EDITORIAL

Introduction: Africa in Times of Global Trade and Geopolitical Upheaval

Global trade and economic integration have been suppressed by the recent surge in inward-looking economic policies.[1] The changing geopolitical/geoeconomic landscape, global wave of populism, and reassessment of Bretton Woods-inspired liberal economic policies have inspired buzzwords like 'deglobalization', 'slowbilization', 'nearshoring', 'reshoring' and 'friendshoring'.[2] Amid an increase in trade wars, beggar-thy-neighbour industrial policies, and unilateral measures adopted in the name of national security, countries and regions that are shielding themselves from the fray look on in dismay.

One such region is Africa. As the famous African proverb goes: 'When elephants fight, the grass gets trampled'. Africa's vulnerability to external shocks has been exposed and exacerbated by a series of current and ongoing crises. First, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in export restrictions on various products, including agricultural and medical products, and African countries were left with inadequate access to some food products and COVID-19 vaccines. Subsequently, many African countries experienced wheat, grain, and fertilizer shortages triggered by the Russia–Ukraine conflict. These incidents and ongoing measures adopted by governments around the world to advance and protect their own economic and ideological interests and influence continue to affect the way Africa trades and her economic stability.

Indeed, Africa's share of global trade is a paltry 3%[3] and it accounted for a mere 3.5% of global foreign direct investment inflows in 2022.[4] However, the continent has a lot to offer and is experiencing a change of fortunes despite the current global gloom and doom. With a population of 1.4 billion people, Africa is home to the fastest-growing and youngest population in the world. Approximately 70% of all Africans are under the age of thirty.[5] Further, African countries account for six of the fourteen economies that are projected to achieve high growth (6% and higher) in 2024.[6] Moreover, critical to the green and digital transformations, Africa has approximately 85% of the world's manganese, 80% of platinum and chromium, 47% of cobalt, 21% of graphite, and 6% of copper.[7] However, as Africa weathers one crisis after another in the midst of rapid global change, African countries are turning inward for solutions. Continental initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) promise a pathway to resilience, sustainable economic growth, and the repositioning of the continent as a significant player on the global stage.

This Special Issue addresses the impact on the African continent of some of the most pressing current issues in global economics. These events almost exclusively occur outside of African borders but reverberate deeply from Cape Town to Cairo. The contributors have canvassed not only the (obvious) challenges but also the opportunities presented to Africa during the current global mêlée.

Beatrice Chaytor and **Ify Ogo** identify the potential of Africa's maritime services sector to overcome the chronic challenges and high costs involved in getting goods to, from, and across Africa. They consider that to position this sector as a key enabler of intra-African trade, AfCFTA State Parties must offer maritime services commitments and conclude comprehensive regulatory frameworks that allow this crucial industry to develop.

Notes

1 *See* Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (1st American ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2022); Anthea Roberts & Nicolas Lamp, *Six Faces of Globalization: Who Wins, Who Loses and Why It Matters* (Harvard University Press 2021).

2 World Economic Forum, *What's the Difference Between 'Friendshoring' and Other Global Trade Buzzwords?* (17 Feb. 2023), https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/friendshoring-global-trade-buzzwords/; Pinelopi K. Goldberg et al., *What Is the Evidence for Deglobalization?*, Brookings Institution (11 May 2023), https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-the-evidence-for-deglobalization/.

3 Hippolyte Fofack, *The Future of African Trade in the AfCFTA Era* in *Foresight Africa: Top Priorities for the Continent in 2024* 98 (Aloysius Uche Ordu ed., Brookings Institution 2024), https://www.brookings.edu/collection/foresight-africa-2024/.

4 UNCTAD, *World Investment Report 2023: Regional Trends Africa*, https://unctad.org/system/files/non-official-document/wir2023-regional_trends_africa_en.pdf.

5 UN, *Young People's Potential, the Key to Africa's Sustainable Development*, https://www.un.org/ohrlls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development.

6 IMF, *Real GDP Growth (Annual Percent Change)*, https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD.

7 Gracelin Baskaran, *Prospects for U.S. Minerals Engagement With Africa* (29 Aug. 2023) Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://www.csis.org/analysis/prospects-us-minerals-engagement-africa.

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In their timely and topical contribution, **Collette Van der Ven** and **Sunayana Sasmal** address the EU's Green Deal and some of the accompanying measures that have rattled African countries. They maintain, however, that these environmental policies provide an opportunity for Africa to adopt a proactive approach by leveraging legal frameworks like the AfCFTA and charting policies that serve African interests.

In their article, **Kholofelo Kugler** and **Rutendo Tavengerwei** posit that the exercise of digital sovereignty by the United States, China, and the European Union (EU) has impacted and dominated Africa's nascent digital markets. Nevertheless, regionwide collaborative efforts, including the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol, present an opportunity for African countries to insulate themselves from outside influence and cultivate a digital trade agenda that will support continental economic growth.

Stephen Karingi and **Moukaila Mouzamilou Takpara** address the global increase in subsidies and their inimical impact on African economies. They nonetheless argue that this subsidization presents opportunities for Africa to strengthen regional trade through the AfCFTA to create alternative markets, diversify production away from volatile commodities, and engage with Members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to remove subsidies that harm African economies.

Mustaqeem De Gama considers that the WTO needs a balanced reform agenda to address the evolving challenges in the global trading system and ensure that the organization remains effective, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of *all* its Members. He suggests that the WTO reform process would be edified by incorporating some of the proposals of the African Group. These include principles of inclusivity, transparency, and a real commitment to the development agenda.

The perspectives provided in this Special Issue are from individuals who are thought and action leaders in African trade and economic issues. I am grateful for the time and effort they have taken to contribute to this meaningful labour of passion. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my dear colleague Fernando Piérola who has been a sounding board, supporter, and trusted advisor from the very beginning of this project. Last but not least, many thanks to the Editor and his team for the opportunity and for all the invaluable behind-the-scenes work.

Amanda Bisong and Pamella Eunice Ahairwe note that Africa's growing population and 'youth bulge' present a challenge for African governments with limited resources to provide adequate services for all. However, with adequate training, cooperation, and conducive migration and labour mobility policies, Africans of various skill levels could alleviate some of the labour shortages in the EU that are triggered by the ageing population and declining fertility levels.

Finally, Ludovica Poponcini underscores that Africa's participation in global supply chains is very low and often limited to providing raw materials. She identifies Africa's opportunities to increase its supply chain participation in the light of its natural and human capital, strategic geographic location, expanding consumer markets, and current global reshoring trends. However, she emphasizes that without addressing deficiencies in, inter alia, infrastructure, energy, transport systems, and regulation, Africa cannot seamlessly integrate into global supply chains.

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