HESPI
THE HORN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY INSTITUTE

Rethinking African Regional Integration:

A Functional-Spatial Model of Modular Convergence

Danilo Desiderio
Trade Policy Expert &
Senior Associate at HESPI

JULY, 2026

www.hespi.org contacthespi@hespi.org @hespiofficial

Rethinking African Regional Integration:

A Functional-Spatial Model of Modular Convergence

Danilo Desiderio,

Trade policy expert and Senior Associate at HESPI

Abstract

For over three decades, African regional integration has been interpreted through a linear Balassian framework assuming staged progression toward supranational authority. This paper argues that this lens misreads African regionalism by obscuring the distributed functional mechanisms through which integration actually unfolds. Integration advances primarily through sector-specific coordination initiatives. Transport corridors, energy pools, digital payment infrastructures, joint border management arrangements, and selective regulatory mechanisms are generating measurable integration effects on the ground, often emerging independently of formal treaty processes. African regionalism is better understood as a spatial-functional configuration that cannot be captured by linear, stage-based models of integration. The paper advances the concept of modular convergence, in which integration is driven by interlocking functional domains shaped by operational necessity and emergent opportunities for cooperation across space.

Keywords: *African integration, functional integration, variable geometry, modular convergence, corridor integration, AfCFTA,*

1. Introduction

Regional integration has long occupied a central place in Africa's developmental discourse. From the Pan-African visions of Kwame Nkrumah to the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty, it has been perceived not merely as an economic project but as a historical necessity for overcoming colonial fragmentation, market disarticulation, and geopolitical marginalization (Nkrumah, 1963, Aemro & Nsoh, 2024). The aspiration for a united Africa has been rooted in both political and systemic considerations: regional integration has long been conceived as a vehicle for consolidating sovereignty, accelerating industrialization, and strengthening Africa's collective bargaining power in the post-colonial international order (Oloruntoba, 2020).

Yet the history of African integration is also frequently narrated as a history of delays, incomplete implementation, and institutional underperformance. Observers routinely point to weak intra-African trade, overlapping regional blocs, persistent non-tariff barriers, and the inability of RECs to achieve deeper forms of market unification. The continent appears trapped in what many analysts have described as "*integration without structural transformation*" (Jiboku, 2015, Gibbs, 2009). This paper challenges that dominant interpretation.

The central argument of this study is that the slow progress of African integration cannot be attributed only to leadership deficits or implementation failures. Rather, it reflects a deeper conceptual challenge: the prevailing analytical framework through which integration is understood is misaligned with the continent's evolving economic, institutional, and spatial realities. The limitations of the integration process therefore stem not only from deficiencies in execution, but from the persistence of an interpretative paradigm that may no longer adequately capture the complex and differentiated pathways through which regional integration is emerging in Africa. This paradigm remains anchored in a linear sequence of institutional stages, which implicitly assumes that African integration must reproduce the European trajectory in order to be recognised as a form of integration at all. Yet African regionalism does not evolve through orderly, staged institutional upgrading. It unfolds instead through functional adaptation, selective coordination, and negotiated expressions of sovereignty shaped by structural asymmetries and unevenly distributed state capacities. In this configuration, integration is not the culmination of a linear process of supranational institutional deepening, but the outcome of pragmatic coordination across systems of governance responding to shared practical interests. This perspective requires a shift away from narratives centred on leadership performance or implementation deficits toward a reconsideration of the conceptual foundations through which integration is understood.

This paper advances the notion that African integration is advancing through functional-spatial trajectories, i.e. cooperative patterns driven not by adherence to treaty-based sequencing, but by sectoral convergence that generates immediate and shared benefits. Crucially, these patterns of cooperation are not confined to formal, state-led initiatives.

They also emerge through informal cross-border economic networks, where economic actors create practical solutions to governance gaps and market constraints. For example, livestock traders operating between Somalia and Kenya have developed commercial networks based on trust, clan relationships, and informal financial systems that facilitate cross-border trade despite weak institutional coordination (Ng'asike et al., 2020). These arrangements sustain regional economic integration in practice, even where formal regulatory frameworks remain fragmented. By framing these informal dynamics as "tactical hybridity" (where actors pragmatically navigate the gaps between formal rules and local realities), the paper demonstrates that informal trade in Africa is not an aberration to be regulated away, but an active, bottom-up driver of spatial integration.

Across this emergent landscape, inter-State transport corridors, corridor governance institutions, One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), cross-border energy systems, digital payment platforms, and security coordination mechanisms collectively form the *de facto* architecture of African integration. These systems do not merely support integration; they actively produce it. In many instances, they precede formal supranational arrangements and demonstrate greater operational effectiveness than institutionally prescribed pathways, revealing integration as an evolving spatial process anchored in functional connectivity rather than institutional hierarchy (Desiderio, 2026).

The implication is decisive: African regionalism should not be interpreted as an incomplete version of an Eurocentric integration process, but a distinct modality of integration organised around densified operational interdependence rather than institutional linearity. Its evolution is more accurately captured through the cumulative deepening of sectorally coagulated interests among African nations than through conformity to predefined sequences of institutional stages.

1.1 Methodological and Analytical Approach

To advance the conceptual re-evaluation at the core of this study, we move beyond conventional quantitative approaches to regional trade integration, which typically measure progress through indicators such as tariff liberalisation, aggregate trade flows, and trade-to-GDP ratios. While these metrics provide important insights into the extent of market openness, they offer a limited understanding of the institutional, spatial, and operational processes through which integration is actually constructed. Instead, this study adopts a critical realist qualitative case study approach aimed at identifying the underlying generative mechanisms that shape the emergence, functioning, and uneven trajectories of regional integration. This perspective enables the analysis to move beyond the distinction between formal commitments and implementation gaps by examining how institutions, infrastructures, regulatory systems, and actors interact to produce concrete integration outcomes.

By doing so, the study differentiates between formal integration architectures (expressed through treaties, protocols, and regional institutional frameworks) and operational integration realities, namely the practical ways in which economic actors, authorities, and networks create connectivity and facilitate exchange across borders. The analytical framework is based on Spatial-Institutional Mapping, which examines regional integration through two complementary dimensions. The first is Institutional Density, referring to the depth and scope of formal commitments, including treaties, protocols, regulatory frameworks, and supranational arrangements. The second is Operational Interoperability, referring to the extent to which countries are effectively connected through compatible technical systems, infrastructure, administrative procedures, and digital platforms.

By analysing these two dimensions together, the study moves beyond a purely legalistic understanding of integration and captures how functional forms of cooperation can emerge even where formal regional integration remains incomplete. This approach enables the identification of operational "modules" of integration—such as trade corridors, digital platforms, or sectoral value chains—that may develop independently of the full implementation of regional treaties.

2. Linear Paradigm and Structural Isomorphism in African Integration

The intellectual architecture of African regional integration has been decisively shaped by classical integration theory, particularly Béla Balassa’s model (Balassa, 1961). In this framework, integration is conceived as a linear and sequental progression of institutional stages—from Free Trade Areas to Customs Unions, Common Markets, Economic Unions, and ultimately Political Unions—associated with the gradual transfer of sovereign competencies, including regulatory, policy, and macroeconomic authority, from the national to the supranational level.

This model is embedded in the design of most Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa, which are conceived as “building blocks” of continental integration, and it became the conceptual backbone of the Abuja Treaty establishing the African Economic Community (AEC). In this architecture, integration is envisaged as a cumulative and sequential process, in which sub-regional institutional consolidation is expected to progressively converge into a continent-wide economic and political union. At its core, this design reflects a structural isomorphism of African integration: a cognitive and institutional configuration in which African frameworks are implicitly modelled on an assumed equivalence with European integration dynamics, despite the fundamentally different economic configurations of African states, institutional capacities, and historical trajectories. The methodological flaw lies not in borrowing integration theories developed outside the African context, but in the assumption that comparable institutional architectures necessarily generate comparable integration outcomes across structurally heterogeneous systems.

Conceptually, this isomorphism produced a dual misreading of African political economies: first, an overestimation of their capacity to reproduce Europe’s sequential integration trajectory; and second, an underestimation of their structural specificity, characterised by weak productive and trade complementarities, commodity dependence, fragmented and unevenly effective state apparatuses, spatially discontinuous infrastructure systems, limited regional value-chain formation, and the centrality of informal economic systems in structuring production, employment, and cross-border exchange.

Empirically, the expectations of orthodox integration theory have not materialised. Across RECs, the implementation of the institutional integration agenda derived from the Balassian model remains partial, fragmented, and uneven. For instance, rather than evolving into fully liberalised regional markets, African Free Trade Areas have in some cases developed into regimes of variable geometry, where participation and enforcement are differentiated across member States. In the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), for instance, only 16 of 21 member States participate in the FTA.[1] The same happens in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where only 13 of 16 members trade with each other on a duty-free basis.[2] A similar pattern is observable in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), where the Free Trade Area exists primarily in legal form but remains weakly operationalised, with persistent tariff and non-tariff barriers and very limited effective intra-regional trade (Olaifa & Olubi, 2024).

Similarly, customs unions are characterised by widespread derogations and exemptions that weaken the uniform application of the common external tariff (CET), resulting in arrangements that function as "imperfect" customs unions rather than fully unified tariff systems.[3] A clear example is the East African Community (EAC), where Article 12(3) of the Customs Union Protocol allows Partner States, subject to approval by the Council of Ministers and publication in the EAC Gazette, to invoke a "stay of application" mechanism. This provision permits temporary deviation from the Common External Tariff, enabling States to suspend agreed tariff obligations on selected sensitive products. In practice, this creates differentiated tariff application within a formally harmonised customs union,

[1] Countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo remain outside full FTA participation, with others exhibiting partial or phased implementation of tariff liberalisation commitments.

[2] At present, Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola are not yet participating in the Southern African Development Community Free Trade Area. However, Angola initiated preparations in February 2025 to accede to the FTA, although this accession has not yet been completed.

[3] A Customs Union (CU) is conventionally defined as a stage of regional integration in which member States adopt a common external tariff (CET) and relinquish the formulation and administration of customs and trade policy to the supranational level. In the African context, however, CUs can be more accurately characterised as "imperfect" or flexible customs regimes, operating through partial compliance rather than full uniformity. These imperfections (manifested in sensitive product exemptions, unilateral import restrictions, recurring derogations from the CET, and a reduced transferral of customs and trade policy competences from the national to the supranational level) reflect a deliberate political economy response to the distributional asymmetries of integration. In highly heterogeneous economic spaces, a uniform external tariff can impose disproportionate adjustment costs on smaller, less diversified, or landlocked economies, while amplifying the competitive advantages of more industrialised regional hubs. As a result, African customs unions function less as rigid tariff unions in the classical Vinerian sense and more as managed and adaptive trade regimes. Member States strategically deploy derogations as instruments of industrial policy, revenue protection, and food security management, all policy functions that a strictly rules-based customs union would constrain. From this perspective, "imperfect" integration is not simply a deviation from the model, but a functional adaptation to structural divergence. The persistence of flexibility within customs unions thus reflects not institutional failure, but a pragmatic mechanism for sustaining regional cooperation under conditions of uneven development.

thereby reintroducing elements of national discretion into a system normatively structured on the basis of common external trade policy. A comparable form of derogation is the EAC Duty Remission Scheme, established under Section 140 of the EAC Customs Management Act (2004) and regulated by the EAC Duty Remission Regulations (2008), which permits manufacturers to import selected industrial inputs at reduced or zero duty when such inputs are unavailable locally or are used in the production of goods destined for export outside the EAC. Although designed to support industrialisation and export competitiveness, the scheme effectively creates differentiated tariff treatment within the customs union.

A similar pattern is observable in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), where recurrent national import bans and unilateral trade restrictions on products such as rice, poultry, and textiles have repeatedly bypassed agreed CET disciplines, exposing the persistent gap between formal customs union commitments and their uneven domestic enforcement. Even the Southern African Customs Union (SACU)—the world's oldest customs union and one of Africa's most institutionally consolidated regional trade arrangements—is not immune from differentiated application of the common external tariff. While SACU maintains a comparatively high degree of tariff harmonisation, the continued use of safeguard measures, rebate facilities, infant-industry protections, and country-specific derogations introduces important layers of flexibility within the common tariff framework. For example, under Article 26 of the 2002 SACU Agreement, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, and Namibia are permitted to impose temporary additional duties to protect infant industries within their domestic markets. Namibia's use of infant-industry protection measures in the poultry sector illustrates how national developmental priorities can generate selective deviations from the uniform application of the common external tariff (Susa, 2014). While these mechanisms do not dissolve the customs union, they weaken its degree of uniformity, demonstrating that even highly institutionalised customs unions operate through negotiated flexibility rather than fully uniform tariff governance.

Monetary integration processes exhibit a comparable pattern of selective convergence, shaped by macroeconomic asymmetries, divergent policy preferences and persistent constraints on the pooling of monetary sovereignty. The repeated postponement of the West African Monetary Zone (WAMZ) convergence agenda, alongside continued delays in operationalising the EAC Monetary Union (whose launch has recently been postponed to 2031),[4] illustrates the structural difficulty of achieving macroeconomic alignment even within relatively cohesive regional blocs. In both cases, convergence frameworks have been strongly influenced by euro-centric monetary integration models, particularly the Maastricht-style emphasis on inflation ceilings, fiscal deficit thresholds, reserve adequacy, debt sustainability, and exchange-rate stability (Zhang, 2012). Yet the transplantation of

[4] Endale, A. (2026). East African Community Postpones Currency Launch to 2031. Ethiopian Reporter, July 18, 2026.

these nominal convergence criteria into structurally heterogeneous African economies (characterised by commodity dependence, asymmetric productive structures, fiscal volatility, and uneven monetary capacities), has exposed the limited adaptability of European monetary integration templates to African regional political economies.

2.1 From Vertical Integration to Lateral Functional Expansion

To explain how African integration advances despite limited supranational institutional development, this article revisits one of the foundational concepts of neo-functionalism: Ernst Haas's theory of spillover (Haas, 1958). "Spillover" refers to the process through which cooperation in one policy area creates functional pressures for coordination in adjacent sectors, gradually expanding the scope of integration beyond its initial domain. The experience of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) provides the classic illustration of this dynamic. Cooperation in coal and steel progressively revealed the need for coordination in related policy areas, such as transport and energy. As economic interdependence deepened, these functional linkages generated demand for increasingly integrated institutional arrangements, contributing to the progressive evolution of the European integration project from the ECSC to the European Economic Community and, ultimately, the European Union.

Within the neo-functionalist framework, spillover operates horizontally through the progressive expansion of cooperation across interconnected policy areas. However, its long-term implications are vertical, as increasing interdependence generates pressures for the transfer of decision-making authority from national governments to supranational institutions.

Although Haas recognised that spillover was mediated by political bargaining rather than operating as an automatic mechanism, later scholars such as Leon Lindberg (1963) and Philippe Schmitter (1970) refined this theory by presenting integration as a more contingent and less deterministic process. They acknowledged that spillover could slow, stall or even reverse depending on political preferences, institutional capacities and the strategic behaviour of key actors. Yet these refinements left one fundamental assumption unchanged: regardless of its pace, spillover was expected to move integration upwards, towards progressively stronger supranational governance, at the expense of national sovereignty.

The African experience suggests that the principal limitation of this theoretical framework lies not in its assumptions about the pace of integration, but in its assumed direction. Across much of Africa, sovereignty is not regarded as a policy instrument that can be progressively pooled. Rather, it is understood as a strategic asset closely associated with statehood, political legitimacy and political autonomy, reflecting the continent's historical experience of colonial rule, externally imposed governance and often fragile post-independence state formation (Herbst, 2000). This enduring concern with preserving sovereign authority (what in this article we refer to as "defensive sovereignty") means that functional pressures rarely translate into demands for stronger supranational institutions. Instead, spillover tends to spread horizontally through intergovernmental coordination across sectors, rather than vertically through the transfer of authority to supranational bodies. Consequently, in the African context, the long-term implications of spillover also differ from those envisaged by neofunctionalist theory: instead of progressively deepening supranational governance, spillover contributes to the gradual expansion of regional cooperation while preserving national sovereignty as the primary locus of political authority.

In other words, rather than producing an upward transfer of authority, functional interdependence expands laterally across complementary operational domains while political authority remains primarily rooted at the national level. Constraints emerging in one sector are addressed through intergovernmental coordination, rather than through the delegation of authority to supranational instituitions, which creates intersected but institutionally autonomous functional areas. Transport corridors, customs information systems, digital payment platforms, regional power pools and logistics networks become progressively linked because they depend on one another operationally, not because they are governed by a common supranational authority. Where regional institutions are involved, their role is generally to establish common policy and regulatory frameworks, facilitate coordination among member states, and support implementation. However, operational execution and day-to-day coordination typically remain primarily the responsibility of national authorities. Corridor Management Authorities (CMAs)[5] provide an example of a more function-specific coordination mechanism, where cross-border operational challenges are addressed through cooperation among national agencies and relevant stakeholders without requiring the transfer of sovereignty to a supranational body.

On the other hand, trade facilitation provides a clear illustration of the mechanism of lateral expansion. A reform that improves trade between two neighbouring countries (such as a joint investment to complete a missing link in a cross-border transport corridor) may initially address a specific infrastructure bottleneck but subsequently reveal constraints in related areas of the two countries' trade systems that limit the efficiency gains generated by the reform. For instance, may reveal the need to develop an automated transit data exchange between customs administrations, or strenghten coordination among border agencies. As a result, the initial reform creates incentives for

[5] CMAs are institutional coordination mechanisms established by two or more States along a transport corridor to oversee, harmonise, and manage the performance of cross-border logistics systems. They typically bring together public agencies (customs, transport, immigration, trade ministries), private sector actors (logistics operators, freight forwarders), and sometimes development partners to coordinate policy implementation along a defined corridor. Their core function is not to replace national sovereignty, but to improve operational coherence across fragmented jurisdictions by addressing bottlenecks such as transit delays, inconsistent regulations, infrastructure inefficiencies, and administrative duplication. CMAs therefore act as corridor-level governance platforms that enhance trade facilitation through continuous monitoring, joint problem-solving, and procedural harmonisation across borders. In essence, CMAs transform transport corridors from a chain of national segments into a coordinated regional logistics system.

complementary reforms in adjacent functional areas, gradually expanding cooperation beyond the original domain of intervention. Rather than generating pressure for the creation of supranational institutions, lateral spillover unfolds through the progressive alignment of procedures, communication protocols, and operational practices among Customs and other border authorities of the two countries. The integration process therefore advances through the progressive expansion of functional interdependence across specific sectors, while decision-making authority remains primarily located at the national level.

Within a neo-functionalist framework, such pressures would be expected to generate momentum towards vertical institutional integration, through the progressive transferral of decision-making authority from the national to the supranational level. As functional interdependence expands, cooperation is expected to extend into increasingly sensitive policy domains, such as the establishment of customs unions through common external tariffs and, ultimately, monetary integration, potentially culminating in monetary union and supranational monetary institutions. Many African Regional Economic Communities have indeed pursued this objective, most notably through initiatives such as the East African Monetary Union and the proposed ECOWAS or EAC single currency. However, progress towards these more advanced forms of integration has proved politically and institutionally complex, reflecting the persistent tension between the economic logic of increasing interdependence and the political imperative of preserving national autonomy over core areas of state authority.

To address this tension, African countries have increasingly adopted complementary operational solutions that resolve specific functional constraints while preserving national policy autonomy. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) illustrates this approach. By enabling cross-border payments in African currencies, PAPSS addresses a key bottleneck affecting intra-African trade: the cost, complexity, and inefficiency associated with settling transactions across multiple national currencies. It does so by facilitating greater trade integration without requiring any monetary convergence or the transfer of authority over national monetary and exchange-rate policies.

3. From Institutional Sequencing to Functional Systems of Integration

Across Africa, integration has advanced more through the progressive densification of functional areas of coordination than through staged institutional deepening. Transport corridors such as the Northern and Central Corridors in East Africa, and the North–South Corridor linking South Africa to Zambia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Malawi, have significantly improved logistics performance by reducing transit bottlenecks, enhancing cross-border trade facilitation, and enabling partial articulation of regional production linkages across extended spatial networks. Regional energy systems such as the Southern African Power Pool and the Eastern Africa Power Pool have enabled cross-border electricity trade, strengthened grid interconnection, and improved system-wide reliability through shared generation capacity and coordinated dispatch mechanisms. In the domain of trade facilitation, integrated border management tools such as One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs),[6] have enhanced interoperability among national border agencies while preserving national control over the implementation and enforcement of border management procedures. By shifting border governance from fragmented national procedures toward coordinated governance arrangements, these mechanisms have reduced procedural discontinuities along critical trade routes and border crossing points. They therefore illustrate a broader pattern of selective regulatory convergence, in which States cooperate through targeted arrangements to harmonise rules and coordinate procedures in specific functional domains such as border management, without requiring a relinquishment of sovereign authority to supranational institutions.

In parallel, digital financial infrastructures (most notably the PAPSS system mentioned above) are reducing transaction costs in intra-African trade by enabling real-time settlement in local currencies. By reducing reliance on third-party currencies and mitigating delays associated with correspondent banking arrangements, such systems facilitate greater financial connectivity among African economies while preserving the autonomy of national banking and monetary systems.

The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) provides a further illustration of lateral expansion beyond the trade domain. Initially established as a security alliance to address common defence challenges, the AES has progressively extended cooperation into adjacent functional areas. As the need for greater coordination has evolved, the Alliance has begun to develop common approaches in monetary cooperation, trade, and customs policy. The introduction, in March 2025, of a 0.5 per cent levy on imports originating from ECOWAS countries[7] exemplifies this dynamic. Although conceived as a trade-related measure, the levy reflects the gradual expansion of cooperation from its original security focus into broader areas of economic governance.

These developments indicate a clear shift from institutional sequencing toward forms of integration driven by operational interdependence. Rather than unfolding through staged legal convergence, African regionalism is increasingly structured around systems that reduce transaction costs directly across space (such as corridor-based connectivity systems, regional power pooling arrangements, cross-border digital payment systems,

[6] OSBPs (also known as Joint Border Posts, and in some West and Central African contexts referred to as Juxtaposed Control Points), are integrated border control facilities where border agencies from two neighbouring countries jointly conduct exit and entry procedures at a single location, rather than duplicating processes on each side of the border. Under an OSBP arrangement, travellers and cargo typically stop only once, while officials from both countries perform coordinated checks within a shared operational space. This reduces duplication of inspections, streamlines documentation requirements, and improves information sharing between border agencies. OSBPs are designed to reduce clearance times, lower transaction costs, and enhance predictability in cross-border movement of goods and people, while preserving the distinct legal authority of each State through separate national enforcement systems.

[7] Premium Times, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso impose 0.5% import levy on ECOWAS countries. 1 April 2025.

logistics governance arrangements, and security cooperation frameworks), allowing functional integration to deepen without requiring the transfer of sovereign authority to supranational institutions.

Crucially, this shift is not accidental but reflects the structural characteristics of African economies. The limited development of productive interdependence, evidenced by continued commodity dependence, low levels of trade complementarity among African countries, and weak regional manufacturing linkages (Cissé et al., 2020), constrains the emergence of trade-led integration in the neofunctionalist sense. In the absence of dense intra-industry trade and vertically integrated regional value chains, tariff liberalisation alone generates relatively limited pressures for deeper institutional integration. As a result, regional integration has increasingly occurred in functional domains where cooperation delivers more immediate and tangible benefits, including transport corridor development, digital payment systems, energy interconnection, logistics coordination, and cross-border security cooperation. These areas create direct operational efficiencies, reduce transaction costs, and strengthen regional connectivity without requiring the progressive transfer of sovereign authority to supranational institutions.

These structural constraints have also limited the ability of many Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to anchor integration in territorially embedded production strategies, such as coordinated agro-industrial systems, cross-border manufacturing clusters, or regionally integrated value chains. This reflects persistent limitations in regional productive capacity, industrial coordination, and value-chain development (Desiderio & Tevoedjre, 2026). Consequently, although the formal architecture of African regional integration continues to be framed around progressively deeper institutional integration, the principal drivers of integration have increasingly emerged elsewhere. In practice, the most significant advances have occurred through functional cooperation in operational domains that improve connectivity, reduce transaction costs, and facilitate cross-border interactions, without requiring a corresponding transfer of sovereign authority to supranational institutions. Yet these formal operational arrangements do not fully explain how regional integration functions in practice. In many parts of Africa, particularly in border regions, cross-border economic integration also depends on locally embedded forms of coordination that operate alongside, and sometimes beyond, formal institutional frameworks.

This implementation gap between formal regional frameworks and everyday cross-border interactions is bridged not solely through top-down institutional design, but also through the spatial and functional dynamics of borderlands themselves. Across African borderlands, trade networks, mobility systems, and livelihood-based exchanges generate continuous cross-border interdependence that operates partly outside formal regulatory frameworks while remaining deeply embedded in regional economic life (Kahiya & Kadirov, 2020). This phenomenon can be conceptualised as *tactical hybridity*: the pragmatic coexistence and adaptive interaction of formal rules and informal practices that enable cross-border trade continuity under conditions of regulatory fragmentation, procedural complexity, and restrictive enforcement approaches toward small-scale cross-border trade. This orientation is reflected in the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, whose recitals recognise the realities of small-scale and informal cross-border trade and acknowledge the role of Simplified Trade Regimes (STRs)[8] as instruments for lowering transaction costs at the margins of formalisation.

These patterns reveal the limits of the orthodox integration paradigm, which privileges formal institutions as the primary engine of integration. The structural isomorphism embedded in the Abuja framework and REC architectures rests on an implicit assumption of universal linear convergence. However, African regional dynamics increasingly diverge from this model. Integration is more accurately understood as a process of functional convergence, driven by spatial connectivity and adaptive coordination across heterogeneous systems. In this sense, African regionalism evolves more as a distributed system of coordination in which integration is produced through the interconnection of functional domains rather than through their consolidation into a hierarchical supranational framework.

4. The "Spaghetti Bowl": a Systemic Adaptation to Structural Heterogeneity

Mainstream discourse has long criticised Africa's overlapping memberships in multiple RECs as a "spaghetti bowl" of inefficiency, legal ambiguity, and wasted resources (Mengistu, 2015). Yet this diagnosis rests on an implicit preference for orderly, territorially coherent institutional architectures that does not correspond to the realities of fragmented and uneven regional political systems in Africa. Rather than signalling institutional failure, multiple affiliations to RECs enable States to strategically allocate commitments and access differentiated regimes of infrastructure cooperation, trade facilitation, and political alignment. In a context of uneven integration depth across RECs, States operate within a logic of variable geometry, aligning selectively with different institutional frameworks according to sector-specific advantages and functional payoffs: for instance, a state can leverage the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) for advancing security cooperation interests, the EAC for deeper gains in infrastructure integration and mobility, and COMESA for broader market access and trade facilitation opportunities linked to its wider membership base.

Overlapping membership should therefore be seen also as a form of strategic institutional hedging, whereby States construct a dense and partially redundant governance ecosystem that enhances resilience and policy optionality. If one institutional pathway

[8] A Simplified Trade Regime (STR) is a trade facilitation mechanism used mainly in African Regional Economic Communities, such as COMESA, EAC and SADC, to ease cross-border trade for small-scale traders. It aims at simplifying customs procedures, using reduced documentation, and granting preferential or duty-free treatment for low-value consignments of commonly traded goods. In practice, STRs are designed to bring informal or semi-formal cross-border trade into a lighter regulatory framework, lowering transaction costs without requiring full compliance with standard customs procedures.

underperforms, stalls, or no longer aligns with a given State's priorities, alternative regional platforms remain available through which both national objectives and shared regional interests can still be pursued. However, this systemic adaptiveness at the macro-level introduces severe friction at the micro-operational level. For instance, for a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) trying to navigate highly complex and divergent Rules of Origin across multiple regional frameworks, overlapping memberships are rarely perceived as a "resilient asset". Instead, they are often considered as a source of regulatory uncertainty, conflicting requirements, and increased administrative burdens. A fundamental tension therefore exists within this governance model: while strategic institutional hedging may serve state elites' interests in preserving political stability and policy flexibility, it systematically penalizes the very trading enterprises whose cross-border activities are essential for translating regional integration commitments into tangible economic outcomes.

From this perspective, the so-called "spaghetti bowl" is better interpreted not as a pathologic form of integration, but as an adaptive governance architecture. It reflects a form of bottom-up regionalism in which States develop overlapping coalitions of functional necessity to address shared and context-specific challenges, rather than converging toward a single hierarchical institutional blueprint. The AfCFTA and the Tripartite Free Trade Area (which entered into force on 25 July 2024) both exemplify this governance logic. Neither framework establishes a supranational authority over participating States. Specifically, the AfCFTA is grounded in intergovernmental governance, with its Secretariat serving primarily administrative, technical, and supervisory functions, without autonomous regulatory or enforcement powers over member States. Similarly, the Tripartite Free Trade Area is coordinated through a joint task force, rotating annually among the three constitutive RECs (EAC, COMESA, and SADC) which is mandated to support implementation rather than exercise independent authority.

5. Emergent Pathways: Corridor Integration, Variable Geometry, and Functional Interdependence

The most dynamic expressions of African integration are increasingly located outside formal treaty architecture and within territorially grounded systems of connectivity. Large-scale infrastructure and logistics corridors (such as the LAPSSET Corridor, the Maputo Development Corridor, and the Lobito Corridor) illustrate a shift toward what may be termed "spatial-functional integration". These initiatives bypass the slow pace of comprehensive legal harmonisation by prioritising "hard" infrastructure (transport and energy networks) and "soft" interoperability (customs digitisation, transit facilitation, and regulatory coordination) along specific geographic axes.

Empirically, corridor-based systems tend to generate more immediate integration outcomes than comparable formal free trade arrangements. In several cases, observed increases in intra-corridor trade flows are strongly associated with reductions in clearance times, improved infrastructure reliability, and digitised border management systems than with tariff liberalisation *per se*. The Northern Corridor (Mombasa–Kampala–Kigali) provides a well-documented case in which corridor reforms (particularly OSBPs and digital interconnection initiatives among customs systems) have reduced transit times and improved predictability of freight flows. Several studies have shown that these operational improvements have contributed more significantly to facilitating trade expansion along corridors than tariff reductions *per se* (Fitzmaurice & Hartmann, 2013).

Within this context, African integration is increasingly characterised by variable geometry, whereby subsets of states advance cooperation at different speeds and intensities depending on shared sectoral priorities and political alignment. Initiatives such as the AES and the Horn of Africa Initiative (HoAI)[9] reflect this logic of differentiated participation. These arrangements function as modular platforms of cooperation, where states "plug into" specific regimes (security and counterterrorism coordination in the case of the AES, and infrastructure, trade facilitation, and connectivity initiatives in the case of the HoAI), without requiring uniform continental alignment.

6. Modular Convergence, Role of the AfCFTA and a New Theory of African Integration

Building on the empirical and conceptual arguments developed above, this paper advances a shift from linear integration theory toward a framework of modular convergence. Within this paradigm, integration is not conceived as a sequential ladder of institutional stages, but as the gradual interconnection of functional systems whose coherence emerges through interaction rather than hierarchy.

These systems operate across sector-specific domains including transport and logistics, trade facilitation, energy cooperation, digital payments, and security coordination. Integration deepens as these domains progressively interlock through both functional necessity and emerging collaboration opportunities. The defining characteristic of this architecture is therefore not supranational authority, but operational interoperability: integration advances through the coordination of rules, procedures, infrastructures, and technical systems across differentiated governance spaces rather than through centralised institutional consolidation.

[9] The Horn of Africa Initiative (HoAI), launched in 2018, represents a pragmatic, results-oriented model of regional cooperation among Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and South Sudan, all of which also participate in IGAD (and, except South Sudan, COMESA). Unlike treaty-driven integration frameworks, HoAI operates as a light, intergovernmental coordination platform led by Ministers of Finance, with only a minimal Secretariat facilitating consensus-building. Its architecture is organised around four pillars, the first two of which focus on regional infrastructure (transport, energy, digital connectivity) and trade and economic integration. Rather than advancing through formal supranational mechanisms, integration is generated through a bottom-up process: priorities are first identified at national level through multi-stakeholder consultations involving government agencies and the private sector, then elevated to ministerial endorsement, and finally translated into sectoral roadmaps and cross-border projects.

In this configuration, sovereignty is not progressively transferred to supranational entities in a linear manner. Instead, it is incrementally reconfigured through technical coordination, mutual recognition arrangements, shared operational platforms, and negotiated forms of regulatory alignment. Within this evolving system, the AfCFTA should be understood not as an additional hierarchical layer of integration, but as a structural coordination mechanism that reduces fragmentation across differentiated regional trade and regulatory systems.

At the same time, modular convergence generates a structural risk of fragmentation. Functional systems may deepen internally while remaining weakly connected to one another, producing relatively dense but partially disconnected "islands of interoperability". In the absence of a strong supranational centre, integration could stabilise around differentiated clusters of coordination rather than evolve into a coherent continental system.

The AfCFTA addresses this risk by providing a horizontal coordination layer that aligns rules and procedures relating to trade facilitation, customs cooperation, non-tariff barriers, technical standards, and sanitary and phytosanitary measures across otherwise differentiated regional and functional systems. Through mechanisms of regulatory coordination, mutual recognition, and procedural convergence, it aims at reducing fragmentation in continental trade governance and enhancing interoperability across regional integration frameworks. In this sense, the AfCFTA does not suppress modular diversity or replace existing regional systems. Rather, it functions as connective tissue across them, facilitating convergence through structured alignment rather than hierarchical integration. Modular convergence therefore reframes African regionalism as a dynamic and adaptive system in which integration advances through the accumulation, overlap, and interaction of functional domains rather than through institutional sequencing. This framework accommodates asymmetries through variable geometry, incorporates the coexistence of formal and informal systems through tactical hybridity, and recognises that integration may emerge through decentralised coordination rather than supranational consolidation. In doing so, it moves beyond the Abuja-centred and REC-centric paradigm of institutional mimicry toward a more grounded understanding of African integration as a distributed, incremental, and operationally driven process of systemic transformation.

7. Conclusion: The Dawn of the African Decoupling

This paper has argued that African regional integration cannot be adequately understood through linear, stage-based models derived from classical integration theory. Empirical patterns across the continent suggest a different reality: integration advances mainly through the incremental densification of coordination in specific functional areas and strategic spatial configurations, particularly along trade corridors, borderlands, and interconnected economic networks where cross-border interdependence is most pronounced.

Across transport corridors, OSBPs and other joint border management arrangements, energy pools, digital payment infrastructures, and security coordination arrangements, integration is produced through growing operational interdependence. These systems generate tangible forms of regional connectivity that are not contingent on the completion of supranational institutional stages. On this basis, the paper develops the concept of modular convergence, in which integration unfolds through sector-specific domains that interlock through both functional necessity and emerging collaboration opportunities. This process gives rise to uneven geographies of integration, characterised by relatively dense but partially connected "islands of interoperability", where functional depth does not automatically translate into systemic coherence. Within this configuration, the AfCFTA does not redefine these islands or replace their internal logics. Instead, it operates as a connective tissue across them, a horizontal coordination layer that links otherwise autonomous functional modules by aligning rules, standards, and procedures. Its role is not to impose institutional uniformity, but to improve interoperability across differentiated systems without establishing a centralising authority. Crucially, this connective function is not confined to trade liberalisation alone, but extends to the articulation between these heterogeneous functional domains, allowing corridor systems, payment infrastructures, logistics networks, and regulatory regimes to become partially interoperable within a shared continental trade governance space.

A further implication concerns the coexistence of formal and informal systems. Across African nations, economic life is sustained through *tactical hybridity*, where informal networks of trade in goods and services, mobility systems, and informal financial arrangements interact continuously with formal regulatory regimes rather than existing in separate spheres. The implication is that policy frameworks like the AfCFTA matter not because they eliminate informality, but because they can structure and reduce frictions in how formal and informal systems interact. This orientation is reflected in the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, whose recitals recognise the realities of small-scale and informal cross-border trade and acknowledge the role of Simplified Trade Regimes (STR)[10] as instruments for lowering transaction costs at the margins of formalisation.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that African regionalism is not converging toward a supranational order, nor simply deviating from it. It is giving rise to a different type of regional system altogether: a decentred architecture of functional interdependence in

[10] A Simplified Trade Regime (STR) is a trade facilitation mechanism used mainly in African Regional Economic Communities, such as COMESA, EAC and SADC, to ease cross-border trade for small-scale traders. It aims at simplifying customs procedures, using reduced documentation, and granting preferential or duty-free treatment for low-value consignments of commonly traded goods. In practice, STRs are designed to bring informal cross-border trade into a lighter regulatory framework, lowering transaction costs without requiring full compliance with standard customs procedures.

which integration is produced through the interaction of overlapping coordination regimes rather than institutional consolidation. Coherence, in this sense, is not designed from above but continuously emerges from the friction and alignment of heterogeneous systems operating across space. The analytical implication is fundamental: African integration should no longer be read as a delayed project of institutional completion, but as a post-linear form of regional formation, where authority is distributed, coordination is layered, and integration is enacted through operational necessity rather than constitutional design. This "African Decoupling" is twofold: it is both analytical (a decoupling of regional studies from the Eurocentric, Balassian paradigm of linear progression), and operational (whereby functional integration advances independently of formal treaty completion or supranational state-building). In this configuration, the formal/informal and completed/incomplete distinctions collapse as analytical categories, as integration is no longer an institutional condition but an emergent property of interacting systems.

Bibliography

- Aemro T. B. & Nsoh C. (2024). Regionalism and Africa's future: the imperative of unity, International Journal of Research in Education Humanities and Commerce, Volume 5, Issue 2, March - April 2024. Retrieved from: https://ijrehc.com/uploads2024/ijrehc05_34.pdf
- Balassa, B. (1961). Towards a Theory of Economic Integration, Kyklos, International Review for Social Sciences. Retrieved from: https://2024.sci-hub.se/937/c4ded200c460b8621483a62d6c35da77/balassa1961.pdf
- Cissé, F.; Kurtz, J. E. & Odjo, S. P. (2020). Intra-African trade integration. In Africa agriculture trade monitor 2020. Bouët, Odjo, Sunday and Zaki Eds., Chapter 3, Pp. 41-76. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). Retrieved from: https://cgspace.cgiar.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/e6c17d76-3981-4bac-8c52-d17b2baebe75/content
- Desiderio, D. (2026). The Africa Integration Paradox: Progress, Challenges, and Alternative Paths. The Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI), January 2026. Retrieved from: https://hespi.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Africa_Integration_Paradox.pdf
- Desiderio, D. & Tevoedjre, E. (2026). African Integration Reimagined: From Continental-Level Aspirations to Regional-Level Realities. International Journal of Technology, Health and Sustainability, Vol 2, Issue 3 (July-September 2026). Available at: https://ijths.com/wp-content/uploads/IJTHS-0203012.pdf
- Endale, A. (2026). East African Community Postpones Currency Launch to 2031. Ethiopian Reporter, July 18, 2026. Retrieved from: https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/51913/
- Fitzmaurice, M. & Hartmann, O. (2013). Border Crossing Monitoring along the Northern Corridor. Sub-Saharan Africa Transport Policy Program. (SSATP) working paper; no. 96. Retrieved from: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/16dcde0c-0f01-5460-bc64-535ff367f3c0
- Haas, E. (1958). The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957, Volume 11. Retrieved from: https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015004765965&seq=11
- Herbst, J. (2000). States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control. Princeton. Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000.

- Gibb, R. (2009). Regional Integration and Africa's Development Trajectory: meta-theories, expectations and reality. Third World Quarterly. Retrieved from: https://sci-hub.africa/10.1080/01436590902867136
- Kahiya, E. & Kadirov, D. (2020). Informal Cross Border Trade as a Substratum Marketing System: A Review and Conceptual Framework. Journal of Macromarketing 40(10), January 2020. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338433710_Informal_Cross_Border_Trade_as_a_Substratum_Marketing_System_A_Review_and_Conceptual_Framework
- Jiboku, P. A. (2015). The Challenge of Regional Economic Integration in Africa: Theory and Reality. Africa's Public Service Delivery & Performance Review, Vol 3, No 4. Retrieved from: https://apsdpr.org/index.php/apsdpr/article/view/96
- Lindberg, L. N. (1963). The Political Dynamics of European Economic Integration. Stanford: Stanford University Press. Retrieved from: https://archive.org/details/politicaldynamic0000unse_g0w9
- Mengistu, M. M. (2015). Multiplicity of African Regional Economic Communities and Overlapping Memberships: A Challenge for African Integration. International Journal of Economics, Finance and Management Sciences (Volume 3, Issue 5). Retrieved from: https://www.sciencepg.com/article/10.11648/j.ijefm.20150305.12
- Ng'asike et al. (2020). Ng'asike, P.O., Stepputat, F. & Njoka, J.T. Livestock trade and devolution in the Somali-Kenya transboundary corridor. Pastoralism 10, 27 (2020). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1186/s13570-020-00185-y
- Nkrumah, K. (1963). Africa Must Unite. Friederick A. Praeger published, New York. Retrieved from: https://ccaf.africa/books/Africa-Must-Unite-Kwame-Nkrumah.pdf
- Olaifa F. G. & Olubi, E. A. (2024). Determinants of Trade Flow in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS): Does Governance Matter? Economic and Regional Studies / Studia Ekonomiczne i Regionalne, Volume 17 (2024): Issue 1 (March 2024). Retrieved from: https://reference-global.com/article/10.2478/ers-2024-0004
- Oloruntoba, S. O. (2020). Pan Africanism, Regional Integration and Development in Africa, Palgrave McMillan. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/116818811/Pan_Africanism_Regional_Integration_and_Development_in_Africa
- Premium Times, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso impose 0.5% import levy on ECOWAS countries. 1 April 2025. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/785099-mali-niger-burkina-faso-impose-0-5-import-levy-on-ecowas-countries.html

- Schmitter, P. C. (1970). A Revised Theory of Regional Integration. International Organization, Cambridge University Press, vol. 24(4).
- Susa, S. M. (2014). The protection of Infant Industries in SACU: The Namibian Poultry Industries Case. North West University (Potchefstroom Campus), South Africa. Retrieved from: https://repository.nwu.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/b5609505-7587-4e8a-b8bc-243cda37a385/content
- Zhang, J. (2012). Macroeconomic Convergence in African RECs. African Development Bank, Regional Integration Policy Papers, N° 001-December 2012. Retrieved from: https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Regional_Integration_Policy_Papers_Supporting_Macroeconomic_Convergence_in_African_RECs.PDF

HESPI

THE HORN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICY INSTITUTE

ABOUT HESPI

The Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI) is an independent, non-profit regional think tank, that generates research evidence, promotes knowledge generation and dissemination, and builds effective institutional capacity for sound economic and social policies in the IGAD sub-region and Africa at large. It seeks to provide the IGAD member countries and the African continent with fact-based analysis, research and consultancy services to promote and advocate for sound formulation and implementation of impactful social and economic policies.

CONTACT US

HEADQUARTERS

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia | Kirkos Sub City, Wereda 07, Teklu Desta Building H.No. 288/10-13

contacthespi@hespi.org

www.hespi.org

+251 11 515 3262/65 | +251 11 515 0521/84 | Fax. +251 011 515 0763 | P.O.Box 2692 Code 1250

REGIONAL OFFICE

Nairobi, Kenya | Kiganjo House, Ground floor; Rose Avenue

+254 742 475 775