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THE ASSESSMENT OF IGAD'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE REALIZATION OF AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AFCFTA)

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THE ASSESSMENT OF IGAD'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE REALIZATION OF AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AFCFTA)

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY AFRICAN STUDIES PROGRAM, ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY, FOR PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF MASTER OF ARTS IN AFRICAN STUDIES; SPECIALIZATION ON HUMAN AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA.

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ADDIS ABABA

Declaration

I DESSALEGN MEKONNEN MENGISTU do hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and that all sources of materials used have been duly acknowledged. I also solemnly declare that the thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Master of Arts (MA) Degree in African Studies, and it has not been submitted, partially, or in full, by any other person for the award of any degree, diploma or certificate in any other university/institution.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my beloved family, whose unwavering support and sacrifices helped me reach where I am today.

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List of Abbreviations

AfCFTA: African Continental Free Trade Area

AMRII: African Multidimensional Regional Integration Index

AMU: Arab Maghreb Union

ASAL: Arid and Semi-Arid Land

AU ETTIM: African Union Economic Development, Tourism, Trade, Industry, Mining

AU: African Union

AUC: African Union Commision

BIAT: Boosting Intra-African Trade

CEN-SAD: Community of Sahel-Saharan States

CEWARN: Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism

COMESA: Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

DESSU: Djibouti, Ethiopia, South Sudan andUganda Corridor initiative

EAC: East African Community

ECCAS: Economic Community of Central African States

ECOWAS: Economic Community of West African States

FDI: Foreign Direct Investment

FTA: Free Trade Area

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

ICBT: Informal Cross-Border Trade

ICPAC: IGAD Climate Prediction & Applications Centre

ICPALD: IGAD Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development

IDDRSI: IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience Initiative

IGAD: Intergovernmental Authority on Development

IGADD: The Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development

IRIMP: The IGAD Regional Infrastructure Master Plan

KII: Key Informant Interviews

LAPSSET: Lamu Port South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport

NEPAD: New Partnership for Africa's Development

OAU: Organization of African Unity

PIDA: Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa

REC: Regional Economic Community

SAATM: Single African Air Transport Market

SADC: South African Development Community

UNCTAD: United Nation Conference on Trade and Development

UNECA: United Nation Economic Commussion for Africa

UNIDO: United Nation Industrial Development Organization

Abstract

This study assessedIGAD's Contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA and employed a qualitative approach based on key informant interviews using semi-structured questionnaires and document analysis. IGAD participated in the AfCFTA negotiations as an observer, but as a member of the AU Technical Task Force, it contributed for the establishment of the AfCFTA by drafting key documents and providing technical, logistical, and coordination support to its member states.Since then, IGAD has made efforts to support the ongoing AfCFTA implementation in the region. Nonetheless, its overall contribution remains limited due to challenges like inconsistent payment of assessed contributions and the accumulation of arrears by member states, weak trade integration arrangement in IGAD,mistrust and limited private sector engagement in the region andoverlapping REC membership of its member states. IGAD has an Economic Cooperation and Regional Integration Division, as well as initiatives and legal mandates and institutional frameworks for trade integration. However,four of Africa's seven non-party states to the AfCFTA and five of nine non-members of the WTO are in the IGAD region. as a result, IGAD is the lowest performer in the trade integration dimension among all AU-recognized RECs.This study recommends IGAD to leverage AfCFTA momentum to establish a regional FTA, provide the IGAD Secretariat with a funded mandate to coordinate trade policy, and ensure all member states join the AfCFTA framework, member states must either fully fund IGAD's initiatives or pursue complementarity with advanced RECs preferably EAC and finally IGAD should narrow its areas of cooperation to a few core priorities. Otherwise, IGAD risks lagging in AfCFTA implementation and missing opportunities of continental trade integration.

Key words: AfCFTA, IGAD, Trade Integration, Challenge, Overlapping Membership.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Africa, the second-largest continent, has a vast landmass, a huge population, and abundant natural resources. Despite these advantages, poverty remains widespread among its people. Africa contributes only 3% to global GDP. Its manufacturing exports represent 1% of the global total, with Eastern and Central Africa being the least significant contributors (UNIDO report, 2023).

A significant body of literature explores the reasons behind Africa's ongoing underdevelopment, presenting diverse perspectives on its causes. Some scholars argue that poor leadership and governance are the primary drivers of Africa's economic challenges (Mills, 2010). Other scholars point to historical injustices such as the negative economic impact of the slave trade, colonialism, and ongoing resource exploitation, as well as external influences, as primary drivers of underdevelopment (NATHAN, 2008; Ojo,2015). Conversely, geography is also exerting influence on economic development (Sachs, 2003).and some argue thatsome parts of Africa lacks sufficient natural resources to support its development, However, the researcher argues that the combination of all the above factors underlies Africa’s ongoing underdevelopment.

Regardless of the underlying causes of underdevelopment and poverty in Africa, there are various initiatives that aim to reduce poverty and foster development, which are being implemented across the continent through continental and regional economic communities (RECs), such as Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Common Market for

Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Southern African Development Community (SADC), East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), etc. Such regional and continental economic integration strategies and initiatives are key to reducing underdevelopment in Africa.

Economic integration is fundamental to fostering economic development and to reduce underdevelopment (Balassa, 1961) and while the journey to Africa's economic integration is challenging, it holds the potential to shape the continent's future economic development (Muchanga, 2020). If managed effectively, economic integration can increase trade interaction and regional cooperation, it attracts FDI, help trade liberalization, policy harmonization, and promote institutional and infrastructure development between member states, which are important for economic development.

Economic communities are entities established mainly for economic integration and trade facilitation which have huge potential to address underdevelopment. Regional and continental economic communities are established with the aim of facilitating regional economic integration between and among member states (AU, 2025a). The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents significant efforts by African states to promote trade integration and drive development. Specially AfCFTA is believed to increase trade flow within Africa by avoiding the challenges of intra-African trade. According to the UNECA (2025), AfCFTA is an opportunity to accelerate a trade led integration and sustainable development in Africa.

The Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) was established in 1986 and mandated to address the issue of drought and desertification in the Horn

of Africa. But, on 18 April 1995, in Addis Ababa, member countries agreed to expand cooperation and to restructure IGADD. In 1996, with the decision of member states (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Uganda) in Nairobi with decision number IGAD/SUM-96/AGRE-Doc, IGADD was restructured into Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) with a holistic mandate including economic integration (IGAD,1996).

IGAD, as one of the eight African Union (AU) recognized RECs and a key component of the AfCFTA, is trying to play a role in promoting economic integration in the region and across Africa. IGAD's potential to contribute for the economic integration, stability and prosperity of the region and beyond is huge.

In 2009, IGAD identified grains and livestock as priority sectors for regional integration (IGAD Minimum Integration Plan, 2009). Since then, it has been promoting trade liberalization, conflict resolution, policy harmonization, and infrastructure development through a gradual approach that addresses political and economic barriers.

IGAD has made progress in several areas, such as infrastructure development, for example, the Lamu Port South Sudan Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor and conflict mediation efforts, as seen in the South Sudan peace process (IGAD, 2018a). Additionally, IGAD's Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) has been instrumental in proactively addressing and mitigating conflicts in the region (CEWARN, 2022).

IGAD can play a crucial role in advancing the AfCFTA's realization in the region by promoting trade integration and strengthening the free movement of goods, services, and people across its Member States and beyond.

IGAD has mechanisms like regional policy frameworks, technical working groups, sectoral institutions, pilot cross-border projects, regional business forums and capacity-building

programs for trade integration. And pilot initiatives such as the One Stop Border Posts (OSBP) and pastoral trade corridors are supporting trade integration in the IGAD region. But the region's overall trade integration remains limited. IGAD was the lowest performer in the trade integration dimension among the eight AU recognized RECs, scoring 0.49, on a scale from 0 to 1(AU AMRII, 2021).So, much remains to be done in the areas of trade integration and trade policy harmonization in the region.

This study aims to examine IGAD's contributions to the establishment and implementation of the AfCFTA, particularly in relation to trade integration. It also seeks to identify the challenges that limit IGAD's contribution in advancing the AfCFTA in the region, and to propose possible courses of action for achieving more effective trade integration.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Regional economic integration has strong potential to promote development and address many of Africa's persistent challenges. Advancing economic integration has been a central objective since the post-colonial Africa, which encouraged the establishment of Regional Economic Communities (RECs) throughout the continent (AU, 2025a). Both continental and regional economic communities were created to overcome the fragmentation of African economies and to foster greater development and unity across Africa.

AfCFTA, as a continental free trade area, seeks to create a single continental market by reducing trade and non-trade barriers to trade, harmonizing economic policies, and boosting intra-African trade and libralise trade in services (AU, 2018). Through this initiative, African countries and RECs aim to strengthen economic ties, foster greater cooperation, and promote sustainable development across the continent.

The AfCFTA maintains a structured relationship with RECs, grounded in frameworks such as the Abuja Treaty, the African Union Constitutive Act, and the 2019 Revised Protocol on AU–REC relations. Notably, Article 19 of the AfCFTA Agreement recognises the progress achieved by RECs and allows those with deeper integration to retain their higher levels, while Article 5 recognizes RECs as foundational building blocks of the AfCFTA implementation (AU, 2018).

leveraging and sustaining the integration efforts of RECs is crucial for advancing continental trade integration initiatives like the AfCFTA, as RECs play a vital role in both its establishment and success.The Abuja Treaty (1991) highlights that continental economic integration should be pursued through the "coordination, harmonization, and progressive integration" of RECs activities. In this context, the contribution of RECs like IGAD are fundamental to the continental economic integration and AfCFTA realization (IGAD Regional Strategy, 2021).

IGAD has been implementing various mechanisms for regional integration and achieving progress in infrastructure development, conflict mediation, member state capacity building, One Stop Border Posts, and pastoral trade corridors. However, compared to other RECs, IGAD has advanced slowly in integration efforts specially IGAD have fragmented marketand has not yet established a free trade area (Erasmus, 2021).

Several researchers such as Aman (2020), Kidane (2018), GAAS (2023), Mwendwa (2014), Mekonnen (2019), Dinka (2013), Abdi and Seid (2013), as well as Gardachew, Kefale, and Antigegn (2019) have examined various contributions of IGAD including IGAD’s role in regional integration, the political and structural challenges facing integration, emerging regional dynamics, the prospects and constraints of integration, the influence of state capacity, institutional frameworks, and the broader political economy shaping integration in the IGAD

region. Generally, this demonstrates that there is extensive research on IGAD's contribution for regional peace, security, and integration in the region and beyond.

But despite IGADis mandated to contribute for AfCFTA realization and trade integration in the region (AU, 2018; IGAD Trade Policy, 2022), and some other AU recognized RECs are contributing for AfCFTA implementation significantly, there remains a gap in evidence regarding IGAD's contributions to the realization of AfCFTAand major specific challenges that are limiting IGAD's ongoing contribution for AfCFTA implementation in the region.

This research gap hinders a current comprehensive understanding of regional integration dynamics in the IGAD region. A targeted assessment of IGAD's contributions to the realization of AfCFTA is therefore essential as it would provide valuable input for policymakers by identifying key gaps and provide practical recommendations, deepen practitioners' understanding, enhance coordination between IGAD and continental frameworks.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of this study was to investigate IGAD's contribution for the realization of the AfCFTA in terms of trade integration and trade policy harmonization.

The specific objectives of this study were the following:

- To analyse how IGAD contribute to the realization of the AfCFTA.
- To examine the implementation strategies and institutional frameworks of IGAD, with an emphasis on promoting trade integration.
- To assess the role of Stakeholders' engagement in the AfCFTA implementation.
- To identify major challenges preventing IGAD to contribute to the AfCFTA implementation.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The Horn of Africa holds strategic importance for the global and regional economic and political stability. Positioned along key global trade routes, particularly for energy shipments through the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the region plays a vital role in global commerce (Dubale, 2024). It is also rich in natural resources, including livestock, agricultural products, oil, gas, and minerals such as gold, copper, and iron ore. Despite these advantages, the region faces considerable challenges.

Regional integration efforts, particularly through IGAD, are viewed as critical to addressing these issues (IGAD, 2021). Given the geographical opportunities, regional economic integration through IGAD's role as a building block for AfCFTA is essential to use these abundant resources and trade opportunities to bring development in the region and beyond.

Therefore, examining IGAD's contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA will provide valuable insights into current opportunities, institutional structures, and its overall role in advancing trade integration. These findings, in turn, will enhance practitioners' understanding and offer useful input for policymakers seeking to strengthen the effectiveness of regional integration efforts.

1.5. Scope of the Study

This study is conceptually, geographically, and temporally delimited. In terms of time, it encompasses the years starting from 1996 when IGAD was formally established with an expanded mandate for economic integration and regional cooperation. The study's geographic

focus is on the IGAD member states and their efforts at economic integration within the AU's broader framework. The study's conceptual focus is on how IGAD contribute to regional economic integration, and how it contributes to the realization of the AfCFTA.

The region’s unique socio-economic, political, and geographical context, shaped by its strategic location along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, makes it the epicenter of geopolitical rivalries. The region faces persistent challenges, including conflicts, droughts, displacement, weak institutions, external interference, and poverty. These issues have led IGAD to prioritize peace and security over economic integration (Aman, 2020), resulting in weak infrastructure, low industrialization and less integrated compared to other RECs like EAC, ECOWAS, and SADC (AU AMRII, 2021). Insights on IGAD’s contributions to the realization of AfCFTA can help to strengthening integration efforts in the region.

1.6 Limitation of the Study

This study has methodological limitations. It adopts a qualitative case study design and employs purposive sampling for data collection, which limits the generalizability of the findings.In addition, due to time and resource constraints, the researcher was unable to collect data from other IGAD member states beyond Ethiopia. However, to help address this gap, the researcher gathered data from various regional and continental institutions, like IGAD, the AUC, UNECA, and AfCFTA.

1.7 Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter one provides the introduction, chapter two reviews related literature, and chapter three outlines the research methodology. Chapter four presents the findings and discussion, and chapter five offers conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The AfCFTA was established in 2018 with a broader objective of creating a unified and liberalized continental market which can lead to the achievements of a prosperous, and integrated Africa and RECs are the building blocks for the AfCFTA to achieve its objectives. IGAD, as a REC, has an objective of promoting cooperation and integration in the Horn (IGAD agreement, 1996).

Therefore, this section reviews the literature on economic integration, focusing on conceptual and theoretical frameworks, historical overview of integration in Africa, AfCFTA, and the specific contributions of IGAD to AfCFTA realization.

2.2. Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

This section examines the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. The conceptual framework identifies the key concepts and their interrelationships, while the theoretical framework draws on established theories of regional integration to provide an analytical lens for examining the research problem.

2.2.1 Conceptual Frameworks

2.2.1.1 Regional Economic Community and Economic Integration

Regional integration is a process through which states align national policies and establish regional institutions to achieve shared objectives.Economic integration refers to the process of unifying separate economies within a region through the reduction or elimination of trade and economic barriers, with the aim of promoting collective growth and development

(Kenton, 2025).Economic integration brings together two or more national economies by removing barriers to cross border trade, payments, and the movement of goods, services, capital, and labor. Accordingly, regional integration involves states entering into multifaceted agreements to promote development, peace, and stability.

The core rationale for regional integration lies in combining small and fragmented economies to achieve economies of scale, comparative advantage, stronger value chains, and greater competitiveness. Over time, regional integration can also foster political cooperation, which is essential for peace and security, conflict resolution, infrastructure development, and disaster management. However, there is no universally accepted, one-size-fits-all definition of regional integration (Ajibo et al., 2021).

Economic integration which is a key aspect of regional integration, is a process where countries harmonize economic policies to achieve shared goals, benefiting all participants (Asante, 1997, cited in Ajibo et al., 2021). Trade integration is the process of eliminating economic discrimination and reducing trade barriers to enable smooth and successful exchange of goods and services among member countries. This integration combines national economies into a larger economic space by removing economic borders.

A Regional Economic Community (REC) is a legally established regional organization formed through a treaty among member states, with the primary goal of promoting economic and social integration (AU and RECS protocol, 2008). So as a regional grouping, RECs serve as platforms for member states mainly to promote economic cooperation and development within a region. In addition to economic integration, RECs are increasingly involved in wider areas such as peace, security and governance, as seen in the case of IGAD too.

2.2.1.2 Stages and Levels of Integration

Regional Economic integration can be divided in terms of geography based on the number of countries involved, scope based on numbers of sectors involved and degree based on the depth of the integration (Dar, 2018). Based on the degree of integration, regional economic integration can be divided in to five, free-trade area, a customs union, a common market, an economic union, and complete economic integration (Balassa, 1961).

Africa's current level of economic integration has developed through time and the economic integration efforts have progressed through five phases. The first, rooted in the Pan-African movement and the OAU's creation, emphasized political unity. The second, shaped by the 1979 Monrovia Summit and 1980 Lagos Plan of Action, sought economic self-reliance but was undermined by the 1980s crises. The third, from the 1991 Abuja Treaty to the 2012 Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) agreement, focused on legal frameworks and sub-regional integration. The fourth, beginning with BIAT in 2012, aimed to boost trade through regional consolidation. The fifth, marked by the AfCFTA's launch, seeks to establish a continent-wide free trade area (Grout et al., 2019 as cited in Ajibo et al., 2021).

According to Article 6 of the Abuja Treaty, continental integration is to be achieved through six progressive stages. The final stage envisions integration levels like the creation of a single continental market, the complete integration of all sectors, the establishment of a Pan-African economic and monetary union, and the adoption of a single African currency and central bank. One of the earlier steps, the third stage, involves removing tariff and non-tariff barriers and establishing a continental free trade area (AU).

Therefore, within the framework of the Abuja Treaty, the AfCFTA represents the third stage of Africa's continental integration, which involves the establishment of a Free Trade Area.

According to Balassa's integration theory, the AfCFTA is likewise at the Free Trade Area level of integration.

2.2.1.3 Why Economic Integration?

Various scholars have provided different perspectives on the importance of integration. For example, regional economic integration was seen as a means to prevent future wars (European Union, 2018), it has been viewed as a tool for safeguarding political and economic freedom (Uzodike, 2009), it has been also viewed as essential tool to expand markets, to achieve economies of scale, and to strengthen a region's bargaining power in international trade negotiations (Bhala and Bhalla, 1997, as cited in Kidane, 2018).

Economic integration can boost trade, attract FDI, reduce marginalization and fragmentation, support trade liberalization and policy harmonization, and promote institutional and infrastructural development among member states. Economic integration also fosters region-wide consensus on broader issues, increases trade by removing barriers, and strengthens interdependence among countries. In doing so, it reduces reliance on external partners and enhances both the political and economic strength of the region.

Economic integration is among the key challenges facing Africa's future (Annan, 2015). If not managed well, Economic integration also presents challenges. For example, eliminating trade barriers can expose weaker economies to an influx of manufactured products from more advanced neighbors, turning them into potential dumping grounds. So for weaker economies, removing barriers to goods, labor, and capital may have at least short term negative effects.

2.2.1.4 Integration Efforts of AU Recognized RECs

An examination of economic integration agreements in Africa shows that most are lagging behind their intended timelines for achieving stated missions and objectives. Overall,

regional integration at the continental level has progressed slowly and remains below expectations.

At the regional level, although progress is uneven, some RECs have advanced further than others in regional integration. According to the African Multidimensional Regional Integration Index (AMRII) a tool used to measure the integration performance of Africa's RECs the levels of integration vary significantly across the different RECs.

AMRII assesses how well RECs align with continental integration objectives and the provisions of their respective treaties. The index was developed by the AU Commission and the RECs, in collaboration with National Statistical Agencies and African Central Banks. AMRII is composed of eight dimensions and thirty-three indicators, which together provide a broad assessment of regional integration. The eight dimensions are: Free Movement of Persons, Social Integration, Trade Integration, Infrastructure Integration, Financial Integration, Monetary Integration, Environmental Integration and Political and Social Integration.

According to the AMRII report, the average integration score of the eight dimensions across the eight AU-recognized RECs was 0.62, on a scale from 0 to 1. Among the RECs, ECOWAS scored highest with 0.74, followed by the East African Community (EAC) at 0.73, COMESA at 0.68, ECCAS at 0.62, and SADC at 0.61 all performing at or above the continental average. In contrast, CEN-SAD scored 0.54, IGAD scored 0.53, and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) scored 0.52, are falling below the average, indicating weaker progress toward regional integration (AU AMRII, 2021).

In the trade integration dimension, which is the main focus of this study, several RECs demonstrated strong performance. The East African Community (EAC) scored the highest with 0.85, followed closely by ECOWAS at 0.84, COMESA at 0.79, SADC at 0.67, and ECCAS at

0.64 all indicating significant progress in trade integration. On the other hand, AMU scored 0.51, CEN-SAD scored 0.50, and IGAD scored 0.49, as the lowest performers in this dimension (AU AMRII, 2021). And based on AU African Synthesized Regional Integration Index (ASRII) IGAD scored 0.46 on overall economic integration, which is well below average but better than AMU and CEN SAD (AU, 2025b).

2.2.1.5 The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

The other important step for the integration efforts of Africa is the signing of the AfCFTA. Although discussions and planning for a continental single market have been underway for years in Africa, it was not until March 21, 2018, that AU Member States formally signed the AfCFTA in Kigali, Rwanda. The AfCFTA is a free trade area with the central goal of establishing a single continental market for goods and services, including the free movement of persons, in alignment with AU's Agenda2063, which envisions "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa".

During the 18th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the AU in Addis Ababa in January 2012, a decision to establish a Continental Free Trade Area by 2017 was adopted. This summit also adopted an action plan on Boosting Intra-Africa Trade focused trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity, trade-related infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration.

Based on the direction given on the 25th Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly in 2015, at Johannesburg, the first phase of AfCFTA was negotiated between February 2016 and March 2018. On 21 March 2018, during the 10th Extraordinary Summit of AU Heads of State and government in Kigali, Rwanda, AfCFTA Framework Agreement and its three protocols: on goods, services, and dispute settlement were adopted. On the same day, the Framework

Agreement was signed by 44 AU Member States, but as of February 2026, the Agreement has been signed by all the AU Member States, except Eritrea.

The AfCFTA agreement secured its 22nd ratification in April 2019 and entered into force on May 30, 2019, as stipulated in Article 23 of AfCFTA agreement, which required the agreement to take effect 30 days after the 22nd ratification (AfCFTA, 2018). The operational phase was launched on July 7, 2019, during the 12th AU Extraordinary Summit in Niamey, Niger, and official trade under the free trade area started on 1 January 2021 by virtual ceremony. But actual trade under AfCFTA began in October 2022 through a pilot project called “AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative" with the involvement of eight African countries namely: Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Tunisia (UNECA, 2024). Now member countries for AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative are expanding to 30 countries (Esonam, 2025, UNECA, 2025).

Phase II negotiations on Competition Policy, Investment Policy and Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) were successfully finalized and the Protocols adopted by the AU Assembly in February 2023. Similarly, Protocols on digital trade and women and youth in trade were adopted by the AU Assembly in February 2024. And waiting for enough ratification to enter into force.

Economic communities, regional, sub regional and/or continental, are established for economic integration and trade facilitation among member states. So AfCFTA is believed to increase trade flow within Africa by avoiding the challenges of intra-African trade. The AfCFTA is an opportunity to accelerate a trade led economic integration and sustainable development in Africa (UNECA Report, 2025). AfCFTA is playing a key role in shaping the continent’s future, and African countries are committed to ensuring its success (Muchanga, 2020).

As outlined in the AfCFTA agreement (2018) RECs are building blocks for the agreement and since they are in a different level of integration, only the experience and progress of RECs which achieved FTA and higher level of integration are allowed to be maintained. But IGAD not achieved a FTA level of integration.

2.2.2 Theoretical Framework

Integration theories are theories that explains the efforts of states to unify their systems through different forms including removing discriminations in their shared economic activity (Djan, 2021). Regional integration theories are essential for analyzing and predicting the dynamics and implications of integration across regions. They clarify key concepts, policy goals, and mechanisms, and help distinguish between different forms of integration economic, political, and social providing a more precise understanding of the integration process.

Economic integration theories help to distinguish between different forms of integration, explain how and why countries integrate their economies, and provide policy clarity across the integration process.It involves measures to eliminate discrimination among economic units from different countries and create a level playing field that enables equal economic participation.

While other perspectives exist, the two dominant theoretical approaches for explaining regional integration are the political and the economic approaches of regional integration theories.The political approachincludes theories such as functionalism, neo-functionalism, and intergovernmentalism, which focus on institutional development and policy harmonization. The economic approach includes customs union theory, optimum currency area theory, and fiscal federalism theory, which emphasize market integration and trade interactions (Mattli, 1999, as cited in Kidane, 2018). Despite their differences, these theories share the common view that

integration arises from the shared economic and political interests of member states (Uzodike, 2009).

To understand the topic, the researcher applies inter-governmentalism and customs union theory, particularly Bela Balassa's economic integration theory, as discussions on African RECs especially IGAD and their contributions to continental integration should be analyzed through both political and economic perspectives.

2.2.2.1 Customs Union Theory

Customs union theory explains the economic benefit of removing trade barriers among member states and forming a customs union in a region. it also focuses how integration increases economic welfare through mainly trade creation.

Béla Balassa is a well-known customs union theorist, widely recognized for his stages of economic integration framework. According to this framework, there are five ascending levels of economic integration: free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union, and complete economic integration (Balassa, 1961).

According to him, countries abolish trade restrictions like tariffs for member countries and maintain the tariffs for third nations on free trade area level, On the custom union level, countries establish a common tariff against the third nations. On the third level, common market is where restrictions both on trade and on factor of production are lifted. The forth level is economic union, which includes all benefits from common market plus some degree of economic policy harmonization across members. Total economic integration, the last and the highest level of economic integration, includes unifying member states' policies as well as establishing a supranational authority to make decisions (Balassa, 1961).

In Africa, it was the Casablanca bloc that tried to follow different format which aspires political integration before economic integration (Nkrumah,1963). But starting from the establishment of OAU and up to now, Africa, both in continental and regional level integration efforts like in AFCFTA and in RECs, is trying to follow Balassa's stage of economic integration process, which starts from a free trade area, a customs union, a common market, an economic union, and a complete economic integration or political union.

Therefore, the researcher argues that discussions on IGAD's integration efforts and its contribution to continental trade integration should be analyzed through the lens of Béla Balassa's Custom union theory, as it provides an essential analytical framework for understanding the level and process of trade integration in the region.

2.2.2.2.Intergovernmentalism

Intergovernmentalism is a theory of regional integration that places national governments at the very center of the process. It argues that states are the primary actors responsible for initiating, controlling, and shaping the course of integration. The foundational assumption is the primacy of the state, meaning that all significant authority and initiative remain with member governments. While there are different variants, such as realist or liberal variants, they all share the critical importance of inter-state bargains and negotiations in driving integration forward.

Under this theory, sovereignty is not transferred to any supranational authority; states retain full control over processes and decisions through intergovernmental negotiation and bargaining. Economic integration occurs only when it serves states' economic, political, or security interests, and they may reverse integration or withdraw membership.

IGAD is an intergovernmental organization, the major decisions are made through intergovernmental conferences, not by the secretariat. It is the responsibility of member states to come up with an agenda including trade integration and instruct the secretariat to implement it since everything needs interstate bargaining before being implemented at IGAD level.

So, for a researcher examining IGAD's activities and its role in continental trade integration, intergovernmentalism provides an essential analytical perspective, as it helps explain trade related political decision-making processes in the region.

2.3. Historical Overview of Integration in Africa

2.3.1 History of Regional Integration in Africa

Despite the notable differences between African states, particularly between the Casablanca and Monrovia groups, on the approach to continental integration, there is a long history of regional integration efforts in Africa. Economic integration has been the central idea in OAU/AU discussions and initiatives for long (Ajibo et al., 2021). Unlike European Union which used to believe integrated Europe will not go to war with one another (European UNION, 2018) and ASEAN which was established as an instrument to stop the spread of communism in their region (SCMP ,2020), regional integration in Africa was perceived as an instrument for safeguarding freedom gained from colonizers (Uzodike, 2009).

For decades, Africans have consistently established several legal and policy instruments, adopted policies and put in place strategies to accelerate the continent's integration. The path to African integration has been marked by a series of major initiatives and decisions. Kinshasasummit, Monrovia declaration, Lagos plan of action, Abuja Treaty, AfCFTA, New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the AU constitutive act, the Programme for

Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) and the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) are among the notable initiatives and decisions taken by African leaders to integrate and unify Africa.

On 11th Extraordinary Session of the Council of Ministers of the OAU on Economic Development and cooperation held in Kinshasa in December 1976 and 1979 Monrovia Declaration, African leaders were discussing measures for economic cooperation on sub regional, regional and continental basis in Africa during 1970s and even before (Monrovia Declaration, 1979). The Lagos Plan of Action boldly called for expansion of intra-Africa trade and encouraged to reduce trade barriers and build common market in Africa. It also stressed the need for institutions that develop capabilities for economic integration in Africa (Lagos Plan of Action, 1980).

The Abuja Treaty was a significant milestone for Africa's economic integration that established African Economic Community.During the Abuja summit, a treaty that provides principles, goals, frameworks to strengthen the integration agenda of Africa and that proposed the establishment of African economic community was singed. The Abuja treaty, was a six stage continental integration strategy which according to article 6(4) of the treaty, the Assembly shall have approved the transition from one stage to the next stage (Abuja Treaty,1991).

There were several initiatives at continental level with the purpose of speeding up Africa's multifaceted integration.NEPAD was adopted in 2001 with the objective of providing political framework to accelerate integration in Africa. The AU minimum Integration Programmme was adopted in 2009 with the aim of promoting inter-RECs harmonization and Abuja treaty implementation. The Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA) was adopted in 2012 with the objective of building integrated infrastructure specially

transportation system. As well, Agenda 2063 was adopted in 2015 with ultimate goal of attaining an integrated, developed and peaceful Africa. The Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) was adopted in 2018 with the aim of creating a unified and integrated air transport in Africa.

2.3.2 Challenges of RECs and AfCFTA Implementation

Many scholars agreed economic integration efforts in Africa have been challenged by different technical, political, institutional, economical and infrastructural challenges across regional economic blocs and at the continent level. Among the challenges, political instability and conflicts, overlapping membership of RECs and weak infrastructure across the continent are the main challenges of regional integration (Gardachew et al., 2019; Abdi &Seid, 2013).

Overlapping membership in multiple RECs results in policy duplication, conflicting trade rules, institutional competition, and significant administrative burdens all of which undermine the effectiveness of regional integration. Another major challenge is the unequal capacity and participation among member states. Less developed countries often fear being economically dominated by stronger economies, which leads to limited commitment and uneven implementation of integration policies.

Furthermore, many African countries, particularly IGAD member states, rely heavily on trade taxes to fund government operations. This dependence creates reluctance to eliminate tariffs and other trade barriers, slowing the pace of integration. The lack of coordinated economic policies such as inconsistent customs procedures and complicated cross-border trade is the other challenge. In addition, the similarity in the import and export profiles of member states limits trade complementarity, weakening the economic case for deeper integration. Poor regional

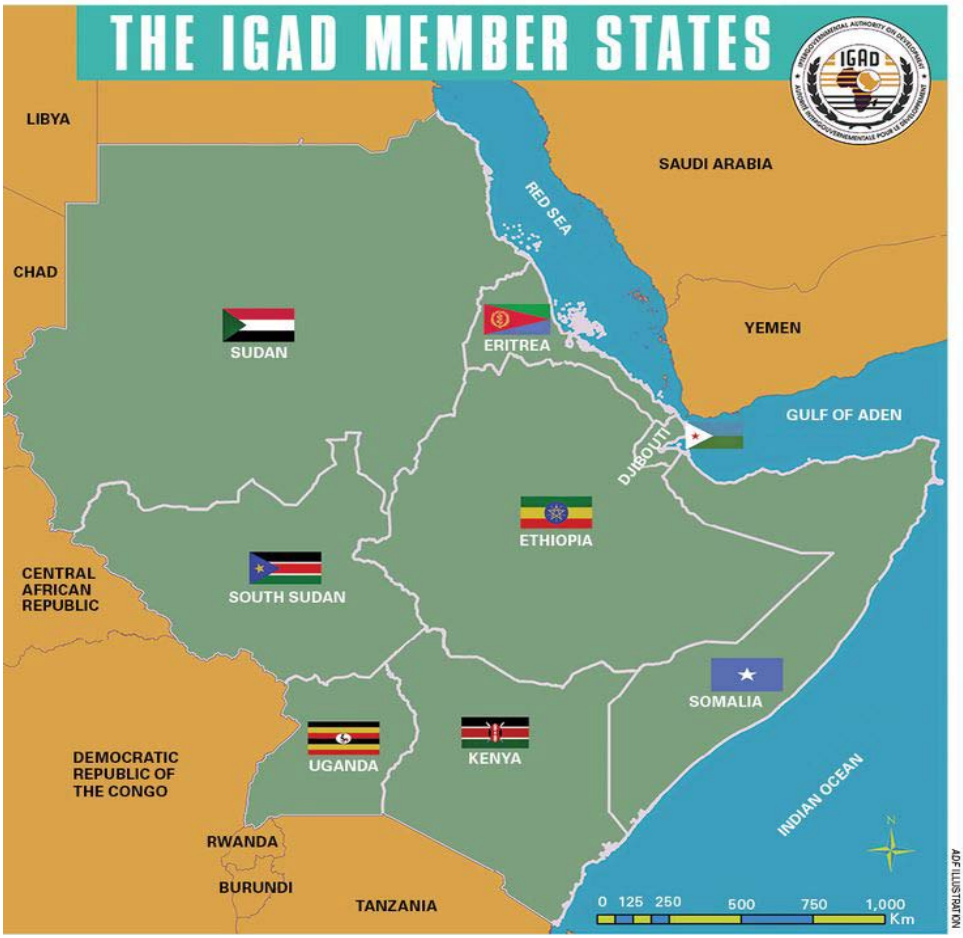
infrastructure, limited technical capacity, and external influences also remain main challenges for regional integration.

2.3.3 IGAD: Its Geography and Regional Integration

2.3.3.1 IGAD Members

IGAD Member States are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. Its main objective is economic cooperation, and integration through the elimination of barriers to trade, and the harmonization policies among member states (Uzodike, 2009).

The IGAD region covers 5.2 million km² and is home to over 230 million people. Approximately 70% of this land is classified as Arid and Semi-Arid Land (ASAL), creating significant challenges due to its harsh climate. The area experiences low, unpredictable rainfall, leading to frequent and devastating droughts and flash floods, which are exacerbated by climate change. Despite having diverse climates and agro-ecological zones, only 7% of the land is farmland. This small agricultural sector is highly vulnerable to the region's extreme rainfall variability (IGAD,2026a).



IGAD Map taken from IGAD (ICPALD) 2022 (green shaded are member countries)

2.3.3.2 Political and Security Situation in IGAD

The IGAD region remains one of Africa's most troubled regions. Border disputes exist andinstability persist, war and terrorism continue to thrive. Many countries are burdened by high debt, recurring droughts, famine, and widespread hunger. The region also faces large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), weak and fragile states, and increasing external intervention fueled by geopolitical rivalries among global powers.

Let us take Sudan and Somalia as examples to understand the current political and security situations in part of the region. Sudan, in particular, is facing a highly complex and unstable political landscape. Following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019

through a military coup, the country has experienced multiple changes in governance. Initially, a military-led government known as the Transitional Military Council (TMC) took power from April to August 2019. Then the Military entered into a power-sharing agreement with civilian leaders, leading to the formation of the Transitional Sovereign Council in August 2019.

The Transitional Sovereign Council led by Prime Minister AbdallaHamdok remained in power until October 2021, when the military seized full control, removed Hamdok, and reinstated military rule. This military dominance continued until April 2023. Since then, Sudan has been under de facto dual military leadership, with power divided between two generals.

Due to this power struggle between the two military forces, Sudan's political, economic and security situation has worsened significantly, with deepening rivalries among armed factions and growing political fragmentation. Despite numerous mediation efforts such as the Jeddah Process, African-led peace initiatives, and international sanctions targeting key leaders no meaningful progress has been achieved and heavy fighting continues across the country.

The ongoing civil war displaced millions of Sudanese, both within Sudan and across its borders, making it the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The conflict has led to mass displacement, acute hunger, disease outbreaks, and the collapse of essential services (UN Report, 2025).

Somalia is currently facing with a complex mix of political, security, and humanitarian challenges. Politically, there is significant fragmentation and ongoing tension between the federal government and regional states, with the constitutional review process being a major source of dispute.

On the security front, Al-Shabaab remains the primary threat. Despite joint efforts by the Somali National Army and the AU peace keeping forces, the group continues to hold

strongholds, mainly in central and southern Somalia. In addition to this, inter-clan conflicts, often driven by disputes over land, water, and political control, are further undermine stability in Somalia.

Beyond the political and security issues, Somalia is also experiencing recurrent droughts and flash floods, which are devastating livelihoods across the country. As a result of both man-made and natural disasters, more than 4 million people are internally displaced, and nearly 6 million are facing food insecurity (European Union, 2025).

As the primary regional organization in the Horn of Africa, IGAD has played an active role in mediating conflicts in the region. The AU (2025) recognizes IGAD as a key regional mechanism with established expertise in peace and security supported by institutions such as CEWARN. And IGAD has been coordinating mediation efforts and supporting political agreements aimed at ending conflicts in the region in general and Sudan and Somalia in particular.

But persistent crises continue due to the deeply rooted and fragmented nature of these conflicts, the limited enforcement capacity, coordination challenges with international actors, resource constraints, and divergent political interests among member states. Consequently, despite a clear commitment to regional stability, IGAD’s mediation efforts have been uneven in effectiveness and have not consistently translated into sustainable peace on the ground.

2.3.3.3 Regional Integration of IGAD

The Inter-Governmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) was established in 1986 with a mandate to address drought and desertification in the Horn of Africa. However, in 1995, member states agreed to broaden the scope of their cooperation and

restructure the organization. Following that IGADD was transformed into the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 1996 by the decision of the then member states.

The restructured IGAD was given a comprehensive mandate that includes economic cooperation and regional integration, which are vital for fostering growth and development. This expanded role aligns with the AU's objective of establishing the RECs (AEC) (IGAD Strategy, 2005) and IGAD changed its agreement in to a treaty in 2023 with a special focus of accelerating regional integration (IGAD Treaty, 2023).

According to Article 7 of the IGAD Establishment Agreement and article 3 of IGAD Treaty,

one of IGAD's key objectives is accelerate regional economic integration and harmonize policies particularly economic policies related to trade and other sectors (IGAD Agreement, 1996; IGAD Treaty, 2023). To further advance regional integration, IGAD signed the Protocol on the Relations Between the RECs. And, in 2009, IGAD developed a minimum integration plan and identified grains and livestock as priority sectors for regional integration (IGAD Minimum Integration Plan, 2009).

IGAD, one of the eight Regional Economic Communities officially recognized by the AU under the 2006 Moratorium on the Recognition of RECs (Assembly/AU/Dec.112(VII)) and a key pillar of the AfCFTA, is trying to play a role in promoting economic integration in the region. IGAD has been promoting trade liberalization, conflict resolution, policy harmonization, and infrastructure development through a gradual approach that addresses political and economic barriers. Initiatives like IGAD Integration Strategies help member states harness their collective economic potential (IGAD strategy, 2020).

IGAD holds significant potential to contribute to economic integration, stability, and prosperity in the region and beyond. But IGAD stood last in trade integration with the score of 0.49 (AU AMRII, 2021) and third from the last in economic integration with the score of 0.46 (AU ASRII, 2025) among all the eight AU recognized RECS.

2.3.3.4 The New Treaty and Institutional Framework of IGAD

In 2023, IGAD replaced its 1996 Establishment Agreement with a new treaty, reflecting its ambition to align more closely with continental integration goals. Under the 1996 Agreement, IGAD operated through four main organs: The Assembly, the Council of Ministers, the Committee of Ambassadors, and the Secretariat (IGAD Agreement, 1996). However, the 2023 Treaty introduces greater institutional flexibility by allowing the Assembly to establish additional organs whenever deemed necessary. For instance, the Assembly may create new bodies aimed at supporting the regional integration process (IGAD Treaty, 2023).

A major change introduced by the treaty relates to decision-making procedures of IGAD. While the 1996 Agreement required consensus for Assembly decisions, Article 12 of the new treaty allows decisions to be made by a simple majority on procedural matters and by a two-thirds majority on substantive matters (IGAD, 1996 &IGAD Treaty, 2023). This shift from consensus to voting mechanisms is expected to make it easier for member states to take timely decisions on critical regional integration initiatives. And more importantly, the treaty empowers IGAD to issue regulations and make binding decisions to advance regional trade integration objectives(IGAD Treaty, 2023).

IGAD has divisions responsible for agriculture and environment, health and social development, peace and security, administration and finance, planning coordination and partnership and economic cooperation and regional integration. And the treaty expands IGAD’s

scope of action. Article 24 of the treaty outlines key areas of cooperation, while Article 25 is devoted specifically to trade liberalization(IGAD Treaty, 2023).

Through the AfCFTA, IGAD and its members have significant opportunities to expand regional trade integration. To realize these, IGAD focuses on promoting cooperation in trade using its legal instruments including its new treaty and its trade policy.

2.3.3.5 IGAD and Some of Its Legal Instruments

IGAD has adopted many legal instruments, policies and strategies which align with continental integration instruments aiming to promote regional integration in the region and beyond. IGAD Establishment Agreement (1996), IGAD Regional Strategies, Protocols on the Relations Between the AU and the RECs, IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol, IGAD Regional Trade Policy Framework, IGAD Migration Policy Framework & Regional Consultative Process on Migration (RCP) and IGAD Treaty (2023) are among the instruments.

IGAD Free Movement of Persons Protocol (2020) has the objective of gradual realization of free movement of persons, along with the rights of establishment and residence across IGAD Member States and as of May 14, 2024, the protocol signed by five IGAD member countries namely Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Uganda (IGAD,2024). IGAD is also working to ensure safe and well managed migration with in the region using IGAD Regional Migration Policy Framework of 2012 and migration action plans.

Infrastructure is a vehicle for economic development and regional integration. The IGAD Regional Infrastructure Master Plan (IRIMP), which its process began in 2006 during the 11th IGAD Summit of Heads of State and Government in Nairobi, aims to enhance regional interconnectivity particularly in transport, energy, ICT, and water resources. The plan also seeks

to scale up infrastructure development across the region to support integration and sustainable growth (IGAD IRIMP, 2020).

As outlined in Article 7, the IGAD Regional Trade Policy aims to promote regional integration and sustainable development by harmonizing economic and sectoral policies, facilitating trade and the free movement of goods and people, and boosting investment. The policy also seeks to strengthen food security, protect the environment, develop infrastructure, promote peace and conflict resolution, advance science and technology, and build regional capacity (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022).

2.3.3.6 Contribution of IGAD to Regional Integration Efforts in Africa

There are more than 14 economic blocs and only 8 of them got recognition as regional economic community by AU that can serve as a building blocks for the success of continental economic integration efforts.

IGAD, as one of the AU recognized REC, is implementing projects to address problems in the region to ensure the implementation of regional integration objectives has made progress in several sectors. For example, in infrastructure development: The Lamu Port–South Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor and the Djibouti-Ethiopia-South Sudan-Uganda (DESSU) Corridor which are designed to strengthen regional integration by creating infrastructure links in the region and progressing are among the achievement of IGAD (IGAD, 2018a).

In conflict mediation efforts, IGAD played a very significant role in South Sudan peace process (IGAD, 2018b). Similarly, IGAD’s Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) has been instrumental in proactively addressing and mitigating conflicts in the region (CEWARN, 2022).

Initiatives like IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience Initiative (IDDRSI), Climate Adaptation Strategy (2023–2030) and Climate Prediction& Applications Centre (ICPAC) are contributing for the region by Strengthens resilience, nature-based solutions, climate-smart agriculture, and disaster risk reduction through the mechanisms that will have an impact on food Security and Climate Resilience in the region.

2.3.3.7 IGAD Contribution to Trade Integration and Trade Policy Harmonization

There have been trade related strategies and initiatives in IGAD since its establishment. Especially after 2003, IGAD started to harmonize policies, procedures and standards necessary to increase trade integration among the Member States in the region (IGAD LPI, 2009).

According to article 7 of IGAD's 1996 Agreement, Trade policy harmonization and trade facilitation were among the objectives of IGAD (IGAD Agreement, 1996).The Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) Framework was adopted on 21 June 2018 with the objective of harmonization of policies on cross-border trade and integrate informal trade (IGAD,2018). The IGAD Minimum Integration Plan has been focusing on harmonization of trade policies and practices among member states and eliminate barriers to trade in the region (IGAD Integration plan, 2009). The IGAD Regional Strategies are also among trade related initiatives of IGAD. The current regional strategy of IGAD has an objective of regional integration through enhanced trade and market access in the region (IGAD Strategy, 2020).

Although regional integration has been a pertinent issue and trade is a critical driver of regional integration, IGAD did not have a formal trade policy until 2022. That year, the organization introduced the IGAD Regional Trade Policy with the goal of strengthening intra-regional trade by eliminating barriers and creating a unified economic space. The policy is also designed to support member states in acceding to the WTO, aligning their trade policies with the

AfCFTA, improving market access through trade integration and regulatory reforms, and promoting a favorable environment for both domestic and foreign investment (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022).

While the IGAD Trade Policy aims to support member states in aligning their trade agendas with broader continental objectives and fostering regional economic cooperation and trade integration still major challenges persist. Economic integration is widely seen as a driver of economic development, with trade integration being a core component. This study will therefore assess IGAD's contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA, with a focus on trade integration and the harmonization of trade policies.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed in this study. It details the research design and approach, explains the sampling strategy and sample size, and describes the tools and sources for data collection. The chapter also presents the data analysis techniques, discusses ethical considerations, acknowledges the study's limitations, and explains the organization of the study.

3.2 Research Approach and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, which is well suited for in-depth exploration of complex issues (Creswell &Poth, 2018). Given the complexity of economic integration, this approach enables a deeper understanding of experts' perspectives (Denzin& Lincoln, 2011). It is particularly appropriate for analyzing IGAD's contribution to the implementation of the AfCFTA, as it allows for detailed, context-specific insights.

The study adopted a case study research design to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives on IGAD's contribution to the establishment and success of the AfCFTA. The study explored participants' insights and document analysis to examine the IGAD's contribution for the realization of the AfCFTA. To capture the complexity of the issue in depth, this research explored a wide range of sources.

3.3. Sampling Method and Sample Size

The study employed a purposive sampling, whereby participants were deliberately selected based on their experience and expertise in IGAD's contribution to the AfCFTA and

regional trade integration more broadly. To obtain the most relevant data, the researcher included experts working closely with IGAD and integration issues within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade and Regional Integration, IGAD, the AfCFTA Secretariat, the African Union commission, UNECA, the Ethiopian Embassy in Djibouti, and the Institute of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia. These participants were directly and indirectly involved in regional economic integration processes, particularly IGAD-related affairs, and possessed firsthand experience of IGAD's trade integration efforts in the region.

With regard to sample size, the study was based on 13 key informant interviews. Data saturation was achieved after the eleventh interview, as no new themes emerged beyond that point. Nevertheless, two additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation. Consequently, the final sample comprised 13 key informants.

The informants included two division heads from the IGAD Secretariat, one official from the AfCFTA Secretariat, one senior trade policy officer from AUC and one senior trade expert and integrationist researcher from UNECA. Additional participants comprised two integration experts from Ethiopia's Ministry of Trade and Regional Integration, one ambassador from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responsible for African affairs, and one senior diplomat from MFA AfCFTA Desk who also serves on the national AfCFTA negotiating team. The sample further included one senior diplomat from MFA member to Ethiopia's WTO accession negotiations team, one diplomat from the Ethiopian Embassy in Djibouti working on IGAD file, and two senior researchers specializing in the Horn of Africa from the Institute of Foreign Affairs.

3.4 Tools and Sources of Data Collection

3.4.1 Data Collection Tools

This study conducted using in depth interview and document analysis, as both effectively provide depth of insight and contextual understanding. Interviews capture detailed perspectives on participants' experiences, which are essential for understanding the complexities of regional economic integration. Document analysis complements this by examining relevant reports, policies and agreements. Together, these methods enable a comprehensive and reliable exploration of IGAD's integration efforts and its contribution for AfCFTA's realization.

The first data collection tool used was a Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). KIIs were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to enable in-depth discussions. Participants were selected based on their experienceand knowledge on IGAD's contribution to the AfCFTA on trade integration, policy harmonization, and related challenges. The interviews carried out either in person or virtually. To allow flexibility, a semi-structured interview guidedeveloped based on the research objectives and key themes identified.

The KII guideline had two sections. The first gathered demographic details, including sex, age, position, and academic rank. The second section covered open-ended questions directly linked to the research objectives. The KII guideline was pre-tested to ensure clarity, relevance, and the ability to capture meaningful insights. The semi structured interview guide included questions covering economic integration, trade and non-trade barriers, institutional formwork of IGAD, IGAD's contribution to the AfCFTA, challenges to regional integration in the IGAD region.

The second data collection tool was a document review. Secondary data were systematically synthesized from written sources, including IGAD's trade policy, the Minimum Integration Plan, strategic documents, founding agreement, AfCFTA protocols, AU initiatives,

and policy papers. Additional data drawn from scholarly works, books, and official reports. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded; otherwise, detailed notes were taken manually.

3.3.2 Method of Data Collection

The researcher employed both primary and secondary data sources and data collection methods. Primary data were gathered in the informants' natural settings using appropriate data collection approaches, while secondary data were obtained from relevant documents and other credible sources. English and Amharic were used as the languages of communication during interviews with the informants.

3.3.2.1. Primary Data

Primary data were collected directly by the researcher from purposefully selected informants using a semi-structured interview guide. To obtain first-hand information, informants were selected based on their experience with IGAD's contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA and trade integration based on their respective institution's perspective. Eleven of the thirteen informants are directly involved in trade integration, serving as desk officers, negotiators, implementers, or sector leaders. The remaining informants support trade integration indirectly: one works in IGAD's Peace and Security Division, and the other is from the Political Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Nine of the thirteen informants consented to the use of a voice recorder, and their interviews were audio-recorded, while handwritten notes were taken for the remaining four informants.

3.3.2.2. Secondary Data

The secondary data were systematically collected from books, official policy and strategic documents, including the AfCFTA Agreement and its protocols, the IGAD Trade Policy, and the AU's Agenda 2063, founding agreements, and related initiatives. Additional sources were included scholarly works, books, official reports from IGAD, the AU, UNECA, and other relevant organizations essential to this research. Archival sources from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that reveal IGAD trade integration efforts are used.

3.5 Data Analysis

This study employed thematic content analysis to systematically identify and interpret patterns in qualitative data. The analysis began with familiarization through careful reading of interview transcripts, notes, and relevant documents. Primary data from key informant interviews capturing participants' perspectives, insights, and experiences were triangulated with secondary documentary sources.

The second step involved generating initial codes manually by breaking the data into smaller chunks and labeling meaningful words, phrases, or segments of text related to the research objective. Once the data is coded, themes were identified by grouping similar codes and exploring relationships between them. These potential themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represent the data and align with the research objectives. Finally, the findings were organized by themes, with supporting evidence, such as direct quotes, used to illustrate each theme.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

Before conducting the interviews, a permission letter was taken from the Department of History and Archeology: African Studies program Addis Ababa University (AAU). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were assured that the information they provide will remain confidential and their identities will not be disclosed. Participants were informed that they do have the right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Interviews were conducted in a private, secure setting. All collected information were handled with strict confidentiality, responsibility, and care.All audio recordings were transferred to a flash disk and securely stored in a private locker together with the written notes.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This study examines IGAD's contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA, including its policy alignment and harmonization with AfCFTA objectives, institutional framework and capacity to promote trade integration, and the role of stakeholder engagement in supporting implementation. It also examined the key challenges that limit IGAD's contribution to AfCFTA implementation. The analysis is based on in-depth interviews with key informants from different sectors and document analysis, guided by the study's objectives. Findings are organized under major thematic areas aligned with the research objectives.

4.2. Demographic Data and Data Sources

As a primary source of data, a total of 13 key informant interviewees (KIIs) from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia (MFA), Ministry of Trade and Regional Integration (MoTRI), Institute of Foreign Affairs (IFA), AUC, UNECA, IGAD, AfCFTA and Ethiopian Embassy in Djibouti wereinterviewed (see Annex 3)

The secondary data were systematically collected from official policy and strategic documents, including the AfCFTA Agreement and its protocols, the IGAD Trade Policy, and the AU's Agenda 2063, founding agreements, reports from IGAD, the AU, and UNECA.

4.3 The Contribution of IGAD to the Realization of the AfCFTA

The AfCFTA is widely recognized as a cornerstone of Africa's economic development and a transformative driver of trade integration. Its implementation is therefore a top priority under the continental Agenda 2063 framework. The effectiveness of the agreement largely depends on the ability of RECs to align and harmonize their policies with its objectives, making them indispensable partners in its realization.

IGAD's contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA was explored into two dimensions: first, its contribution to the formation of AfCFTA, and second, its ongoing efforts to support effective implementation of AfCFTA. And with regard to the contribution of IGAD to the realization of the AFCFTA, three themes were identified including: its founding role; its facilitation and implementation role; and its efforts toward policy harmonization amid overlapping state memberships as follows.

4.3.1 IGAD's Contribution for the Establishment of AfCFTA

All the eight AU recognized RECs, in line with the 2006 AU moratorium, took part in the AfCFTA negotiations. However, "Their (RECs), including IGAD, contribution to the establishment of AfCFTA was minimal ...they participated only as observer during the negotiations, without decision making authority and voting power" (KII 2).

IGAD has been a member of the African Union Task Force on the AfCFTA, a technical task force established by the AU and contributed to the establishment of AfCFTA by assisting in the preparation of key documents that were later tabled for member states negotiation. And IGAD also supported its member states during the negotiation phase, through technical, logistical, and coordination assistance (KII8).

Article 5 of the AfCFTA agreement designates RECs that have achieved FTA status as foundational building blocks. Furthermore, Article 8 of the Protocol on Trade in Goods specifies that only RECs that have established an FTA or higher may be maintained (AfCFTA Agreement, 2018). This indicates that the AfCFTA is built upon the progress, experience, and achievements of RECs that have successfully implemented FTAs.

Although some IGAD members belong to FTAs through other RECs (e.g., Kenya and Uganda in the EAC), IGAD as a REC has not yet achieved a free trade area level of integration (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022). Therefore, as per the agreement, IGAD is not formally considered as a building bloc and does not have such practice and experience to be maintained for AfCFTA.

In conclusion, though the IGAD's role in the negotiation and establishment of the AfCFTA was not as decisive as that of the member states who directly negotiated and vote the agreement, IGAD contributed to the establishment of AfCFTA by assisting in the preparation of key documents that were later tabled for negotiation as a member of a technical task force. And assisted member states through technical, logistical, and coordination assistance. As a result, "its member states except Eritrea, were active participants and signed the agreement of AfCFTA" (KII 7). However, as per the agreement, IGAD itself was not considered as a building bloc under the AfCFTA and lacks the institutional experience to be maintained.

4.3.2 Ongoing Contribution of IGAD to the Implementation of AfCFTA

IGAD has been playing a role in facilitating the AfCFTA implementation process at the regional level and advocated for the signing and ratification of the Agreement to its member states.According to the AfCFTA protocols on Trade in Goods and Services, all RECs are empowered to play a coordination role. For example, according to article 29 of the Protocol on

trade in goods,RECs are empowered to give technical assistance and capacity building for member states for successful implementation of the agreement (AfCFTA Agreement, 2018). So IGAD's primary function is to provide ongoing technical assistance and support to its member states, helping them to implement AfCFTA obligations and align regional initiatives with the wider continental framework (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022).

As KII 5 stated“the region’s poor policy harmonization, minimal intra-regional trade, lack of clear and harmonized standards, limited cross-border mobility, and fragile interstate relations put IGAD far from positively influencing the AfCFTA implementation in the region” **(**KII 5).

According to KII 6, IGAD’s contribution to AfCFTA implementation in the region is mixed. On the positive side, IGAD serves as a stepping stone for AfCFTA through its work in economic integration, infrastructure development, power connectivity, maritime management, and peace and security. However, intra-regional trade within IGAD remains very low, policy harmonization has not been achieved, and the region has yet to establish a Free Trade Area. Compared with other RECs, IGAD is lagging behind, which may adversely affect AfCFTA implementation (KII 6).

As stated by KII7, “IGAD mainstreamed AfCFTA objectives into its regional trade policy and supported member states’ awareness, technical assistance, policy alignment and national strategy development for AfCFTA implementation” (KII 7). The interviewee also stated that IGAD is assisting member states on rules of origin, trade facilitation matters, national strategy development and validation workshops for AfCFTA implementation. In addition to this, IGAD

also mainstreamed AfCFTA objectives into its regional trade policy and support member states to implement their obligation arising from implementation of AfCFTA (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022).

In general, there were mixed views on IGAD's contribution to the implementation of AfCFTA in this study. The first view was IGAD's positive contribution to the implementation of AfCFTA. IGAD serves as a stepping stone for AfCFTA implementation through its initiatives in economic integration, infrastructure, power connectivity, maritime management, and peace and security. It has also mainstreamed AfCFTA objectives into its regional trade policy and assisted member states through awareness creation, technical support, policy alignment, and national strategy development.

On the other hand, IGAD's contribution to the implementation of AfCFTA was viewed as very limited since there is very minimal market integration in the region. IGAD's contribution to AfCFTA implementation remains minimal, and regional trade integration activities are still marginal. The region continues to lag behind in trade integration and intra-regional trade (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022; AU AMRII, 2021). Furthermore, IGAD member states consistently import more than they export, leading to a persistent trade deficit (IGAD, 2023). As Erasmus (2021) stated the region's economic integration progress is too slow and the region has yet to establish a free trade area as IGAD. The African Multidimensional Regional Integration Index (AMRII, 2021) ranks IGAD second to last in average integration and in trade integration, IGAD is the lowest performer across in all AU recognized RECs in Africa.

According to IGAD (2024) there is a small increase in intra-regional trade in the region. For example, the intra-regional exports have risen from 12.8% in 2015 to over 15% in 2023 (IGAD,2024). However, there is limited evidence that this increase can be attributed to the

concrete processes and capacities of IGAD. As KII9 stated “the small progress in the intra-regional trade and export is due to bilateral and country level efforts not at IGAD level**.** IGAD’s substantive contribution to AfCFTA implementation is minimal, and progress in regional economic integration remains marginal”(KII 9).

According to AU report IGAD has achieved limited substantive impact on intra-regional trade, as common standards and tariffs are lacking, and coordinated effects remain absent (AU Report, 2025). IGAD is not a primary driver of regional economic integration, but rather plays a facilitator and supportive role.In contrast, some of its member states, as primary driver, have individually taken active steps and exerted influence on the implementation process.

“Though there is a limitation of IGAD in terms of policy harmonization, intra-regional trade, harmonized standards, cross-border mobility, security constraints and on establishing a Free Trade Area, IGAD is performing well with regard to its particular task, given by AfCFTA protocol and its trade policy, of giving technical assistance and capacity building for member states and positively contributing AfCFTA implementation by assisting its member states in putting the agreement into practice” (KII7).

But although IGAD’s policies and strategies are broadly aligned with AfCFTA frameworks, there remains a significant gap in implementation. For instance, despite IGAD’s trade policy being designed to assist member states in implementing the AfCFTA, only six African countries have yet to ratify the Agreement, and one has not signed it. Notably, three of the non-ratifying states and the single non-signatory are IGAD members. Out of IGAD’s eight member states, Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia remain outside the AfCFTA implementation framework (AFCFTA, 2026). Similarly, while IGAD’s trade policy also supposed to support member states in joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), nine African

countries are not yet members and five of which are again in the IGAD region: Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and Sudan (WTO, 2026). So the region's trade integration effort is too low at regional, continental and global level.

The low level of trade integration and IGAD's limited contribution to the AfCFTA stem from both institutional weaknesses within the IGAD Secretariat and a lack of commitment from member states. On the institutional side, "the Secretariat is understaffed, lack of smart management of resources though there is resource constrains" (KII7), "gives insufficient priority to trade integration" (KII13), and "has effectively outsourced its trade mandate to COMESA" (KII9). More fundamentally, the problem lies with the member states. "If the IGAD Summit were to adopt a clear trade integration agenda and provide adequate resources, the Secretariat would be able to lead the process. The absence of such political direction is the core constraint on IGAD's integration agenda originates from the member states themselves" (KII9).This is largely due to weak commitment from member states.

In conclusion, regional economic integration and policy harmonization is one of the main objectives of IGAD (IGAD Treaty, 2023: IGAD Trade Policy, 2022) and IGAD is also empowered by the AfCFTA agreement to give technical assistance and capacity building for member states for successful implementation of the AfCFTA in the region (AfCFTA Agreement, 2018). In line with this, IGAD's primary role is to support its member states in implementing AfCFTA obligations and aligning regional initiatives with the continental framework (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022). So IGAD is mandated to support and coordinate trade integration efforts in the region.

Despite this mandate, IGAD's practical engagement in trade integration remains limited. And IGAD's substantive impact on intra-regional trade remains very limited (AU Report, 2025).

Key informant noted that “IGAD has been absent” (KII 10) in advancing trade integration, and “that it has effectively outsourced its trade mandate to COMESA through a memorandum of understanding” (KII 9). As a result, progress in regional trade integration, including AfCFTA implementation, has been minimal within the IGAD region.

4.3.3 IGAD’s Policy Harmonization to AfCFTA Objectives: Policy Harmonization Vs Overlapping Membership

IGAD, as oneof the African Union recognized REC, is expected to support the realization of the AfCFTA’sobjectives through policy harmonization within the region. According to article 24 of the new IGAD treaty, IGAD changed its security focused cooperation to a holistic cooperation. Its objective is cooperation and integration. On its vision and strategy, it places economic integration, trade, infrastructure and resilient livelihoods at the Centre (Vision2050, IGAD Treaty, 2023 & Regional Strategy 2021–2025). According to AfCFTA Protocol on trade in goods, IGAD is mandated in facilitating AfCFTA implementation and as REC, has a mandate to promote regional economic integration, reduce barriers to trade, and coordinate member-state policies to leverage continental integration (AfCFTA Agreement, 2018).

“And IGAD is using mechanisms like regional policy frameworks, technical working groups, sectoral institutions like ICPALD for livestock, pilot cross-border projects like one-stop border posts, regional business forums and capacity-building in its effort to harmonize the regional policies and standards” (KII 7).

However, “the current trade integration and policy harmonization in the region remains minimal and there is no specialized body mandated to facilitate trade or to resolve trade-related disputes” (KII 5). According to KII1, “Regional integration has two dimensions soft/policy level

harmonization and hard/infrastructural harmonization.And IGAD is relatively good at hard/infrastructural harmonization and integration. But policy uniformity is still far to achieve in the region" (KII 1). Additionally, "Policy harmonization is at infant level in the region" (KII 6).

With regard to policy alignment, the IGAD trade policy is designed to support member states in acceding to the WTO, aligning their trade policies with the AfCFTA, improving market access through trade integration and regulatory reforms (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022). Its documents and activities covering areas such as trade facilitation, services, rules of origin, and sectoral integration are structured to reflect AfCFTA frameworks. IGAD has aligned its trade policies and regional strategies with the AfCFTA and its objectives, notably, IGAD's Regional Trade Policy explicitly states that one of its objectives is to support member states in implementing the AfCFTA objectives in the region (IGAD Trade Policy, 2022).

As KII7 stated, IGAD is executing its mandates with regard to helping countries aligning their trade policies with the AfCFTA goals and objectives through policy development, capacity building, technical assistance for national AfCFTA strategies, and sectoral projects in the region. The level of alignment differs between policy intent and actual practice, both within IGAD and at the member state level. In practice, alignment is uneven because implementation depends on national capacity and REC obligations (KII 7).

"Overlapping REC membership is a major constraint on IGAD's regional policy harmonization efforts, affecting integration more than tariff and non-tariff barriers and administrative delays" (KII 1). Among IGAD's eight member states, four belong to the EAC, four to CEN-SAD, and seven to COMESA and this leads to issues such as "Policy inconsistencies, administrative and financial burdens, fragmented integration processes, conflicting trade commitments, weakened negotiating power, delays in AfCFTA implementation,

and in some cases, political strains in the region (KII 7).” similarly, due to duplication of membership, countries are engaging in same level of integration frameworks across different RECs in the region.

As KII1 stated Overlapping membership is a problem almost everywhere including in WTO system. But overlapping in IGAD region is threating not only the integration process but also challenging IGAD to discharge its mandate (KII 1). There are also priority issues, “Countries in the region are prioritizing their obligations with more advanced, in terms of integration level, RECs than IGAD” (KII 10).

“IGAD is using mechanisms such as mapping member states’ REC commitments, promoting policy coherence via coordination platforms and policy briefs, prioritizing technical harmonization where overlaps occur, and encouraging joint implementation modalities that respect existing REC frameworks while aligning with AfCFTA as a mechanism to address overlapping memberships of its member states in multiple RECs” (KII 7).However, progress in policy harmonization remains limited. As noted, “There is not a lot of harmonization work being done in terms of trade” (KII 10). So, though the efforts of IGAD to harmonize policies and integrate the economy, IGAD’s economic integration progress has been slow (Erasmus, 2021) and the economy remain fragmented (Leshoele 2019).

In general, IGAD is working to harmonize policies and promote trade integration within its region as clearly stated in its vision statements and strategic documents, such as Vision 2050, and the 2021–2025 Regional Strategy and IGAD is also mandated to facilitate implementation of AfCFTA in the region. However, in this study it has indicated that IGAD has made limited progress in policy harmonization, which remains at an infant stage. the central and enduring

challenge for this limited progress is the overlapping membership of IGAD member states in multiple RECs.

The problem of overlapping membership in IGAD extends beyond operational inefficiencies and is threating the organization's very existence. Some member states are in internal conflict and some others are prioritizing their financial commitments to other RECs which are more advanced than IGAD like EAC, and fail to pay their assessed contributions and arrears to IGAD. For example, as KII11 stated “Uganda has an arrear of 14 million USD of IGAD assessed contribution but zero arrears of EAC which shows where its priority and commitment is” (KII11). This financial neglect, compounded by the region's other challenges, makes the issue of overlapping membership distinct in both nature and severity for IGAD compared to other regional blocs. Consequently, trade integration within IGAD remains deeply fragmented and uneven, preventing the collective progress envisioned by its agreements.

4.4. Institution and Challenges of IGAD

Institutional capacity and frameworks are central to IGAD’s efforts to promote trade integration in the region. However, various challenges continue to hinder IGAD’s ability to effectively assist its member states in implementing the objectives of the AfCFTA. Specifically, the analysis examines IGAD’s human and institutional capacity, its institutional framework, and the role and significance of stakeholder participation, while also highlighting the major obstacles limiting IGAD’s effectiveness. Together, these dimensions provide valuable insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and evolving nature of IGAD’s institutional arrangements and their overall contribution to regional trade integration.

For this objective, the researcher identified three key themes namely institutionalframework and capacity of IGAD, stakeholder engagement, and challenges that affecting AfCFTA implementation in the region.

4.4.1 Institutional Framework and Capacity of IGAD

According to the IGAD Treaty (2023), the organization comprises the following main organs: The Assembly of Heads of State and Government, the Council of Ministers, the Committee of Ambassadors, and the Secretariat. The Treaty also allows for the establishment of additional organs or procedures by the Assembly as necessary.

The Secretariat is the main implementing body for regional integration. And the secretariat is composed of five divisions namely the Agriculture and Environment Division, Health and Social Development Division, Economic Cooperation and Regional Integration Division, Peace and Security Division, and Corporate Development Services Division (IGAD Report, 2023). The Division of Economic Cooperation and Regional Integration is responsible for IGAD's work on regional economic integration, with a focus on trade integration and policy harmonization, industry, tourism, and infrastructure (IGAD, 2026b). This division plays a central role in promoting trade integration and harmonizing trade policies and business codes among IGAD member states.

Major decisions on the implementation of the AfCFTA are taken at the African Union (AU) level, through the Assembly of Heads of State and Government and the Council of

Ministers. The AfCFTA Secretariat is responsible for administrative, coordination, and technical functions to support the implementation of these binding AU decisions. And only AU member states are parties to the AfCFTA agreement. RECs are implementing partners rather than legal parties to the AfCFTA. Their role is to support and facilitate implementation, as AfCFTA implementation builds on existing REC trade arrangements like FTAs. In this context, IGAD is an implementing partner to the AfCFTA Secretariat and member states, mainly supporting facilitation and capacity building.

IGAD and AfCFTA have multifaceted relationship mandated by the Abuja Treaty, the AU Constitutive Act, the AfCFTA Agreement, the 2019 Revised Protocol on Relations between the AU and RECs, and related policy and legal instruments. And the AfCFTA works with particularly responsible institutions for trade in member states and RECs. And "economic cooperation and regional integration division of IGAD which composed of Trade subdivisions lead the trade integration in the region" (KII 7). So, it is this subdivision especially working closely to implement the AfCFTA objectives in the region more than other divisions.

"On peace and Security Division, IGAD has specialized institutions like Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN), IGAD Security Sector Programme (IGAD SSP) and IGAD Centre of Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (ICEPCVE), but no such specialized institution dedicated for Trade integration" (KII 3).

The capacity of RECs to support AfCFTA implementation depends on their level of integration and existing trade arrangements. Given that "IGAD has been largely absent in trade integration, its current trade framework remains weak, resulting in a limited contribution to AfCFTA implementation in the region" (KII 10). In contrast, other RECs that have achieved FTA

status or higher levels of integration have more well-structured trade arrangements and are performing better. For instance, the EAC, having reached the level of a customs union and possessing relatively adequate resources and structure, is able to engage with the AfCFTA process even as a negotiating bloc, with its existing trade arrangements serving as a building block for AfCFTA implementation.

According to IGAD treaty 2023, the IGAD trade policy 2022, the IGAD vision 2050 and other documents, IGAD is broadening its area of cooperation specially give focus on economic integration. Though there is a plan to increase intra trade in the region, the implementation of trade integration in the region is limited. “IGAD does not have a strong institutional trade arrangement and capacity to implement its plan into practice” (KII 6) and “the trade section within IGAD is critically understaffed, with only one trade expert currently managing trade related activities at IGAD and supporting member states, the trade sub section is also under funded” (KII 7).

According to this study, there were two views on how to enhance IGAD’s contribution in implementing the AfCFTA and trade integration in the region: the first view was to establish a new trade center, while the second one was strengthening the existing division of economic cooperation and regional integration. Furthermore, the Secretariat's capacity is hampered by its heavy dependence on external funding and inconsistent contributions from member states. As a result, creating a new trade center may be difficult given IGAD’s significant funding shortages.

Although IGAD has positioned itself to promote trade integration in the region and aligning its objectives with AfCFTA objectives, resource constraints continue to hinder effective implementation. For example, “Capacity gaps and financial shortfalls have limited both the scale and pace of trade integration initiatives” (KII 7).“The Secretariat is heavily dependent on

external funding, and also member states are inconsistent in paying their contributions and arrears" (KII 10). Consequently, IGAD's capacity for financial, human, and technical capacity remains very limited and its trade arrangement is unexperienced.

Regional integration within IGAD is guided by several key legal and policy instruments. These include the Treaty of IGAD, the IGAD Regional Trade Policy, and the IGAD Minimum Integration Plan (MIP), which also incorporates sectoral measures such as the Livestock MIP. Other important frameworks are the legal modalities for One-Stop Border Posts, cross-border trade facilitation tools, the Regional Infrastructure Master Plan (RIMP), and the AfCFTA implementation strategies developed both by IGAD and its member states. In addition, instruments such as the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance and the Free Movement of Persons are highly relevant for advancing regional integration though the "practical implementation remains slow (AU integration Report, 2025, P.18)".

In conclusion, IGAD has adopted several frameworks and is making considerable efforts to advance trade integration in the region.the IGAD Division of Economic Cooperation and Regional Integration is tasked with trade integration and is the primary division working to implement the AfCFTA agreement within the region. And IGAD has no specialized institutions for trade integration. The integration process in the region is hampered by reasons like human, and financial constraints along with limited concrete effortsand weak institutional arrangement to trade integration. and although IGAD is giving more attention to economic integration than in the past, its impact remainslimited and symbolic rather than substantive.

4.4.2. Stakeholder Engagement and Coordination

Effective stakeholder participation is essential for successful AfCFTA implementation and regional trade integration. In the IGAD region, involving stakeholders is particularly

important to overcome AfCFTA implementation challenges. These stakeholders include national governments, IGAD itself, other RECs, the private sector, civil society organizations, and development partners that provide technical and financial support for implementation.

According to the IGAD Stakeholder Engagement Plan (2023) there are primary stakeholders and secondary stakeholders. These that may be affected positively or negatively, and directly or indirectly by the implementation of the AfCFTA is a primary stakeholders and these with a chance to influence the outcome of the agreement including development partners are secondary stakeholders (IGAD, 2023).

According to the key informant 7 “IGAD has established mechanisms to promote stakeholder participation in AfCFTA implementation. These include national validation workshops, regional business forums, public private dialogues, technical committees involving customs and standards agencies, and multi-stakeholder validation of country AfCFTA strategies”. However, “as an intergovernmental organization, IGAD remains largely state-driven, and private sector participation in practice is limited” (KII 1) and “developmental partners participate better than other stakeholders (KII11). This shows that, despite the existence of stakeholder participation mechanisms, IGAD’s actual engagement with non-state stakeholders remains weak, with member states retaining the primary role in decision-making and implementation. But, the effective implementation of the AfCFTA depends on strengthening the meaningful participation of key stakeholders, especially the private sector. As noted by KII 8, “for the private sector to become competitive in the region and to benefit from AfCFTA, it must be actively engaged in the process and its capacities must be strengthened”.

The region and the continent are pursuing gradual, stage-by-stage integration consistent with Béla Balassa’s theory of economic integration (Balassa, 1961). At each stage, stakeholder

participation especially from the private sector is essential to ensure sustainable progress. For example, identifying and addressing existing trade barriers in the region would be nearly impossible without the active involvement of private sector stakeholders. Unless the private sector participates and build trust and capacity, realizing the AfCFTA implementation and maximizing the benefits of a free trade area will be difficult.

In conclusion, stakeholder participation in IGAD's AfCFTA implementation efforts exists but remains insufficient and largely oriented toward development partners rather than the private sector. Despite existing coordination mechanisms, private sector engagement is weak; without stronger emphasis on its participation and capacity building, AfCFTA implementation in the IGAD region is unlikely to be effective or sustainable.

4.4.3.Challenges Limit IGAD's Contribution to AfCFTA Implementation

IGAD's effective contribution to AfCFTA implementation is constrained by both general trade integration challenges and IGAD specific challenges of regional trade integration. Unharmonized trade policies (World Bank, 2020), political and security challenges (IGAD, 2021), weak institutions, low levels of intra-regional trade (UNCTAD, 2019), varying stages of integration among African RECs (Erasmus, 2021; UNCTAD, 2019), poverty and instability, and difficulties in aligning with AfCFTA protocols and frameworks (AU, 2018) are among the general trade integration challenges that also constrain IGAD's contribution to AfCFTA implementation.

Coming to IGAD major specific challenges, inconsistent payment of assessed contributions and the accumulation of arrears by member states constitute the most pressing challenge limiting IGAD's contribution to AfCFTA implementation. Only three of IGAD's eight

member states pay their contributions regularly (Africa Intelligence, 2025), and “member countries are paying their assessed contribution regularly to more advanced RECs, such as the EAC, and postpone contributions to IGAD due to mainly national interests and priorities” (KII10). Notably, “this has left IGAD in general, and the trade division in particular, underfunded and understaffed, with only one permanent trade expert” (KII7). This indicates that, both in history and at present, trade has not been given adequate emphasis within IGAD. Unless the Assembly allocates sufficient resources for trade integration and instruct the secretariat to work hard on the integration aspect, “IGAD faces a huge risk of lagging behind in the AfCFTA implementation and missing AfCFTA related opportunities (KII 5).”

The second challenge limiting IGAD’s contribution to AfCFTA implementation is its weak trade integration arrangement. According to the AfCFTA Agreement (2018), only the practices and experiences of RECs that have established an FTA or higher can be maintained. Since IGAD has not established an FTA, it lacks a common trade arrangement like FTAthat could serve as a base for AfCFTA implementation. Consequently, IGAD start with limited resources and experience, unlike the EAC, which has already established a customs union, that its experience and structure can help for the implementation of AfCFTA in its region.

The third challenge limiting IGAD’s contribution to AfCFTA implementation is the overlapping REC membership of its member states. Multiple memberships particularly in COMESA, EAC, IGAD, and CEN-SAD create duplication and conflicting trade rules, institutional competition, and significant administrative burdens. These challenges undermine the effectiveness of IGAD in advancing trade integration, which in turn weakens the implementation of the AfCFTA in the region. And most concerning is, countries are giving greater priority to their commitment to more advanced RECs, like EAC, than IGAD.

The fourth challenge restricting IGAD's role in AfCFTA implementation lies in mistrust and limited private sector engagement, “characterized by mistrust among member states” (KII 5) and “minimal stakeholder participation in the AfCFTA implementation” (KII 1). These trust gaps erode political commitment to regional trade integration and weaken intergovernmental cooperation, while simultaneously discouraging cross-border private sector involvement. This dual effect severely limits IGAD’s contribution and effectiveness in facilitating AfCFTA implementation in the region.

According to the informants (KII5 & KII6), lack of political will, divergent macroeconomic and regulatory environments, inadequate infrastructure, absence of policy harmonization and standardization, limited technical, financial, and human capacity, as well as the prevalence of war, conflict, among member states are also among the challenges of trade integration in the region which have effects on IGAD’s contribution for the AfCFTA implementation. Moreover, “member states of IGAD namely Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan have not ratified the AfCFTA, and Eritrea is not a signatory” (KII 2), which further complicates the regional implementation of the AfCFTA within the IGAD region.

The tariff liberalization schedule under the AfCFTA has a common starting date of 1 January 2021, all member states are expected to follow the same timeline. For instance, member countries are required to liberalize 90% of their tariff lines within the specified transition period given according to their level of development based on the agreement. Therefore, countries that not ratified the agreement and yet to submit their tariff offers for goods and services risk accumulating backlogs, and facing pressure to meet the grace period and implementation schedule set according to the agreement. As seen in other regional free trade areas, such as the EAC, late comers often struggle to secure an equitable share of market opportunities compared

to early participants. So without decisive action, the region risks falling behind since all countries have a common starting point.

If this trend continues, the AfCFTA may struggle to stay on course and achieve its projected economic outcomes. For instance, the UNECA (2025) projects that intra-African trade could increase by 45% by 2045 as a result of the integrated market fostered through AfCFTA's efforts to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers. However, if the IGAD region lags behind in implementation, these projections and the broader benefits of continental integration may not be fully realized.

In conclusion, IGAD's contribution to the implementation of the AfCFTA is constrained by a range of interconnected challenges. Key challenges include inconsistent payment of assessed contributions by member states, overlapping REC memberships, weak trade integration arrangement, mistrust among member states and limited private sector engagement are among the major challenges that limit the contribution of IGAD for the AfCFTA implementation in the region.

Divergent customs systems and tariff regimes, limited technical capacity, low levels of intra-regional trade, inadequate infrastructure, and resource constraints further limit IGAD's contribution to AfCFTA implementation. These challenges are compounded by macroeconomic disparities, conflicts, duplication of initiatives, and the inefficient use of scarce resources. As a result, economic integration in the IGAD region remains limited.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main objective of this research was to assess IGAD's contribution to the realization of the AfCFTA in the region. Based on the data analysis, the key conclusions and recommendations are presented below.

6.1 Conclusion

Through an analysis of primary data from key informant interviews and secondary policy documents, the research evaluated IGAD's contribution across themes: its role in the AfCFTA's establishment, its ongoing support for implementation, and its institutional capacity amid significant regional challenges. The main conclusion is that while IGAD has a formal mandate given by continental and regional legal instruments including its new treatythat demonstrates policy intent to support continental integration, its practical contribution to advancing the AfCFTA within its region has been marginal, symbolic, and severely constrained by structural, institutional, and political-economic factors. This implies IGAD's actual contribution to AfCFTA implementation has been limited.

The conclusionconfirms that IGAD's contribution, in the realization of AfCFTA, has been fundamentally supportive rather than decisive. During the AfCFTA's formation, IGAD participated as a member of the AU's technical task force, participated in document preparation and logistical support to member states. However, IGAD participated as an observer without decision-making authority. More critically, the AfCFTA legal architecture designates RECs with established FTA as foundational building blocks. As IGAD itself has not achieved an FTA, it is not formally recognized as such a bloc within the AfCFTA framework. This status relegates

IGAD to a peripheral position, lacking the institutional experience and trade arrangements that RECs like EAC leverage to drive implementation. Consequently, IGAD's contribution is inherently limited by its own low level of regional trade integration.

This study also showed gap between IGAD's strategic documents including the trade policy and substantive trade integration outcomes. IGAD has proactively aligned its core documents such as its Regional Trade Policy and Vision 2050with AfCFTA objectives. It has mainstreamed the AfCFTA into its agenda and undertakes facilitative activities, including technical assistance, capacity-building workshops, and support for national strategy development. Despite these efforts, substantive progress remains limited. Intra-IGAD trade remains among the lowest of all African RECs, policy harmonization is described as being at an "infant stage," and tangible market integration is minimal. Evidence suggests that modest increases in intra-regional trade are attributable to bilateral or national efforts, not IGAD-led initiatives. This implementation deficit underscores the need for policy alignment and harmonization and effective condition for effective regional trade integration.

The study identifies interconnected challenges that fundamentally limits IGAD's effectiveness in its contribution in the realization of AfCFTA, which the problem of non-payment of assessed contributions, overlapping REC memberships, lacks a regional free trade arrangement,mistrust among member states and weak private-sector engagement emerging as primary structural obstacles. Which exacerbated by a severe lack of political will and financial commitment from member states. This financial neglect has leaving the IGAD Secretariat, and particularly its trade unit, critically under-resourced and understaffed. In addition to this that half of IGAD's members are not yet parties to the AfCFTA agreement which paralyzes regional

coordination. These factors collectively create an environment where grand continental ambitions are challenged by harsh local realities.

The institutional analysis reveals a Secretariat operating with a profound capacity gap. The Economic Cooperation and Regional Integration Division, tasked with trade, is constrained by dependency on irregular member state contributions and volatile external funding. Notably, IGAD has no specialized institution dedicated to trade integration, unlike its well-established bodies for peace and security. As interviewees stressed, an intergovernmental organization like IGAD cannot act without a clear mandate and resources from its members. But based on the current arrangement the expectation to support AfCFTA implementation is not matched by the empowerment to do so.Without foundational changes, IGAD's role in the AfCFTA will remain one of symbolic alignment rather than substantive assistance. If these constraints persist, the IGAD region risks missing the transformative economic opportunities the AfCFTA promises.

6.2. Recommendations

1. AfCFTA was signed in 2018 and the need to develop AfCFTA specific national strategies was adopted in the same year. But the IGAD region still faces significant gaps in the trade integration, four of Africa's seven non-party states to the AfCFTA and five of nine non-members of the WTO are found within IGAD region. The region is the most fragmented and isolated.

   So to reverse this trend, the renewed momentum around AfCFTA related trade integration in the region should be harnessed, and, the IGAD Secretariat should providea clear and funded mandate with stable resources to serve as a point of policy coordination in order to enable member states to actively engage in both the AfCFTA and broader global

tradeintegration initiatives. And IGAD have to work to bringing all member states into the AfCFTA trade integration effort as a basic prerequisite for coherent regional integration.

2. The contribution of IGAD to the AfCFTA implementation has to be enhanced and there are two views on how to enhance IGAD's contribution in implementing the AfCFTA in the region. These are through establishing a new trade center or strengthening the existing mechanism and division. However, given IGAD's severe funding constraints, creating a new institution, trade center, may not be feasible. A more practical approach would be to optimize resource management and reinforce the existing trade structure to effectively support AfCFTA implementation in the region.

   Leveraging existing AfCFTArelated frameworks and resources to initiate the development of an IGAD FTA can also enhance the implementation of the AfCFTA across the region.

3. Overlapping membership is affecting the integration process more than tariff and non-tariff barriers and administration delays in the region (KII 1). It poses a significant threat to the very existence of IGAD.IGAD cannot continue to rely solely on the financial contributions of a few member states and external donors for long. To remain relevant, action must come from the IGAD Assembly which have the legal mandate and political commitment to do so, not the Secretariat. On this regard, two main paths can be considered. The first option is, all member states should fulfill their assessed financial contributions and demonstrate a strong commitment to strengthening IGAD trade arrangement. If not, the second optionis to pursue strategic collaboration with other RECs preferably the EAC based on the principle of complementarity which this aligns with the

AU’s vision of building strong and coherent RECs as the foundations of continental integration. IGAD may focus on its niche in peace and security, while the EAC takes the lead on trade and economic integration, as both RECs have the political commitment, legal and institutional arrangement, and experience in their respective areas.Otherwise IGAD risks losing its relevance, as member states shift their focus and allegiance towards the advanced level of RECs where they perceive stronger commitment and more tangible benefits.

4. According to article 24 of the treaty, IGAD has 17 area of cooperation and it is trying to deal with almost everything which is not a wise decision. “The more the issues are broader, it will affect the very management of the secretariat and the organization itself (KII 10).” Given the critical budget deficit of IGAD, 17 areas of cooperation are much, the organization should focus on handful of areas of cooperation and trade integrationshould be prioritized as one of its core area of cooperation.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questionnaires

Part One: Biography Data

1. Age

2. Sex
3. Educational level
4. Employment Status
5. Position
6. Place of Residence

Part Two: Semi Structured Questionnaires

About IGAD's Contribution for AfCFTA,

7. In what ways has IGAD participated in the AfCFTA's establishment and rollout phases?
8. How has IGAD's regional integration agenda influenced AfCFTA's progress in the Horn of Africa?
9. What measures has IGAD taken to promote intra-regional trade and what legal instruments has IGAD developed or implemented to support AfCFTA commitments?
10. How does IGAD harmonize trade policies, standards, and regulations among its member states? How do differences in trade regimes among member states are affecting integration?
11. How are IGAD's trade-related programs and initiatives linked to AfCFTA objectives and protocols?
12. What is IGAD's mandate and strategic approach in facilitating the implementation of the AfCFTA Objective in the region?
13. How does IGAD navigate the complexity of member states membership for different RECs?

14. What is the critical areas where IGAD need to focus to become more effective to catalyze AfCFTA?

About Institutional Frameworks,

9. What institutional structures within IGAD are responsible for regional trade integration and AfCFTA-related activities?
10. How does IGAD involve stakeholders, including national governments, the private sector, and other RECs, in trade policy formulation and AfCFTA implementation, and to what extent has this coordination yielded results?
11. What regional strategies has IGAD developed, and how have they evolved to promote economic integration?
12. Why was the livestock sector identified as “pioneering” in IGAD’s Minimum Integration Plan, and what progress has been achieved in this sector?
13. To what extent does IGAD have the technical, financial, and human capacity to implement its regional integration mandate?
14. How effective are IGAD’s monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in tracking progress towards AfCFTA objectives?
15. What are the challenges limit IGAD’s ability to contribute effectively to AfCFTA?

About Progress, lesson and Future prospects of IGAD

16. What key achievements has IGAD made in trade integration, policy harmonization, and regional integration since the launch of the AfCFTA?
17. What lessons from IGAD's past experience can enhance AfCFTA implementation in the Horn of Africa?
18. What strategies could strengthen IGAD's role as a building block for AfCFTA, and what preconditions are necessary for success?
19. What measures should Ethiopia take to secure its trade interests under regional and continental trade arrangements?

Appendix 2: Informed Consent

Title of Study: The Assessment of IGAD'S Contribution to The Realization of African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA).

Researcher Name**:** Dessalegn Mekonnen

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Purpose of the study

You are invited to take part in a study that examines IGAD's role as a building block in the establishment and success of the AfCFTA, as well as the challenges it faces. The findings of this study are expected to provide a better understanding of regional integration efforts in the region.

STUDY PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured KII. The interview will take approximately 40–50 minutes. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded for accuracy. If you do not wish to be recorded, notes will be taken manually. Your participation is voluntary, so you can refuse to answer any question and terminate your involvement at any time without any negative consequences.

Risks and Benefits

The study has no known risks and regarding to the benefit, there is no a direct personal benefit for you for participating in this study but we hope the information you give and your insights will contribute for policy and academic discussions on regional economic integration in the IGAD region.

Confidentiality

All responses will keep confidential. Your name and identity will not appear in any reports and only the researcher will have access to the raw data. For the purpose of this research code names that will be used on notes and documents will be assigned. Notes, records, and interview

transcriptions and other participant information will keep in a locked file cabinet in in the personal possession of the researcher.

Consent Statement

I have read and I understand the provided information above. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time and my rights as a participant. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant’s Name**:** _____

Signature_____Date_____

Researcher's signature _____Date _____

Appendix 3: Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewees

No	Interviewee (I)	Age	Educational Level	Career/Job	Current Position
1	KII1	41	MA	Diplomat serving for 17+ years	Senior Diplomat at MFA and member to national Negotiating team to WTO
2	KII2	36	MA	Diplomat serving for 13+ years	Director and national AfCFTA sub committee member
3	KII3	38	MA	Civil servant 14+ years	AfCFTA senior expert at MoTRI and national Subcommittee for AfCFTA.
4	KII4	43	BA	Civil servant 16+ years	Senior IGAD expert at MOTRI
5	KII5	38		Researcher	Horn Researcher at IFA
6	KII6	45	PHD	Researcher	Senior Horn Researcher at IFA
7	KII7	54	PHD	Integration and trade expert	Senior expert of Economic Cooperation and regional Integration at IGAD
8	KII8	47	MA	Integration and trade expert	Senior Trade Policy Officer at AUC ETTIM
9	KII9	56	Professor	Integrationist	UNECA Senior Trade Expert
10	KII10	42	MA	Ambassador	African Affairs
11	KII11	32	MA	Diplomat	Work in Djibouti
12	KII12	45	MA	Trade Expert	AfCFTA Secretariat,
13	KII13	50	MA	SeniorIGAD Security Expert	Senior security expert at IGAD Peace and Security Department