effects of COVID-19 on African sustainable development and trade integration.

4.5. AFCFTA Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges

The theme discusses the benefits of AFCFTA, such as intra-African trade, single markets, sustainable development, African unity, and a unified currency. Themes for challenges include ideological differences, neocolonial politics, national or domestic policies, and political unrest and instability. The COVID-19 pandemic caused an economic disaster that was often regarded as the worst in recorded history. However, the newly signed AfCFTA represents a big step towards a more integrated African regional economy, as well as a desire to further engage Africa in terms of establishing a single market and resolving some of Africa's current challenges. The AfCFTA objectives are capable of bringing restoration in the post-COVID-19 period; nonetheless, the question remains if this initiative will enhance economic integration and restore the damage inflicted by COVID-19.

Ngepah and Udeagha (2018) note that many have seen free trade in Africa as a means of promoting trade, regional economies of scale, and market access for long-term growth and development because of the continent's comparatively small share in global trade. According to Green (2008), modernization is the process by which societies transition from traditional to modern. According to Kruger (2008), modernization theory emphasizes the predominance of key notions like tradition, modernity, and backwardness while concentrating on specific developing cultures or nations. This illustrates how the AfCFTA can function as a tool for change, bringing traditional African societies into the modern era.

4.5.1. Opportunities

This decade has seen a focus on the benefits of trade, with Africa advocating for increased and improved trade integration. COVID-19 arrived unexpectedly and left the

world broken, with several countries attempting to devise plans for resuming normal economic operations. Trade integration has been proposed as a driving force that might unite and revitalize Africa. The signing of the AfCFTA in Kigali occurs at a time when the benefits of trade are actively challenged. Global powers that traditionally championed trade see the AfCFTA as a game changer for increasing intra-African trade (Songwe, 2019). The nature of intra-African trade is addressed and analysed in the following subtheme.

4.5.1.1. Intra-African Trade

Data analysis by Olney (2022) indicates that Africa's low global trade share stems from a lack of trade among African countries. Therefore, before the research can explain the perspectives of the study participants, it is necessary to understand the nature of intra-African trade prior to COVID-19 and the establishment of AfCFTA. The graph below illustrates previous intra-trade reviews around the world, comparing the performance of various trade integration shares. The graph below also shows how low trade integration is in Africa and projects some reasons for the necessity for an AfCFTA, particularly in light of COVID-19, which has plagued the countries.

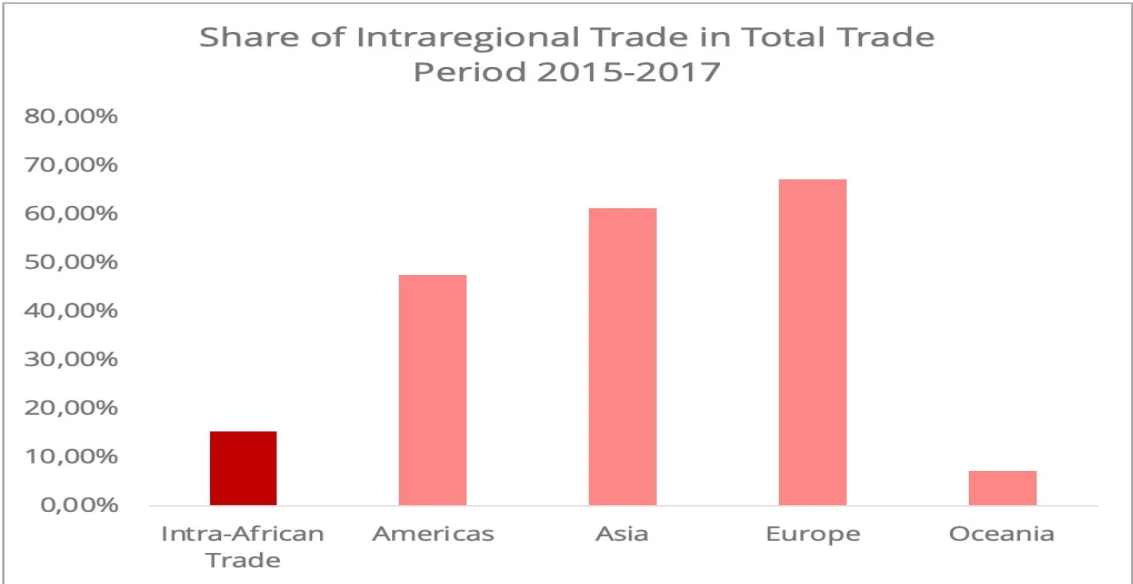


Figure 1 - Data source : UNCTAD Report, [Economic Development in Africa Report 2019](#)

The graph above illustrates how trade between African countries used to be lower, with only 14% of trade occurring inside the continent between 2015 and 2017. Other continents, such as Asia and Europe, engaged in extensive intracontinental trade. This graph illustrates the rationale behind Africa's introduction of the AfCFTA as well as the continent's lack of economic integration. Nonetheless, the World Bank estimates that by 2035, the AfCFTA will increase exports within the continent by more than 81% and exports to non-African nations by 19% (Zhang, 2021). Manufacturing exports are expected to grow at the fastest rate among all sectors, with a surge of 110% for intra-African trade and 46% for non-African trade (Zhang, 2021).

Thus, Participant 4 argues that,

“The main idea of AfCFTA is to make Africa into a massive one market. One single market and capital allow for unfettered movement of goods throughout the continent and among African citizens, as well as the creation of a shared currency. Creating a unified currency, on the other hand, necessitates extensive work in terms of harmonising regulation and monitoring financial policy across the continent. Given the continent's wealth of resources, harmonising policies that integrate Africa into a unified market for goods and services and strengthen Africa's ability to negotiate wherever there is failure in the worldwide market is essential”.

The participant's statement is supported by Ntembe (2022), who believes that a single currency in Africa will increase trade and economic cooperation among African Union countries, hence boosting growth and development. However, this single currency approach in Africa has leaned heavily on the European single currency experience, which is responsible for much of the development in economic and financial integration among EU countries. The Euro currency has proven to be an effective way of conducting trade across participating nations, and its success can be credited in part to the participating

economies' high degree of convergent and homogeneity. However, African countries are more diversified than European ones and require a different approach to achieving monetary unification.

Participant 1 asserts that

“AfCFTA implementation will provide trade facilitation measures that cut red tape and streamline customs, hence facilitating trade between African nations”.

Other noteworthy aspects of the modernization theory, in terms of economics, trade expansion, the provision of services, and the emergence of industry (such as mining) all support agriculture. As trade and better communications enable the expansion of national and international economies, the economy becomes less localized and self-sufficient (Ntini, 2016). Therefore, this will greatly increase the value of what the African continent offers in the world market and what it should receive in terms of absorbing capital and purchasing goods. This will allow human resources to move across the continent and fill the gap in technical challenges when human resources are in limited supply. This would help to enhance infrastructure in Africa, such as air, road, and train travel, which is now a concern. This project will improve people’s movement, gradually drive Africa towards a single market, and empower the continent.

In contemporary society, modernisation theory places focus on specific segment connections that progress individual aims (individualism) and provide advantages based on objective (universalism) criteria. Society is more open, allowing for larger breadth of performance, with ascription serving primarily as a springboard (Knöbl, 2003). In other words, the African society must open their nations for universal purposes with the goal of earning individual interest; thus, the AfCFTA will provide a platform for nations to salvage their economies through open borders trading.

During the AfCFTA's implementation, intra-African trade is expected to grow at its most spectacular rate. By the end of the second decade, cross-border trade might rise by \$34.6 billion (52 percent), according to preliminary projections (Nubong, 2021). If trade

facilitation rather than only tariff liberalization is implemented as a complementing policy during implementation, this growth could increase by an additional \$85 billion (Fofack, 2020).

4.5.1.2. Economic development

AU nations exhibit varying levels of economic development and intra-regional connectivity. Through AfCFTA, Africa's economic regionalism is making a coordinated attempt by member countries to manage limits imposed by the dynamic challenges of COVID-19. Free trade is predicted to boost trade volume and drive economic development (Babić, 2020). Trade integration has a cumulative effect, resulting in growth. Regional economic integration contributes more to economic growth with economies of scale, which can be achieved through larger market sizes. Igwe, Ochinawata, and Nnamdi (2021), regionalism has the potential to enhance Africa's transformation, economic development, and political progress. In this context, modernisation theory was advocated in terms of modernising institutions, modern ideals, modern behaviour, modern society, and economic development as all being linked in some way. To be modernised, a society must transition from traditional to modern.

As said by Participant 5,

“AFCFTA will be a good platform in the right direction to combat the influence of COVID-19, and it will allow economic growth in the future. Again, economic diversification and industrialization will be prioritized. In terms of product manufacturing, African countries will learn from one another. This program will lead to industrial manufacturing, which will result in job possibilities”.

The participant's position on AfCFTA promotes or strengthens industrialization can be comprehensively discussed, as Africa has historically aimed to encourage industrialization through regional and continental initiatives. Regional industrialization efforts have not been effective due to competing interests among African nations, undermining regional aims. Yet it is widely known that industrialization coincides with

trade. To make the AfCFTA a reality, most African countries must invest heavily in trade infrastructure. Kere and Zongo (2023) suggest that providing modern transportation networks (e.g., roads, ports, airports, transit) and Information And Communications Technology (ICT) systems can significantly benefit trade.

Participant 1 asserts that,

“The implementation of the AfCFTA represents a rearrangement of Africa's trading regime, bringing about much-needed reforms for the continent's long-term economic growth. The AfCFTA will alleviate severe poverty on the continent by giving more formal employment opportunities and remuneration to those in the workforce, particularly in countries where it is already prevalent. It is especially important that the AfCFTA will streamline customs procedures, enhance regional trade, and reduce operational expenses. Africa will grow more resilient in the face of unexpected economic shocks, like the recession and COVID-19”.

Even before COVID-19, employment was a critical concern in many African countries. Furthermore, one of the most significant effects of COVID-19 in Africa has been a tremendous setback in poverty and job scarcity. Yes, Participant 1's perspective on employment is precisely aligned with the AfCFTA objectives. According to Woode (2021), despite the devastating effects of COVID-19 on African economies, there is still a high level of hope about the success of AfCFTA.

4.5.1.3. African Unity, Borderless and Unified Currency

The AfCFTA is merely a temporary phase in the larger process of African unification. The AfCFTA is a significant step towards African integration, but there are several problems that must be addressed before it can fully realize its potential. This initiative needs a free movement that seeks to establish an "Africa of People" as opposed to an "Africa of States" to achieve its objectives and address COVID-19. The borderless resolution intends to

remove all trade obstacles within the region, allowing for the unrestricted flow of people and products across state borders.

Participant 7 elaborates on the benefits of the AFCFTA,

“The good news is that the red tape has been cut. This, once again, raises the issue of African unification. Nations such as Morocco, for example, continue to believe that they are not part of Africa, despite their membership in the AU. Again, in Zimbabwe, people dig gold and diamonds, which are exchanged underground with no benefit to the country. Again, Africa must abolish borders to simplify matters and reduce red tape. Countries must follow procedures. When dealing with trade, people must account to their respective countries”.

It is sad that there is yet another disparity in regional integration between the ease of mobility of people and the ease of movement of commodities. Most regional integration accords and declarations aim to facilitate the movement of goods, services, and capital between African countries, promoting intra-Africa trade. While there is much talk, little action is taken to ensure that Africans can travel freely to any African country without the costly and time-consuming visa application procedure. Migration policy is generally controlled by sovereign states. To address this transboundary issue, migration governance needs to emerge at the international and regional levels.

4.5.2. Challenges

The AfCFTA will have major challenges in getting onto the ground. Several political and economic challenges may hamper its successful implementation. African countries face various hurdles, including ideological differences, regionalism, geopolitics, health hazards, political turbulence, terrorism, inadequate infrastructure development, lengthy customs procedures, and limited interior transit.

4.5.2.1. Ideological difference and Regionalism

Many notions are associated with the term regionalism, including people-to-people regionalism, regional integration, regional cooperation, regionalization, and new regionalism. Based on Tshimpaka (2019), regionalism can be defined as a collection of concepts, beliefs, identities, and practices or strategies intended to establish a region or regional endeavor for socioeconomic advancement. The AfCFTA emphasizes a more comprehensive strategy for cutting administrative and transaction costs and overcoming market segmentation, and it might be referred to as a new direction in African regionalism.

Participant 3 believes that,

“The AfCFTA has potential; nonetheless, the AfCFTA is heavily based on neoliberal development principles. Again, with countries attempting to adopt a Marxist viewpoint, such as Tanzania and Rwanda, so free trade seems to be transition in neoliberalism which it might not work in this Marxist states.”

Moreover,

“This participant raised a crucial question that, who is going to profit from this project, are people in general from rural areas going to benefit from this, have we examined adequately how people at the grassroots level are going to benefit from this program? The participant has doubt that people affected by health care and poverty will benefit. Given the nature of AFCFTA, it draws heavily on Western ideas of development rather than how Africa should conceptualize its own growth. Essentially, we are following the West and attempting to develop Africa in a Western fashion. As a result, I do not believe that intra-African trade will help Africans”.

The participant has a good point when it comes to Marxist states not fully participating in AfCFTA, as Marx was never a lover of free trade. This is evidenced by his address on free trade, delivered in Brussels in January 1848, in which he expressed suspicion about

the "free trade sophisms" of the manufacturing class. Marx argued against the "sudden philanthropy of the factory owners," who claimed that free trade helped the workers. He claimed that the bosses' objection to a shortened working day exposed their duplicity (Hampton, 2004). Furthermore, Marx argued that all of this effort would be ineffective in making cheap bread appealing to workers. He contended that free trade meant the British bourgeoisie dominated the global market (Hampton, 2004).

As a result, Marx's remark on free trade plainly answers the participant's question that the AfCFTA is unlikely to assist grassroots people. However, the AfCFTA's principles and aims are inclusive and appeal to all classes, regardless of income level. However, the question will be whether the financially poor will be able to participate in this free trade, which will always be easier for the rich to participate due to their financial power, and the poor may be less likely to participate because they are unable to move their goods from one country to another due to a lack of funds, unless the initiative has the means to cater to small businesses.

Regionalism has long existed in Africa, and integration theories have primarily been designed to explain European economic integration rather than African integration (Manboah-Rockson, 2021). Africa has embraced such theories over the years to explain its own, as the content and successes of regional economic union are based on the European model.

4.5.2.2. *Migration and Politics*

Since regaining independence in the second half of the twentieth century, African political elites have advocated for mutual cooperation among sovereign states. This brings us to the point where, in order to implement the AfCFTA, African economic systems must be coordinated and aligned for mutual benefit. However, political objectives have mostly trumped economic ones in many regional economic communities. Migration and security are two national interests that have persisted in Africa, with many sovereign nations protecting their national borders and enforcing tough immigration rules.

Participant 2 was very critical of migration and trade that,

"If one is not free to relocate to other African countries today, how can free trade succeed? Africa is confined by inward-looking migration policies. So, unless Africa addresses migration challenges, free trade cannot be addressed. For example, who will win if South Africa's economy competes with Zimbabwe's and free trade is implemented? South Africa is likely to lose more because Africa has no economy, and many people believe that Africa is not prepared for free trade."

The participants' perspectives on migration policies must be carefully examined to ensure that there is a strong link between trade and migration on the African continent. Migration has been related to Africa's economic development; hence it is critical for nation states to deal with their internal migration policies openly.

Indeed, migration policy is critical to this new initiative. Africa's trade and migration are inextricably linked, with mutually reinforcing impacts and significant implications for development. In some cases, anti-immigrant policies undercut projects such as AfCFTA, making it impossible for nations and businesspeople to freely trade (Tshishonga, 2022). For instance, there are some countries that are part of AfCFTA but have currently imposed strict migration policies, making free trade impossible. Senegal adopted a National Strategy to Combat Irregular Migration in 2023 to minimize irregular migration by 2033, while South Africa released a long-awaited white paper on revamping the immigration system in 2023 (Williams, 2024).

All in all, a rich Africa is the most effective solution to the continent's migration dilemma and the only way to strengthen continental capability for forceful action against insecurity. The AfCFTA is thus not just a massive step towards increasing income, but also a significant move towards removing Africa's insecurity concerns.

4.5.2.3. Neocolonialism and Geopolitics

Africa's economy has been impacted by ongoing colonial, neocolonial, and artificial boundary pressures. According to Savani (2022), Africans have been socially, culturally,

and politically divided, and used to serve imperial goals. African countries use economic soft power to keep influence over their domestic politics. Bilateral agreements with African governments can lead to imperial control over governance and increased reliance on foreign forces. Today's colonial influence has led to numerous nations, particularly in West Africa, participating in coups to overthrow the so-called puppet government.

Participant 2 had a strong opinion on AfCFTA,

“Claiming that dreaming of African trade unity is wishful thinking. Looking back in history, Africa had two major colonizers: the French and the British. These two captured most African countries, separating them into Anglophone and Francophone nations. Even in AU meetings, the Anglophones want things done their way, while the Francophones want things done the same way. The finest example was when Dr. Nkosazana became the AU chair; the Francophone (French) countries did not want her and did not vote for her. They were looking for a French-speaking candidate in Africa for the role”.

Yes, the Nkosazana Zuma election analysis helped to mend enormous rifts between Anglophone and Francophone countries that attended her election. However, the study disagrees with the above assessment, noting that three Anglophone powerhouses Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia did not support her, resulting in tensions between the southern and western African blocs.

Again, Participant 8 opposed the AfCFTA concept, which is evolving as a European model and raises the question of whether it can be implemented in Africa. It is time for Africa to create its own distinct approaches informed by African philosophy. However, this approach will make it easier for African countries to secure funding.

Bassey (2023) asserts that trade integration in Africa is coerced and benefits Western capitalist nations at the expense of African third-world countries, creating an unequal trading environment. Again, modernisation may be critiqued for emphasising the

necessity to abolish traditional values on the path of development, based on the notion that modernity and tradition coexist and nourish each other in each culture (Gyekye 1997). It might also be argued that traditional beliefs do not always impede modernisation. For instance, the value of allegiance to the emperor among Japanese samurai is well-known for driving high production. Thus, even African countries can modernize without abandoning their ancient values; in fact, the two systems can be combined to work for Africa. Because the reality is that the Western world has different difficulties than Africa, and COVID-19 did not produce the same problems on both continents.

4.5.2.4. Health Risks and Political turmoil

In civil war-affected countries, the government's signing of agreements may be questionable. This may negatively impact the long-term implementation of the AfCFTA. Terrorism is a threat, but it also presents a possibility for regional cooperation. Sudan, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon are currently experiencing civil conflict, which has been ongoing for half a decade, although these nations signed the AfCFTA pact. It can be considered as a positive step toward Africa's unification through a single market, but it also poses a risk to trade. A nation whose security is in jeopardy or at risk does not conduct its foreign trade affairs effectively.

Participant 8 believes that,

“Free movement of people across borders will cause issues from one country to swiftly spread to others, such as diseases, terrorist networks, foodborne infections, and conflict”.

The participant highlighted a crucial point; nonetheless, the euphoria around the AfCFTA should inform realistic requests and continental engagement for pragmatic progress on the peace and security fronts, as a prerequisite for achieving the free trade area's aims. Sambou (2019) suggested that on a continent replete with competing interests, people's and products' security cannot wait any longer. Integration into the free trade zone must

be accompanied by peacekeeping structures for conflict-prone regions. Integration must strengthen the power of states.

In conclusion, trade integration and sustainable development aim to accelerate and cost-effectively increase international trade flows. The intentions are based on the belief that increased trade in the region will lead to job creation, industry connectivity, structural transformation, foreign and domestic investment, and development, finally eradicating poverty. Therefore, according to the findings of Kere and Zongo (2023), the absence of intra-African trade is not just attributable to Africa's size and the number of emerging countries. In other words, the absence of trade between African countries cannot be explained solely by geography and GDP.

4.6. Post-Pandemic Strategies for Sustainable Development and Trade Integration

This theme covers a variety of issues, including ethical leaders and transparency, infrastructure investment, trade commodities, economic development and overcoming non-tariff barriers, industrialization, political stability, social integration, and capacity building. Prior to COVID-19, progress in sustainable development and trade integration had been modest. Aside from these pre-existing concerns, the COVID-19 pandemic compounds matter in developing countries, notably in Africa. The pandemic's socioeconomic impacts are especially severe in structurally vulnerable developing countries. Africa is in a fragile situation, with unequal access to resources hindering long-term development.

According to Zhao *et al.* (2021), the resource pillars on which Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)s implementation is based are food, energy, and water (SDG 2, 6, 7). The effective implementation of the SDGs in a country is dependent on its incorporation into national socioeconomic development plans. Again, trade integration is a driver of sustainable development. The key question is how to achieve equitable and sustainable development and trade integration while balancing the speed and scale of post-pandemic

recovery. As a result, participants provided wide proposals that might be implemented to return Africa to its original economic shape. Many participants believe that Africa has the potential to meet its AU objectives, particularly if it can begin by unifying and finding solutions in an African manner.

4.6.1. Ethical Leaders and Transparency

Combating COVID-19 consequences by promoting sustainable development and trade integration in Africa has been and continues to be a primary goal in the post-COVID-19 era. In Africa, particularly in light of the corruption and health blunders that occurred during COVID-19, transparency and ethical leadership may serve as guiding principles to maintain government accountability and trustworthiness in the post-COVID-19 period (Jackson, 2023). These two elements constitute the heart and soul of effective government. For instance, in South Africa, unethical leadership during COVID-19 has highlighted the failure of the public sector to address corruption, which has persisted across society.

Participant 3 accelerates that,

“Africa and the rest of the globe must be realistic about who they elect to power; African does not have ethical leaders. Africa need leaders with a proactive mind not a reactive mind. It is uncalled for to use crisis to fix our problems, therefore, proactive leaders will always be ahead of time”.

The long-standing relationship between ethical leadership and proactive leaders, as well as the role that individual leaders can play in promoting ethical activity in the post-COVID-19 era. The participant's perspective above demonstrates how proactive leaders may push for Africa's revival while simultaneously ensuring that pandemics such as COVID-19 are predicted well in advance. A proactive strategy involves preparing and taking measures before a threat or opportunity arises (Enter, 2023).

4.6.2. Infrastructure Investment

The COVID-19 outbreak has raised awareness about the limitations of maximizing limited public resources. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of investing in well-constructed infrastructure to mitigate the economic impact. Global economies, particularly emerging nations, faced major infrastructure inadequacies that hindered effective response to the pandemic (Bassi, Pallaske, & Guzzetti, 2020). Infrastructure investments are crucial for economic recovery and environmental sustainability, as well as meeting climate mitigation targets.

Participant 6 submits that:

“Investment in physical and digital infrastructure is critical for improving connectivity, lowering trade costs, and facilitating integration into regional and global value chains. This comprises transportation infrastructure such as roads, ports, and trains, as well as digital infrastructure to facilitate e-commerce and digital services”.

Africa should move fast and aggressively to establish the physical and legislative infrastructure that will allow AfCFTA to be implemented quickly. This entails changing laws and regulations to emphasize infrastructure investment such as railway, road, and air travel. Allowing freedom of movement, as well as the creation of an African continental passport, should enable Africa to roam freely around the continent. Doing so in a non-chaotic manner will continue to entice investors into Africa's important strategic locations. Addressing critical security concerns, such as dealing with civil wars in West Africa, which impact the continent's progress towards its goals.

The aforementioned arguments are reinforced by Vhumbunu and Rudigi (2020), who contend that free movement of people is one of the main tenets of African regional integration since it fosters social integration on the continent and encourages employment creation, intra-African trade, investment, tourism, and labour mobility and skills circulation.

The study supports the idea that integrating new technology into infrastructure projects can save costs and increase performance in sustainable development and trade integrations. Innovative technologies like 5G, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and

renewables have the potential to cut costs, minimise environmental impact, and increase revenues. According to Rostow's theory of modernisation, there needs to be a shift in society's beliefs and attitudes toward economic progress, an emergent elite that is willing to take risks in the pursuit of profits and reinvest a large portion of those profits in production, a sharp rise in agricultural output, improved infrastructure, a new class of entrepreneurs, and a new mentality (Rostow, 2013).

4.6.3. Trade Commodities

The rise in global commodity prices has raised worries about the competitiveness of certain markets. In this subtheme, the solutions that can be implemented to guarantee that the proposed free trade initiative in Africa does not result in conflicts amongst traded commodities. For Africa to respond to COVID-19 through trade integrations, participant 3 hold a strong view that,

“African nations need to identify what commodities that will be traded. For instance, Zimbabwe can produce and trade commodities that South Africa doesn't, Nigeria can produce and trade what Angola doesn't? These strategies will limit competition.”

The participant's statement makes sense, but the notion should have been underlined that countries should specialize in terms of manufacturing. Because commodities can be derived from both manufactured goods and natural resources such as coal and diamonds. Many countries can trade similar commodities derived from natural resources, such as diamonds, as many countries in the central and eastern regions do. So, traded commodities are often classified into four basic categories: metals, energy, livestock and meat, and agriculture. Commodities can help investors diversify their portfolios beyond standard assets.

When dealing with trade products or commodities, it is critical to consider Rules of Origin (RoO), which are legal regulations used to define a product's nationality in the context of international trade. The RoO of a preferential trade area, such as the AfCFTA, define the requirements for a product exchanged between countries to claim local 'economic' origin

status and gain AfCFTA privileges (Signé and Madden, 2021). Furthermore, the AfCFTA RoO considers products entirely obtained or manufactured by a State Party to be of local origin.

4.6.4. Economic change and addressing non-tariff barriers

According to Magda (2019), tariffs are commonly used to defend a country's industry by imposing taxes on imported goods from other countries. Governments frequently employ tariffs as a policy to tax foreign producers that sell their goods in the domestic market. Non-tariff trade barriers are a key component of international legislation regulation. Non-tariff barriers at the international level highlight issues in the international market, whereas internal barriers disclose trade and economic issues within the country (Alazzam, 2021).

As has been demonstrated under Regional Economic Communities (RECs) on the continent, the prevalence and proliferation of various non-tariff trade barriers have the potential to thwart efforts to improve intra-African trade and lower the cost of doing business in Africa, even while trade in goods is allowed under the AfCFTA. Furthermore, the problems associated with Non-Tariff Barriers (NTB) have not received the attention they merit, particularly in light of their influence on certain aspects of trade in services between African nations.

When it comes to economic change, Participant 5 claims that,

“The goal should be to create a more robust economy, particularly in trade, as well as to create more diverse industrial zones and manufacture products that do not compete with one another. Another thing is to support SMEs and entrepreneurs. SMEs will provide funding to small businesses and will also play a role in AFCFTA”.

Indeed, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are crucial to global economics. This is especially relevant in the African context, given the region's multiple developmental challenges. Inclusive intra-African trade is necessary to advance structural transformation and sustainable development in Africa. Trade fairs and

exhibitions will be valuable instruments for small businesses looking to expand into regional and continental markets. As a result, it is critical to establish post-pandemic initiatives that promote youth entrepreneurship in order to maximize the AfCFTA and position small enterprises to accomplish AfCFTA aspirations.

Participant 6 believes that,

“While tariffs have been reduced, non-tariff obstacles such as bureaucratic red tape, corruption, and inadequate logistics continue to be important trade challenges in many African countries. Customs procedures must be streamlined, openness must be improved, and logistics services must be improved.”

In the same vein, Oyelami and Zongo (2022) suggest that policies promoting intra-African merchandise trade, including tariff and non-tariff barriers under AfCFTA, should be actively implemented to include trade in services. NTBs have been identified as a major factor to Africa's high intra-trade costs.

4.6.5. Political Stability

This subtheme focuses on preparing Africa for post-COVID-19 politics, including learning from past failures and rethinking governance and leadership to ensure survival. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the complexities of politics. The pre-COVID-19 political climate is no longer comparable to the COVID-19 period, nor will it be in the post-COVID-19. As previously stated, the post-COVID-19 phase is fraught with political challenges due to political instability, insecurity in certain regions, and intra-African trade barriers.

Participant 2 argues that,

“African governments must address political issues because they are the ones that lead to economic issues when one's political regime is not

accommodating, is dictatorial, is more of a closed system in which only the chosen few participate, and until today Africa still have leaders who refuse to accept political defeat. Therefore, it will be difficult for Africa to realize free trade it is exemplified by good economics, and a country under political instability cannot have a development economy; the economy will stagnate”.

Following the creation of the AfFCTA, post-COVID-19 politics must become more complex, as Africa requires a stable political context to reclaim its path to increased trade integration and sustainable development. Political instability, whether social, political, or economic, in assistance-receiving nations can impact donor aid allocation, making it a crucial factor to consider. IMF (2019), focusing on sub-Saharan Africa, discovered that conflicts and political instability deteriorate the fiscal balance, alter the makeup of government spending, and result in an average loss of tax income of almost 2% of GDP.

Moreover, participant 2 gave an example of Botswana and Zimbabwe politics and economy, stating that,

“Botswana has the most stable economy in Africa. Then if you go to Zimbabwe, where politics are a death trap; to be a politician there is to be hunted. So, a stable political system allows for investment. Firstly, Africa needs to deal with politics first then later the economy”.

Governments should create more effective policies to meet the challenge and prevent effects that harm other nations' chances for development (Oladele & Vieyra-Mifsud, 2021). Simultaneously, they must improve their abilities to take advantage of cross-border synergies in various policy domains, including commerce, investment, agriculture, health, education, the environment, migration, and development cooperation, in order to foster development-friendly environments. Moreover, according to Rostow's theory, the modernisation process occurs when modern science and technology are applied to most branches of the economy, expanding the spectrum of leading industries. Political and social reforms continue, the economy finds "its feet" internationally, and investment stays strong (Ntini, 2016).

4.6.6. Social Integration, SDGs and Capacity Building

The social slowdown caused by COVID-19 has hampered progress towards the SDGs. This is especially evident in African countries that are experiencing debt hardship (Kaftan, Kandalov, Molodtsov, Sherstobitova, & Strielkowski, 2023). This distress has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has limited public funding available for SDG efforts. Implementing SDGs is strongly reliant on finance support, particularly given the significant infrastructural requirements and financing shortfalls. These gaps between SDG aspirations and real capacity hampered efforts to implement them in the post-COVID environment.

According to participant 5,

“One of the few measures that should be put in place to help sustainable development and trade integration should be a combination of policies, plans, and collaborative efforts from all African countries. This is also evident from the fact that during COVID-19, many African nations did not have enough access to a health-care system. Investing in health care and, more broadly, reliance is a positive step in the right way, as is strengthening health infrastructure and preparing for future crises, as well as training health officials”.

According to Participant 6,

“Building capacity in trade negotiation, trade policy formulation, and export strategy creation can assist countries in maximizing the benefits of regional and global trade accords”.

Inglehart and Welzel (2005) cited Inkles and Smith (1974), who claim that modernisation leads to development. Thus, socioeconomic progress can only take place if the bulk of the people is socialized into modern attitudes, values, and beliefs via social institutions such as the home, school, and workplace. In summary, this theme suggests that Africa should reconsider its future goals of economic independence and sustainable

development, even in light of the political and economic obstacles the COVID-19 pandemic promises.

4.7. Regional Economic Cooperation and Nation-State

To address the economic drawbacks of fragmentation in Africa, numerous treaties and regional institutions were established with the goal of promoting self-sufficient growth among member nations. African states form Regional Economic Communities (RECs). The African Union recognizes eight regional economic communities (RECs): Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and Southern African Development Community (SADC). Based on the data obtained, the subtheme focused on SADC REC's function in the post-COVID-19 era and its powerhouse such as South Africa contributed to that position.

4.7.1. Intra-SADC Trade and Economic Cooperation

SADC's economic backwardness due to COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of intra-trade and economic cooperation. SADC struggles with poverty, limited global trade, slow development of human capital and infrastructure, and external influences. In practice, the efficiency of trade integration and sustainable development in SADC depends on improvement in trade flows among member states. According to Maikudi's (2020) analysis, intra-trading among SADC member states leads to economic growth both inside the bloc and at the individual member state level. Furthermore, trade value has increased favorably for individual member states and the bloc. Improving international or intra-trading can generate greater benefits and reduce frictions among member states.

Participant 1 argued that,

“At the height of the pandemic, SADC Member States collectively shared disruptions to socioeconomic activities, the loss of lives, the strain on frail health systems, economic losses, and a reduction in foreign direct investment. SADC nations should strengthen intra-SADC trade and economic cooperation, as well as regional investment, to help their economies recover from the pandemic”.

The participants discussed strongly in favor of strengthening intra-SADC trade and economic cooperation, as well as regional investment, which has been planned for a long time with little implementation. However, if implemented, this could help regional sectors become more competitive by fostering economies of scale and eliminating producers that are less effective in the marketplace. Angula and Nekulilo (2021) did, however, share their post-COVID-19 experiences in SADC countries, which have been difficult because the majority of them rely on South Africa for many basic needs.

4.7.2. Alignment of the domestic policies and Regional Integration

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the lack of a regional alternative for accessing products and services after global value systems were disrupted. Regional cooperation and integration are the missing link in achieving more alignment and coordination between national programs and international development objectives. No country can possibly fulfill its national development goals without international cooperation. So, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that when international bodies fail to achieve their duties, the negative consequences are compounded in the absence of robust and functioning regional modes of cooperation and organization, which occur closer to the areas of implementation. It is critical to have the alignment of domestic policies with regional integration, as mentioned in this subtheme.

According to Participant 6,

“Policies should ideally combine both domestic initiatives and programs to promote regional cooperation, given its position in the area. Infrastructure spending, fiscal stimulus, and community and industry assistance policies

are a few examples of the kinds of national economic recovery initiatives. Regional initiatives to enhance infrastructure, promote commercial integration, and coordinate responses to common concerns might all be aided by South Africa”.

To ensure effective alignment of domestic policies and regional integration, a strong link is required between member states economically and politically, as well as the underlying policy framework that allows for the financing and construction of sustainable, adequate infrastructure. According to Mansour (2014), policymakers should consider global issues when addressing national policy issues.

4.7.3. Health Care System

Previously, it was argued that COVID-19 pressure had devastated the health-care system. However, for business purposes, Angula and Nekulilo (2021) believe that the health sector was not badly impacted, but rather thrived. In SADC nations, many individuals and businesses adjusted their routines to supply health items such as masks, sanitizers, steamers, herbs, protective gear, and services for the COVID dead. These businesses thrived due to high demand. Psychological services were in high demand due to increased social isolation and loss of loved ones due to COVID-19. Those who could afford it sought help from social workers and psychologists (Angula and Nekulilo, 2021).

Participant 5 claims that,

“While proposals to revive SADC economies have been put in place, there has been a lack of implementation, resulting in a slow progress in achieving the objectives. Enough is not being done. SADC countries should build a health diplomacy in order to promote public health. We should not wait for another pandemic; rather, we should prepare ahead of time.”

SADC has established health institutions to coordinate COVID-19 responses, building on previous experience with regional pandemics. SADC member states have reactivated the

Technical Committee for Coordinating and Monitoring the Implementation of the SADC Protocol on Health, expanding its scope to analyze and advise on health, social, economic, and immigration issues (Medinilla, Byiers, and Apiko, 2020).

4.7.4. The role that South Africa played in SADC in the post-pandemic period

This theme seeks to comprehend the role that South Africa played in SADC in the post-pandemic period. South Africa's membership in the SADC regional economic cooperation gives her the greatest possible position to engage in the global economy as a rapidly rising nation in Southern Africa. Southern African governments organised into the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) in the 1980s and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in 1994 as a means of promoting economic growth and development in the subregion (Enaifoghe, 2019).

In the southern African region, South Africa is a regional power. Accordingly, a state that is a part of a particular geographic area, possesses superior power capabilities, and has some sort of control over the region is considered a regional power. Furthermore, South Africa's aspirations to lead southern Africa have taken a different course. According to Hulse (2016), South Africa participated in coercive leadership during the Apartheid era through the SACU and aspired to increase its dominance over southern Africa by creating a planned Constellation of Southern African States.

4.7.4.1. South Africa and SADC Member-state Cooperation

One of the goals of SADC's economic integration is to better the lives of its citizens through trade promotion. The SADC region's economic activity relies heavily on the informal sector. The South African government has taken significant measures to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic through policy and leadership methods. The coronavirus crisis has been described as a war-time situation. Policy interventions to prevent COVID-19 must be practical, innovative, and effective. A successful coronavirus approach involves both battling the virus and promoting economic and societal improvements.

Participant 7 anticipates that,

“South Africa's status as a regional force in SADC is still debatable. Because, since gaining economic strength through the mining sector, South Africa has never shared its wealth with its neighbours. South Africa is still having difficulty selling its best coal and is stuck with the mediocre one. And South Africa must begin using its own currency in international trade”.

This viewpoint was shared by Participant 8,

who went in a different direction, stating that South Africa has been contributing to SADC since after COVID-19, citing examples such as South Africa SOEs, such as Transnet, recently closing a large deal with the DRC in exporting locomotives, and South Africa is establishing deals with other African states, not just in SADC, such as the deal between SAA and Kenya Airlines. However, South Africa is hampered in expanding its SOEs to SADC due to poor performance.

Last but not least, COVID-19 significantly altered a number of sectors within the SADC countries. Over time, these changes had an influence on the economy of the member states, both beneficial and negative, but the latter were more pronounced. Both citizens and governments have an obligation to draw lessons from these experiences, particularly the negative ones, in order to make sure that their economies are strong enough to weather this pandemic.

4.8. Conclusions

In a nutshell the COVID-19 epidemic has brought attention to how interrelated the globe is, how crucial international relationships is, and how important sustainable development is. While the pandemic provides serious obstacles for Africa, it also offers chances to quicken the continent's progress toward economic resilience, sustainable development, and regional integration. In this sense, the AfCFTA is a promising attempt, but it will only

succeed if continued efforts are made to overcome the many trade and development impediments across the continent. Ultimately, to fully realize the possibilities of this new age in African development, a cooperative, inclusive, and forward-thinking strategy will be essential. Again, it is important to note that modernization is largely driven by endogenous forces within societies. These societies should be viewed as cohesive wholes and, if feasible, examined using the theoretical tools of structural functionalism. The transition of various societies towards modernity will occur in a relatively uniform and linear fashion (Knöbl, 2003)

Chapter Five

5. Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings, conclusion, and recommendations on the prospects for international relations in the post-COVID-19 time, focusing on trade integration and sustainable development in Africa. These findings speak to the study's aims and objectives by addressing significant subjects such as COVID-19 in Africa, international relations in the post-COVID-19 era, the AfCFTA project, trade integration and sustainable development plans, and the role of RECs. This chapter also presents the study's recommendations, based on the research findings and for future research studies.

5.2. Summary of Findings

The first (1) chapter dealt with the study's introduction and background, providing more information regarding Africa's core condition since the commencement of COVID-19, as well as elements that may have contributed to the destruction of African economies. The chapter unpacked the study's problem by reviewing issues destroyed by COVID-19, beginning with the importance of diplomatic relations, trade integration, and sustainable development in Africa, as well as how COVID-19 appears to be a problem that may exacerbate Africa's already existing problems. The first chapter described the study's aims and objectives, as well as the importance of theory, which is modernisation theory.

The second (2) chapter reviews the literature and discusses the study's theoretical underpinning, modernisation theory. The chapter examines the existing literature on COVID-19, SDGs in Africa, diplomatic relations and globalisation, trade integration problems, AU position on COVID-19, SADC, AfCFTA, Intra-African Trade, SACU, global diplomacy and COVID-19, EU countries, and the ASEAN.

The third (3) chapter detailed the research methodology that underpins the findings. The study employed a qualitative research method, utilising both primary and secondary data

collection methods. The chapter describes the adopted research approach, paradigm and design, data collection methods, study area, target population and sample, pretesting, quality criteria, ethical issues, plan for dissemination, and reflexivity.

Chapter four (4) centered on data presentation and analysis. This chapter explored a variety of subjects related to the study's aims and objectives, as well as an analysis of responses from participants during the interview or data collection procedure. The chapter begins by presenting data on the theme COVID-19 pandemic overview, which has multiple subthemes, including healthcare systems and infrastructure, vaccine distribution and access, economic impact, social and cultural implications, and worldwide cooperation. Furthermore, this chapter goes on to present data on the state of international relations or politics since the inception of COVID-19.

The study focused on AfCFTA opportunity such as intra-African trade, economic development, African unity, and borderless and unified currency. However, AfCFTA challenges were broken down into ideological differences and regionalism, migration and politics, neocolonialism, and geopolitics, and finally health hazards and political unrest. The chapter also included information on post-pandemic initiatives for sustainable development and trade integration. Lastly, Chapter 4 discussed Regional Economic Cooperation (REC) and Nation-State. However, rather than focusing on all possible RECs in Africa, the study primarily analysed the role of SADC.

5.3. Main Findings

It is indispensable to first reflect on the objectives of the study before giving the findings. This study's objectives were,

- To examine Africa's plan of action and its implementation in the context of sustainable development and trade integration before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To appraise the implications of COVID-19 on the diplomatic relations and economic development on the African continent.

- To determine what needs to be done to address the issues that have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to consider Africa's future in the light of the pandemic.

5.3.1. COVID-19 in Africa findings

The study looked at the prospects for international relations in Africa after COVID-19, with a focus on trade integration and sustainable development. Therefore, the study subjects revolve around COVID-19, which is why it was necessary to seek responses on an overview of the pandemic. The participant's perspectives were validated using the quality guidelines specified in the research methodology, as well as the previously published literature review. As of the views presented by the participants, many considered COVID-19 as a wake-up call for many African countries' health systems, healthcare infrastructure, and diplomatic relations.

Moreover, COVID-19 demonstrated the government's strengths and weaknesses, as well as how developed countries continue to play an important role in international affairs, which at the time focused mostly on vaccine production and distribution. Vaccine roll-out and developments were inadequate, demonstrating the ongoing imbalance in international politics. Nationalism in vaccine diplomacy flourished because developed countries treated their populations first before spreading the vaccine to the rest of the globe, as many participants demonstrated. There was an increase in "vaccine nationalism" as governments battled to be the first to discover a vaccine that could safeguard their country, even poaching one other's research teams (Dyer, 2020). Furthermore, COVID-19 required a global leadership approach from superpowers like as China and the United States; but these nations proceeded with their trade war, disparaging each other from the start of the pandemic and battling over how to bring their vaccine to the global market.

The study found that COVID-19 devastated numerous countries, whether developed or developing. In terms of preventing the pandemic's spread, the study found that several African countries adopted immediate and severe measures, such as instituting lockdowns

and other limitations to reduce transmission. This lockdown has had a significant impact on social life, destroying small businesses and increasing joblessness. Another key result is that multilateralism, regionalism, and bilateralism were critical in preventing and responding to pandemics. Africa has only been able to benefit from breakthroughs in pandemic surveillance.

5.3.2. International Relations position in post-COVID-19 findings

Despite the numerous unfortunate concerns associated with COVID-19, there are some positive consequences that may have been caused by COVID-19, such as global cooperation and diplomacy. Global cooperation has been a part of world politics for a long time, but COVID-19 has increased its impact because many governments have engaged in diplomatic and regional engagement with the common goal of preventing the pandemic from spreading further. Many participants in the study praised the WHO, believing that it played an important role in the pandemic in terms of information exchange and vaccination facilitation, even though this was mostly done by individual nations and global health governance players.

The national lockdowns enforced by nation states had an impact on international relations since borders were closed and travel was prohibited between countries. The study found that African economies were impacted by COVID-19 because trade was halted. Even though most African nations utilized foreign vaccines, with no African country developing its own, numerous leaders questioned the reliability of these foreign vaccines, which were mostly created in the United States, Russia, Germany, China, and the United Kingdom. The study findings indicate that there was distrust of vaccines and disinformation that was circulating in social media, and this has contributed to many individuals not taking vaccines, with some believing that this vaccination is an attempt to wipe-out the population by powerful nations.

Without a doubt, the combination of rising economic disruption and a sluggish and inconsistent response to the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated Africa's trade integration and sustainable development crisis. The study further found that the ongoing tendency of

neocolonialization in health development on the African continent has continued to rely on donor packages, with vaccine distribution serving as evidence of this claim. However, the COVID-19 epidemic has underlined the significance and prospects for global health diplomacy.

5.3.3. AfCFTA findings

The AfCFTA is a significant step toward trade liberalization, regional economic growth, and regional integration. Hence, it is always critical to weigh both the possible opportunities and challenging aspects of any proposed initiative.

5.3.3.1. Opportunities

There are plenty of opportunities intended in the newly developed initiative known as AfCFTA, which was long planned prior to the inception of COVID-19. However, its debut and implementation occurred during a moment of crisis, which is why some of the prospects are delayed, despite the fact that many participants see this effort as a locomotive capable of reviving African economies and completing the work begun a decade ago. The study searched for more data on how to re-establish Africa's trade integration and sustainable development, and AfCFTA is the answer to that question. The African Union prioritizes intra-African trade as a short- and long-term economic goal. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19-related market disruptions on the poor, African countries must prioritize sustainable development and open routes for trade integration.

According to the study's findings, intra-African trade was imbalanced long before COVID-19, with African countries trading little with one another in comparison to Europe, Asia, and South America, which trade more. Africans import more than they export, and their exports are predominantly mineral resources rather than manufactured commodities. Exports provide greater revenue for the economy than imports. Furthermore, the study conducted by Olaniyan (2021) finds that the top exporters to African markets have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic more than African importing nations. This has significant effects on intra-African trade, the full implementation of the AfCFTA, and the agreement's post-COVID-19 operations.

However, AfCFTA, once implemented, is expected to increase intra-African trade by creating a single market and currency. Though some participants have questioned the need for a single currency, it is worth noting that Africa still lacks consistency, and many countries, particularly those that are dependent on the West, may be unwilling to surrender their independent currencies. The data presented in Chapter 4 clearly show that AfCFTA has the potential to promote continental and interregional movement of people and economic activity. The study highlights the importance of reducing the continent's reliance on imported commodities from other countries. Promoting multinational firms and developing an African-based economy can significantly lessen the continent's reliance on foreign goods.

In terms of socioeconomic growth in the post-COVID-19 era, AfCFTA is expected to be a vehicle that can lead to the reorganization of nations. According to the findings, the AfCFTA will help to establish industrialization in Africa, which has been absent since decolonization. The endeavor to introduce industrialization coincides with the creation of job possibilities and the promotion of effective trade, both of which contribute to poverty alleviation. The economic crisis aggravated by COVID-19 may resurface severely if the AfCFTA wish list is successfully executed despite government and leadership incompetence.

Furthermore, the AfCFTA research identified prospects such as African unification, open borders, and a single currency. As there would be no limitations or border closures, individual states will take advantage of this time to examine and alter their migration policies to align with the AfCFTA's objectives. Other participants argue that this approach will be difficult for other countries, particularly those hardest hits by COVID-19, and that it will increase the risk of another pandemic or other challenges such as terrorism.

5.3.3.2. Challenges

The study also found various challenges that may impede AfCFTA's ability to address the repercussions of COVID-19 by advocating for viable trade integration and sustainable development. To begin, political ideologies and regionalism influence how governments embrace their autonomy, which is expected to be a significant problem given Africa's

various ideological challenges. According to the findings, countries that are pro-Marxist in character may not completely engage in this free trade push, as free trade is believed to be the baby of capitalism. Furthermore, many regional organizations are not united. For example, some ECOWAS members, including Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, have just withdrawn their membership. This is a challenge that will undoubtedly test AfCFTA's ability to function properly.

Furthermore, the study found that the colonial legacy persists in African soil because the continent is still divided into Francophone and Anglophone regions. This split persists even on large platforms such as the African Union, Pan Africanist Parliaments, and other continental platforms. Some study participants stated unequivocally that the Francophone and Anglophone divide will impede AfCFTA's ability to achieve its objectives. This is compounded by the fact that former colonists continue to influence decisions in some regions, which is one of the reasons why some countries have departed from ECOWAS, saying that they have been controlled by Western powers. Postcolonial governments in Africa, like most countries, are nothing more than replicas of colonial states; colonialism's first and most visible legacy is how state institutions and power are conceptualized and practiced (Parashar and Schulz, 2021).

Another finding is that AfCFTA is geared in a Western-European way rather than maintaining an Africanist cultural approach. Many intra-African trades took place in a traditional African manner, which functioned well and was widely accepted. Many research participants were concerned that imposing a Western-European style on intra-African trade would result in an outright rejection of the AfCFTA system.

A further factor that may provide challenges, according to the research, is the issue of health risks and political unrest. It is no secret that Africa is dominated by civil wars, social protests, and political violence for a variety of reasons, including the government's inability to function. The study found that the situation could jeopardize the AfCFTA's ability to function normally. For example, no one will want to trade in a terrorist-dominated country such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Central Republic of Africa (CAR), or Sudan because doing so would put their commodities at risk. Another example is the

July unrest protest in South Africa, which resulted in many stores being looted, prompting several investors to withdraw from the country, citing security concerns. Lastly, the study found that free movement of people throughout the continent may present security problems to states, as well as lead to the spread of foodborne diseases unless punitive measures are taken to force traders to follow the AfCFTA code of conduct.

5.3.4. Trade Integration and Sustainable Development Strategies findings

There are numerous strategies that may be applied with the goal of rejuvenating the continent's lack of trade integration and sustainable development; among these strategies, the study identified ethical leadership and transparency as a tool for change. Given the subject's significance and complexity, there has been surprisingly few empirical studies on the role of ethical leadership and openness. Indeed, the study analyzed a large amount of data to show how African governments are dealing with corruption, maladministration, and unethical leadership. To achieve good trade integration and sustained development, many participants stated that transparency should begin with politicians, and integrity and honesty should be regarded significant variables in any African economy.

Since the world is advancing toward the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), some participants emphasized the importance of Africa adopting digitalization in terms of infrastructure and trade. Furthermore, COVID-19 accelerated numerous long-term structural tendencies, such as the value of data and the dominance of the digital economy. The study found that in order to improve the efficiency of trade integration in the post-COVID-19 era, Africa should invest in digital infrastructure such as network signal towers and the Internet to expedite the issue of online trading while also improving tracking mechanisms for goods traded within Africa. The integration of new technologies necessitates significant preparation, and this has the potential to improve the execution of AfCFTA. It is widely known that many developing and established businesses are transitioning to outsourcing infrastructure for both retail and cloud-based services, resulting in long-term market growth.

Another finding indicates that African countries should trade commodities that are not in competition with one another, and that Rules of Origin (RoO) should be prioritized to safeguard small nations' commodities from being exploited by larger ones. AfCFTA is the world's largest market, hence substantial non-tariff impediments to intra-African trade must be removed. Furthermore, non-tariff obstacles must be elevated to the forefront of the African intra-trade debate, with all massively bureaucratic non-tariff trade impediments removed. This should be supported by technical assistance and capacity-building operations in Africa.

According to the study, political stability is a necessity for Africa's transition to an environmentally sustainable economy. It is always worth noting that trade integration and political stability are inextricably linked. According to the study, political instability may restrict investment and slow economic development, which is detrimental to AfCFTA implementation. While some African governments that have achieved high development rates are stable, a handful of relatively low-performing African states also have extremely stable political systems.

5.3.5. Regional Economic Cooperation findings

REC are at the heart of Africa's structural reform program, and foreign trade remains critical to its economic development. The research only looked at SADC intra-trade statistics and how South Africa assisted SADC member states during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. There are numerous regional economic blocs in Africa, but they are frequently not properly integrated, resulting in a lack of cooperation and coordination across countries. According to the findings, numerous countries implemented nationalist measures during the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, the study finds that significant alignment of national domestic policies and regional blocs is required for greater trade integration and sustainable growth. So, policies should ideally mix domestic initiatives and programs to encourage regional cooperation.

5.4. Recommendations

5.4.1. Recommendations from the research findings

- Based on the COVID-19 research findings, which revealed the vulnerability of Africa's healthcare system, Africa may expand on the remarkable progress it has made in monitoring and public-health response to pandemics in recent years. The study recommends that African countries need to spend sufficiently in commodities to assure their health security, as well as position themselves as global leaders in combatting infectious diseases and building long-term hospital infrastructure to prepare for future pandemics. Africa may also use its resources to invest in the development and education of more health professionals.
- Africa should prioritize regional and international cooperation, as well as maintaining free markets, to limit the pandemic's impact. The post-COVID-19 age highlights the interconnectedness and interdependence of all countries, especially those in Africa. As a result, the study recommends that Africa strengthen the quality of its trade policies, international security, and health outreach, and raise knowledge about issues such as international migration in order to prevent wrongdoing like xenophobia and Afrophobia from occurring.
- Again, many African countries have political instability, which can hinder trade and generate uncertainty for entrepreneurs. In this context, the study recommends that Africa take a proactive approach to peace and security issues, which are required for stability, intra-trade, and long-term economic development. This can be accomplished through the AfCFTA, which can facilitate the setting up of African trade tribunals to resolve contract disputes and enforce trade agreements. This will give traders and investors the confidence to engage in trade without fear of loss, promoting economic growth.
- A further recommendation is that Africa contemplate achieving total emancipation from the neocolonial role; this implies that Africa should take pride in embracing its leadership style and trading methods that are Afrocentric in nature. Furthermore,

Africa's future aspirations of economic autonomy and sustainable growth, regardless of political and economic constraints, must always search for better solutions.

- With all of the uncertainties brought forth by COVID-19 in healthcare, the findings report recommends that Africa concentrate investments in health diplomacy and health infrastructure development. Health diplomacy will be effective in navigating and discussing issues that impact global health policy, bringing together knowledge from public health, law, international affairs, management, and economics. According to Boujnah (2022), trade policies like tariffs, patent protection, and free trade have both direct and indirect consequences on health. It is critical to always plan ahead in terms of health diplomacy, as AfCFTA may have a huge impact on health.

5.4.2. Recommendations for future studies

- For future research, there is a gap that has to be filled on the issues of Rules of Origin (RoO) in Africa, including their integrity and any problems that may arise from this approach. The RoO appears to be a strategy that is widely supported by Western powers; nevertheless, does this allow Africa to run its affairs without the intervention of an external party? This study will provide answers to these controversial concerns.
- Another future study recommendation is to confront international migration policies while implementing AfCFTA. How national governments should change their migration policies to align with the goals of the AfCFTA, as this initiative will promote a single market and free movement of people across the continent.
- The study also recommends the subject of Regional Economic Cooperation (REC) in the context of AfCFTA, specifically examining how some RECs have their own

free-trade protocols that differ from one another. So, how can AfCFTA bring all of these free trade initiatives together to achieve a common purpose and set of rules?

- Finally, future research ought to explore the direct and indirect effects of AfCFTA on health. Because AfCFTA has long-term aims of promoting Africa's economic development through trade and a single market, it is critical to understand how it will affect the healthcare system and the spread of diseases because individuals would be able to move freely.

5.5. General Conclusions

In conclusion, the post-COVID-19 era comes with a hefty load to bear, given that COVID-19 has disintegrated many structural entities not only in Africa but throughout the world. However, the research has shown how Africa is attempting to revive its economy and diplomacy despite the fact that many issues arose immediately following COVID-19, such as starvation in some parts of Africa, political violence and civil war in countries such as Sudan, M23 in the DRC, military coups in West Africa, terrorism in Mozambique, and other mass protests such as the July unrest in South Africa.

All the concerns listed above impede AfCFTA's anticipated progress. As a result, the study identified several issues that must be addressed to accelerate Africa's sustainable development and trade integration, including migration policies, health diplomacy, regionalization, economic emancipation, unity and currency unifications, digitalization, and infrastructure development. African nations need to prioritize investments in infrastructure, technological innovation, trade integration, health diplomacy, and regional collaboration, and integrate economic strategies into their preparedness measures in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, African leaders ought to take decisive action to fortify institutions and unleash the potential of local readiness at the continental level.

For decades, African trade destinations have always been non-African countries; thus, as stated in the study, AfCFTA reduces the continent's high trade reliance on non-African

partners by eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers as broadly as feasible while strengthening economic regionalization processes. In fact, post-COVID-19 is an ideal time to implement AfCFTA because many states have disintegrated as a result of COVID-19, making it simpler for scholars, policymakers, legislators, think tanks, and researchers to thoroughly analyze how AfCFTA can help return economies to their original track. Furthermore, collective action by the continent's leaders will surely aid the fight against the epidemic and its economic ramifications for Africa post-COVID-19 by improving trade integration and sustainable development.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. How would you best describe the COVID19 pandemic?
2. How would you explain the current state of international relations since COVID19's inception?
3. How has COVID19 affected Africa's sustainable development and trade integration since its outbreak?
4. What is the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and how well do you understand it?
5. Some of the AFCFTA's objectives include deepening economic integration, creating a single market, and achieving sustainable, inclusive socioeconomic development. Do you believe AFCFTA can help African countries recover from the epidemic?
6. What measures do you believe should be in place to contribute to sustainable development and trade integration in the post-pandemic era?
7. Do you think that South Africa, as the leading economy in the Southern African Community Development (SADC), is doing everything possible to restore socioeconomic growth and develop plans to sustain SADC nations after COVID19?