

Regional Economic Communities in Africa on Layered Paths to Continental Integration



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At this year's G20 Summit hosted by South Africa, several Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), participated as invited guests. Their inclusion underscores the growing recognition of RECs not merely as regional coordination mechanisms, but as relevant economic actors in shaping global agendas.

For decades, RECs have constituted the backbone of Africa's efforts towards economic integration. Since the signing of the Abuja Treaty in 1991, which formally recognized RECs as building blocks of the envisioned Africa Economic Community, RECs have provided a foundation for regional coordination in economic policymaking for common prosperity and external engagement. By expanding market size, fostering intra-regional trade and connectivity, and providing institutional platforms for collective action, RECs enhance policy coherence and member states' bargaining power as a group. As a result, engagement with Africa is increasingly framed at

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the regional level with several RECs functioning as a counterpart in trade and economic cooperation arrangements.

In Africa, the expansion of regional integration gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a sustained expansion of REC membership and areas of cooperation until very recently. Among the eight RECs recognized by the African Union, COMESA, with 21 member states, constitutes the largest market with a combined GDP exceeding USD 1 trillion, followed by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), comprising 16 member states with a combined GDP of USD 839 billion. The EAC, although smaller in size with eight member states, has achieved the deepest level of integration, advancing through a customs union and a common market, pursuing a monetary union, and long-term aspirations toward political federation. The EAC also exhibits a comparatively strong growth trajectory with regional growth projected to around 6% for 2025 and 2026.^{*} At the policy level, RECs have adopted region-specific long-term strategies, such as “Vision 2050” in both the EAC and SADC.

Several factors explain why regional economic integration remains salient in the African context. First, the current level of intra-regional trade points to untapped potential from deeper regional and continental integration. In 2024, only 16.8% of Africa’s total trade took place within the continent, while more than 80% was conducted with external partners, highlighting Africa’s high reliance on extra-continental trade. Intra-regional trade patterns vary across sub-regions: Eastern Africa recorded relatively higher intra-regional trade (18.1%), whereas Central Africa remained markedly low (2.2%). Regional disparities reflect structural constraints including inadequate infrastructure and pervasive non-tariff barriers. Second, the limited progress in economic transformation and export diversification further highlights the importance of REC-level interventions aimed at developing regional value chains. Despite modest improvements, export diversification in Africa remains uneven, indicating slow progress in structural upgrading.

Despite their continued relevance, RECs face challenges arising from the overlapping memberships and multiple mandates, which generate institutional burdens and coordination inefficiencies. More than 70% of African countries belong to two or more RECs simultaneously. This complexity was largely manageable during earlier phases of regionalism but has become increasingly costly as integration agendas have grown more comprehensive. Consequently, in the progress in implementation of commitments, such as delayed Common External Tariff alignment and persistent non-tariff barriers, has remained slow, constraining RECs in delivering deeper integration. These difficulties are compounded by limited availability of consolidated regional economic data and insufficient public awareness of the benefits of regional integration.

Recent developments have further exposed structural strains within the REC system. The episodes of Rwanda's decision to exit from ECCAS and the formal withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger from ECOWAS, driven by strategic and political reasons, mark a departure from the earlier trend of expanding RECs membership. This reflects tensions between national priorities, regional institutional commitments, and broader ambitions for integration.

Africa's integration landscape has entered a new phase marked by the coexistence of long-standing RECs and emerging mega-regional and continent-wide initiatives, notably the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The Tripartite FTA came into force in July 2024, bringing together 29 member states into a single market of approximately 800 million people with a combined GDP of about USD 1.9 trillion, representing around 60% of Africa's total GDP. The TFTA bridges COMESA, SADC, and EAC as a mega-regional integration and seeks to harmonize industrial development, market integration, and infrastructure development. The AfCFTA, launched in 2019, represents a broader strategic effort to advance continental integration by creating a single market of 1.4 billion people and a GDP of USD 3.4 trillion and boosting intra-African trade.

From this perspective, Africa's integration process can be understood as a layered pathway, evolving from national to regional, through mega-regional, and ultimately to the continental level. In this configuration, RECs play an instrumental role for translating higher-level commitments into implementable actions. For instance, COMESA has explicitly aligned its medium-term strategic action plans with the objectives defined at the Tripartite level. At the same time, the expansion of higher-level integration has posed new challenges in implementation of RECs. As COMESA itself noted in an official document, "shifting regional and continental integration spaces through TFTA and AfCFTA... slowed momentum for the adoption of COMESA Customs Union instruments at the national level... as countries opted to focus on TFTA and AfCFTA." This shift in the focus of member states has resulted in limited national resources being dispersed across multiple integration commitments.[†]

This evolution does not imply that RECs are rendered obsolete. Rather, their role should be recalibrated within a multi-layered integration architecture that requires greater harmonization of policies, institutions, and resource allocation across layers. Despite institutional constraints, RECs retain comparative advantages in areas where geographic proximity and shared regional contexts matter most, particularly in setting and implementation of region-specific agenda, and coordination in areas such as infrastructure and regional value chain development and economic transformation. In this sense, RECs remain indispensable building blocks

of continental integration, serving as a complementary institution that facilitates regulatory convergence, regional value chain development, and trade facilitation reforms, and then producing lessons that are later scaled up at the continental level. Mega-regional, and continental frameworks, in turn, provide strategic direction, market scale, and a unified interface for economic engagement with the global economy. The AfCFTA explicitly positions itself as a platform to harmonize and consolidate the existing RECs into a continent-wide integration.

Africa's ability to emerge as a credible economic actor depends on how effectively it manages the layered paths to continental integration. Improved coordination across layers can enable economies of scale, enhance policy coherence, and support structural transformation. This would strengthen Africa's position in global value chains and its collective voice in international negotiations. Within Africa's evolving integration architecture, RECs are likely to remain indispensable instruments for implementation and coordination. Accordingly, collaboration and cooperation between RECs is essential to advance broader and more effective integration across the continent. **KIEP**

* Calculated by author based on IMF World Economic Outlook Database.

† COMESA. Medium Term Strategic Plan 2021-2025.