MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 986-993

Examining the Interplay of Power and Economic Integration in Africa: Challenges and Prospects

Dr. Douglas John Chikhowe Banda*
PhD candidate, Department of Public Administration/Management, Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Email: chikhowebanda@gmail.com
Prof. Nirmala Dorasamy
Senior Lecture, Department of Public Management, Durban University of Technology, Durban. Email: nirmala@dut.ac.za
Prof. Zamokuhle Mbandlwa
Professor, Department of Public Management, Durban University of Technology, South Africa. Email: ZamokuhleM@dut.ac.za

Abstract

This study examines the interplay of power and economic integration in Africa, with a particular focus on how political, institutional, and external dynamics shape the outcomes of regional cooperation. It explores the paradox between aspirations for autonomy and persistent patterns of dependency. The research adopts a systematic literature review drawing on peer-reviewed articles, books, and policy reports published between 2020 and 2025, complemented by foundational works on rationalisation and collaboration theory. Data were analysed using content analysis and document review to identify key themes and patterns. Five categories of barriers were identified: political and institutional weaknesses, economic challenges, social and cultural inequalities, external influences, and the mixed performance of regional institutions. Power asymmetries enable larger states and external actors to dominate decision-making, while weaker states struggle to secure equitable benefits. Integration persists, but often through rationalisations that justify inefficiencies and dependencies. The study recommends clearer policies, stronger accountability mechanisms, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and institutional reforms to rebalance power and enhance legitimacy. By linking power dynamics with rationalisation and collaboration theory, the study provides a novel explanatory framework for understanding Africa's integration paradox, with lessons applicable to other developing regions.

Keywords: afcfta, collaboration theory, governance, power asymmetries, rationalisation theory

Introduction

Economic integration has long been considered a cornerstone of Africa's development strategy. Since independence, African leaders have recognised the limitations of fragmented markets and the persistent legacy of colonial boundaries. Integration has been pursued as a means of expanding markets, fostering industrialisation, enhancing bargaining power in the global economy, and reducing dependence on external actors (Rosenberg et al., 2021). Over the decades, a series of milestones has reflected these aspirations, from the Lagos Plan of Action in 1980 and the establishment of several Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and most recently the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2019. The AfCFTA, with almost universal membership among African Union states, is the most ambitious attempt to date to create a single continental market for goods, services, and investment (Ferreira, 2021). However, progress remains uneven. The International Monetary Fund stresses that reductions in tariffs and non-tariff barriers, coupled with improved trade infrastructure, financial systems, and domestic security, could substantially increase intra-African trade flows and strengthen regional value chains (Dept, 2023). However, the benefits are not shared equally larger economies such as Nigeria and South Africa are far better positioned to capitalise on liberalisation, reinforcing existing asymmetries.

Economic integration cannot be analysed only in terms of economic frameworks or institutional capacity; it is deeply shaped by power relations both within Africa and in its relations with external partners. Internally, dominant economies exert disproportionate influence over regional blocs and continental negotiations, shaping agendas, allocation of resources, and enforcement of agreements (Fofack & Mold, 2021). Externally, powerful actors such as the European Union, China, and the United States influence Africa's trajectory through trade frameworks, financing, and investment partnerships. Recent studies have confirmed this reality. argues that integration tends to benefit larger, more competitive economies, subordinating smaller states unless compensatory mechanisms are included. Similarly, note that Africa remains one of the most isolated regions in global trade but is experiencing renewed momentum for both intra- and inter-regional integration (Simola et al., 2022). Together, these perspectives underscore that integration outcomes are structured as much by politics and power as by formal treaties.

Historical experience reinforces these challenges. Colonial boundaries created artificial states and segmented economies, while post-independence rivalries and weak institutions further complicated integration. Although the Abuja Treaty laid out a roadmap for continental unity, and RECs such as ECOWAS, SADC, and COMESA have achieved partial successes, duplication of mandates and overlapping memberships have slowed progress. Contemporary barriers are equally daunting (Ngono et al., 2025). The African Export–Import Bank highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic and global supply chain disruptions exposed structural weaknesses and magnified dependency on external actors. The African Union Commission warns that trade liberalisation has been prioritised over investment in production and infrastructure, undermining the deeper

MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 986-993

foundations of integration. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Debrah et al. (2024), debt servicing absorbs nearly 27 percent of government revenues in many countries, reducing fiscal space for integration-related investments and weakening negotiation power. These gaps allow dominant states or external actors to influence regional agendas and priorities in ways that entrench existing inequalities.

The Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA), which came into force in 2024 and brings together COMESA, SADC, and the EAC, demonstrates both promise and imbalance. While it expands opportunities for trade and cooperation, critics argue that wealthier members dominate decision-making, raising questions about fairness and inclusivity. add further nuance by showing through network analysis that institutional quality, human capital, and infrastructure are central to successful integration, whereas overlapping memberships, high trade costs, and external shocks act as obstacles (Choquez-Millan et al., 2023). This indicates that integration outcomes are embedded in networks of power, not only in technical frameworks.

Despite these limitations, integration remains central to Africa's future. The problem is that while institutions and agreements are proliferating, their outcomes are uneven because power asymmetries determine who benefits and who does not. Much of the literature highlights structural and institutional barriers, but less attention has been devoted to how narratives and power relations shape the legitimacy of integration (Leshoele, 2020). This study addresses that gap by examining the interplay of power and integration in Africa, focusing on how institutional weaknesses, external pressures, and dominant actors shape outcomes.

The objectives are fourfold: first, to assess how power dynamics influence integration processes across Africa; second, to identify institutional, political, and structural barriers to equitable integration; third, to evaluate the role of external actors and global shocks in shaping Africa's regionalism; and fourth, to propose recommendations that strengthen governance, inclusivity, and legitimacy in integration initiatives. In addressing these aims, the study contributes both theoretically and practically (Tieku & Yakohene, 2023). It brings together rationalisation theory and policy narrative analysis with African political economy, showing how irrational practices are legitimised and sustained through discursive strategies. Practically, it provides insights for policymakers, regional institutions, and international partners seeking to strengthen Africa's integration agenda.In doing so, the study argues that Africa's integration is not only an economic and institutional project but also a communicative and political one. Power asymmetries must be explicitly addressed through compensatory mechanisms, institutional redesign, and inclusive governance. Narratives must be harnessed to mobilise support, strengthen legitimacy, and ensure that weaker actors are not marginalised (Wiegratz & Price, 2024). The AfCFTA, TFTA, and other frameworks will only achieve their transformative potential if the continent addresses these structural imbalances, builds resilient institutions, and promotes integration as a genuinely collective and equitable project.

Literature review

Concept of Power and Economic Integration

Economic integration in Africa is closely tied to the exercise and distribution of power among states. Power shapes not only negotiation outcomes but also the extent to which integration projects deliver equitable benefits. Larger economies such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt often dominate regional economic communities (RECs) and continental initiatives, leaving smaller economies vulnerable to marginalisation (Mahlangu, 2025). argues that while integration frameworks are designed to foster cooperation, they often subordinate weaker states unless compensatory mechanisms are introduced. The International Monetary Fund highlights that the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) could significantly increase intra-African trade, but the gains are unevenly distributed, reinforcing existing asymmetries (Songwe et al., 2021). These findings suggest that integration is not merely an economic process but also a reflection of underlying power structures.

Historical and Political Context

The historical legacies of colonialism and postcolonial reforms continue to shape Africa's integration agenda. Colonial borders fragmented precolonial trade networks and locked African economies into externally oriented patterns of extraction. Post-independence, initiatives such as the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty sought to restore continental unity, However, their implementation has been slow and inconsistent (Parashar & Schulz, 2021). Overlapping memberships in RECs, fragile political will, and entrenched dependencies have undermined progress (African Union Commission). Contemporary challenges reinforce these patterns. The African Export–Import Bank (2024), notes that shocks such as COVID-19 exposed structural weaknesses, revealing Africa's dependence on external partners for trade and investment. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, high debt servicing averaging 27% of government revenues further constrains the fiscal space required for integration projects. These dynamics highlight the enduring impact of colonial legacies and the persistent tension between national and regional priorities.

Theoretical Perspectives

Rationalisation Theory

Rationalisation theory, rooted in Weber's typology, provides a useful framework for understanding how integration outcomes are justified despite inefficiencies. Four forms of rationality are particularly relevant: practical rationality, which legitimises shortcuts as necessary for immediate delivery; theoretical rationality, which relies on selective use of evidence to advance political agendas; substantive rationality UNECA, which appeals to cultural or ethical values such as solidarity; and formal rationality, which justifies rigid procedures even when they obstruct responsiveness (Landström, 2024). In the African context, governments often rationalise delays in integration by attributing them to external shocks or by appealing to Pan-

African ideals to obscure uneven benefits. further demonstrate that institutional quality and human capital strongly influence integration outcomes, while overlapping memberships and high trade costs obstruct progress, underscoring how rationalisation is embedded in both discourse and institutional design.

Collaboration Theory

Collaboration theory complements rationalisation by explaining how states cooperate despite asymmetries and competing interests. Successful collaboration depends on institutions that reduce uncertainty, enforce commitments, and distribute benefits equitably. In Africa, RECs such as ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC attempt to provide such frameworks, but their effectiveness is limited by governance weaknesses and the dominance of larger states (Godefroid et al., 2024). emphasise that institutional capacity is key to sustaining integration, However, many African institutions remain under-resourced and politicised. Collaboration theory therefore highlights both the potential and fragility of regional integration, stressing the need for mechanisms that enhance legitimacy alongside efficiency.

Key Stakeholders and Institutions

African integration involves multiple stakeholders, each with distinct roles and interests. States remain the central actors, as they negotiate agreements and allocate resources. RECs provide institutional frameworks for cooperation, though overlapping mandates frequently dilute their effectiveness (African Union Commission). The AfCFTA represents the most ambitious framework, aiming to unify markets across the continent, However, its success depends on member states' willingness to implement commitments and address asymmetries. External actors also exert significant influence. The Brookings Institution notes that external partners often shape the terms of integration through financing and trade partnerships, limiting Africa's policy autonomy (Ogutu, 2025). Similarly, UNECA stresses that debt and financial dependency reduce bargaining power in international negotiations. These findings underscore that integration is negotiated within a multilayered system where domestic politics, regional institutions, and external actors all exert influence.

Gaps in Existing Research

Despite a growing body of scholarship, several gaps remain. First, much research has focused on structural and institutional barriers such as infrastructure deficits and resource constraints while paying less attention to the role of narratives and rationalisations in legitimising integration practices. Second, studies of policy narratives often concentrate on agenda-setting, but their role in shaping implementation outcomes remains underexplored. Third, while recent studies such as and highlight asymmetries, there is limited comparative research that situates African experiences within broader global debates on regionalism. Finally, reports such as the African Export–Import Bank and the African Union Commission stress the need for research on production integration Grant et al. (2022), industrialisation, and institutional design, However, academic engagement with these themes remains limited. Addressing these gaps requires linking rationalisation and collaboration theories with empirical studies of integration, while also situating Africa within global debates on governance and development.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design to investigate the interplay of power and economic integration in Africa. A systematic review was chosen because it provides a transparent and replicable approach to identifying, evaluating, and synthesising existing scholarship. Unlike a traditional narrative review, this design ensures the inclusion of diverse perspectives while applying explicit selection criteria. The aim was not only to summarise prior studies but also to critically interpret them through the theoretical lenses of rationalisation and collaboration.

Participants and Sampling

Although no human participants were directly involved, the "participants" in this study are represented by the body of scholarly and policy literature analysed. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select works that are most relevant to the research objectives. Sources included:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, prioritising studies on African economic integration, power asymmetries, and institutional performance.
- Books that provide theoretical or historical foundations, including discussions of rationalisation theory and African political economy.
- Reports and policy documents from organisations such as the African Union (AU), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and African Export–Import Bank (Afreximbank), which present current institutional perspectives.

Inclusion criteria were defined as follows: (1) relevance to African economic integration or governance; (2) credibility of source (peer-reviewed, reputable publishers, or official institutional reports); and (3) recency, with emphasis on works from 2020 to 2025. Earlier works were included selectively if they provided essential historical or theoretical insights. Exclusion criteria eliminated sources lacking empirical or conceptual rigour, or those focused exclusively on non-African regions without offering comparative value. This sampling strategy ensured that the dataset balanced historical depth and contemporary relevance.

Data Collection

Data collection followed a structured process consistent with systematic review protocols. Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar were searched using combinations of keywords including African economic integration, power asymmetries, regionalism, AfCFTA, RECs, and governance. Institutional repositories (AU, UNECA, IMF, Afreximbank) were also consulted to capture grey literature and official documents. A desktop-based search supplemented this process to ensure recent preprints and working papers were not overlooked.

Each identified source was screened for relevance by reviewing abstracts, executive summaries, and key findings. A reference management system was used to organise the literature and avoid duplication. The final sample consisted of approximately 65 sources, including 35 journal articles, 10 books or book chapters, and 20 policy reports and working papers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through a combination of content analysis and document review. Content analysis enabled the identification and coding of recurring themes, categories, and relationships across the literature. Codes were developed inductively around key topics such as institutional barriers, power asymmetries, external influence, rationalisation strategies, and collaboration mechanisms. This thematic coding allowed for the synthesis of findings across diverse sources while preserving contextual specificity.

Document review was applied particularly to policy texts and reports from AU, UNECA, IMF, and Afreximbank. This process examined how integration was formally articulated, how narratives were constructed to legitimise specific policies, and how external shocks (COVID-19, debt crises) were used discursively to justify delays or reforms. By triangulating findings from academic and policy sources, the study ensured greater reliability and credibility.

The results of this analysis are presented thematically in the subsequent section, focusing on communication gaps, staffing shortages, resource constraints, autonomy limitations, and administrative weaknesses. These themes reflect both the structural realities of African governance and the narratives that rationalise them.

Results

The analysis of secondary sources revealed five major themes shaping Africa's economic integration outcomes: political and institutional barriers, economic challenges, social and cultural factors, the role of external actors, and the performance of regional institutions. Each theme highlights structural constraints and recurring patterns that influence integration initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and regional economic communities (RECs).

Political and Institutional Barriers

Political instability and weak governance frameworks consistently emerged as central obstacles to integration. Several African states continue to experience conflict, fragile governments, and weak rule of law, all of which undermine regional commitments. Corruption and lack of accountability further weaken institutional capacity, with many integration policies adopted in principle but rarely implemented effectively. Multiple reports highlight that institutional fragmentation and overlapping memberships in RECs contribute to duplication of effort, policy incoherence, and slow progress (African Union Commission; UNECA, 2025).

Economic Challenges

Economic constraints present another major barrier. High levels of public debt consume large proportions of national revenues, reducing fiscal space for investment in infrastructure and integration-related projects (UNECA, 2025). Structural dependence on commodity exports continues to expose economies to external shocks, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted supply chains and revealed limited industrial diversification (African Export–Import Bank). Trade barriers remain significant, including both tariffs and pervasive non-tariff measures, as well as inadequate transport and communication infrastructure that limit cross-border trade flows.

Social and Cultural Factors

Social and cultural dimensions also shape integration outcomes. The persistence of inequalities between and within countries undermines trust among member states. Smaller economies often perceive larger states as dominating benefits, while within states, marginalised groups may feel excluded from regional policies. Cultural diversity enriches Africa's identity but also creates challenges of harmonisation in law, language, and administrative practice. Limited public awareness and engagement in integration projects further weaken legitimacy, with citizens often perceiving regional policies as elite-driven and disconnected from everyday concerns.

Role of External Actors

External actors remain highly influential in shaping Africa's integration agenda. Historical legacies of colonialism entrenched extractive economic structures and fragmented states. In the postcolonial era, multilateral financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have influenced policy through conditionalities attached to loans, often

MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 986-993

prioritising liberalisation and austerity. While foreign investment from Europe, the United States, and increasingly China offers opportunities, it also risks reinforcing dependency, as integration priorities are sometimes aligned with external interests rather than continental needs.

Regional Institutions

Regional institutions are central to Africa's integration but face mixed performance. The AfCFTA represents the most ambitious initiative, aiming to create a unified continental market. Early results indicate progress in tariff reduction commitments and increased attention to regional value chains. However, implementation is uneven, and monitoring mechanisms remain weak. The analysis of RECs such as ECOWAS, SADC, and EAC shows variation in outcomes show in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Barriers to African Economic Integration

Category	Key Findings	Sources
Political & Institutional	Instability, corruption, weak rule of law, overlapping RECs	AUC (2021); UNECA (2025)
Economic	High debt, dependence on commodities, trade barriers, poor infrastructure	Afreximbank (2023); IMF (2023)
Social & Cultural	Inequalities, lack of trust, limited citizen participation, diversity challenges	Te Velde & Massa (2024)
External Actors	Colonial legacy, IMF/WB conditionalities, foreign investment dependency	Brookings (2025)
Regional Institutions	Mixed REC performance, uneven AfCFTA implementation	Ndzamela (2024); IMF (2023)

ECOWAS has made progress in trade liberalisation and free movement protocols but struggles with enforcement. SADC has achieved partial industrial cooperation but remains hindered by overlapping membership with other RECs. In Figure 1 illustrates this overlap. The EAC has demonstrated stronger institutional frameworks, including a customs union, but political tensions among member states occasionally slow progress.

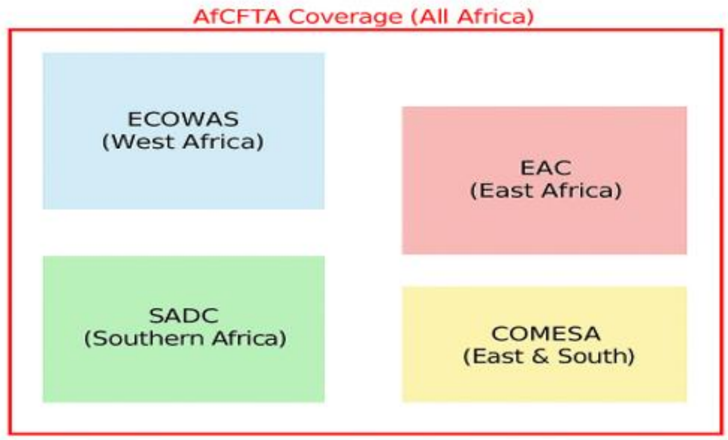

Figure 1. Major Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and AfCFTA Coverage

Summary of Findings

The results indicate that African integration is constrained by a convergence of political, economic, social, and external factors. Political instability and corruption weaken governance frameworks, while debt and structural dependence limit economic resilience. Social inequalities and cultural diversity pose additional hurdles for building trust, and external actors continue to shape agendas in ways that reinforce dependency. Regional institutions demonstrate both progress and limitations, with AfCFTA offering promise but facing slow and uneven implementation.

Discussion

Power Dynamics and Integration Outcomes

The findings demonstrate that African economic integration is shaped as much by power dynamics as by economic or institutional frameworks. Larger economies such as South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt dominate negotiations within the AfCFTA and regional economic communities (RECs) (Cramer et al., 2020). This dynamic creates uneven benefits: stronger economies have the capacity to implement tariff reductions, expand manufacturing, and capture value chains, while weaker states often remain dependent on raw material exports. Such imbalances reinforce existing hierarchies rather than creating equitable cooperation. Power asymmetries are also reflected in decision-making. Smaller economies frequently lack bargaining power, leaving them to adopt agreements designed around the priorities of dominant states. As illustrate, integration networks are not neutral but reflect structural centralities that privilege certain actors. This unevenness raises concerns about whether integration serves collective Pan-African goals or becomes an extension of national interests.

MSW MANAGEMENT -Multidisciplinary, Scientific Work and Management Journal
ISSN: 1053-7899
Vol. 36 Issue 1, Jan-June 2026, Pages: 986-993

The Paradox of Dependency and Autonomy

A central paradox in African integration is the tension between dependency and autonomy. On the one hand, integration is pursued to reduce external dependency by fostering intra-African trade and industrialisation. On the other, integration itself often relies on external financing and technical assistance, which limit autonomy. UNECA highlights that debt servicing absorbs nearly one-third of revenues in some countries, reducing fiscal space for regional investment and tying states to creditor priorities.

This paradox mirrors what rationalisation theory describes: governments frame dependency as necessary for development, rationalising external influence through appeals to pragmatism or solidarity. Practical rationality justifies borrowing and external partnerships as immediate solutions, while substantive rationality reframes them as moral commitments to "development partnerships". However, such rationalisations obscure the persistence of dependency, weakening the autonomy required for effective integration. The AfCFTA, despite its ambition, risks replicating dependency patterns if it fails to address asymmetries in production, technology, and finance.

Trust, Cultural Context, and Inclusivity

Integration is not only an institutional or economic project but also a cultural and social process. The results highlight that inequalities and mistrust undermine cooperation, both among states and within domestic societies. Smaller states often distrust larger economies, fearing domination, while citizens view regional agreements as elite-driven projects disconnected from their needs. Cultural diversity further complicates integration. Multiple languages, legal traditions, and governance systems make harmonisation difficult (DiPrete & Fox-Williams, 2021). However, cultural context can also be an asset if leveraged inclusively. Narratives rooted in shared history and Pan-African identity may build legitimacy. argue that integration will only succeed if trust and inclusivity are prioritised alongside efficiency.

Collaboration theory supports this insight. For cooperation to endure, institutions must not only manage technical barriers but also address perceptions of fairness and cultural legitimacy. Mechanisms such as equitable distribution of gains, participatory decision-making, and transparent communication are essential to build trust. Without inclusivity, even technically sound policies risk rejection.

Long-Term Engagement, Institutional Reform, and Feedback Loops

Another key insight is the importance of long-term engagement. Integration cannot succeed through short-term commitments or one-off agreements. It requires sustained institutional reform and continuous adaptation. Feedback loops are critical for legitimacy: communities and states must see tangible benefits, while institutions must adapt policies in response to concerns.

The African Union Commission acknowledges that past integration efforts failed partly because of weak monitoring and limited feedback mechanisms. Absent such mechanisms, governments rationalise delays and failures as unavoidable, while citizens perceive integration as irrelevant. emphasise that integration networks function effectively only when institutional quality and feedback processes are strong.

Institutional reform is therefore essential. Strengthening transparency, accountability, and administrative capacity can reduce corruption and increase compliance. Equally, financial reform particularly debt management must accompany integration, ensuring that states have the autonomy to invest in infrastructure and production. Afreximbank (2023) calls for stronger investment in industrialisation and regional value chains, arguing that integration will remain fragile without productive capacity.

Global Relevance: Lessons for Developing Regions

Although this study focuses on Africa, its findings resonate globally. Many developing regions face similar paradoxes of rationalising dependency while pursuing autonomy. In Asia, for example, large economies such as China and India dominate regional trade agreements, while smaller states navigate dependency on external investment. In Latin America, integration through Mercosur has repeatedly been challenged by national rivalries and asymmetries in power. Africa's experience offers lessons: integration requires not only tariff reduction but also institutional design that balances asymmetries, investment in production, and inclusive governance. Furthermore, the African case illustrates the importance of narratives in legitimising integration. Governments worldwide frame integration successes or failures in terms of solidarity, security, or modernisation, even when outcomes fall short. By foregrounding narrative and rationalisation, this study contributes a lens that can be applied beyond Africa to explain the persistence of uneven integration outcomes.

Theoretical Contribution: Linking Power, Rationalisation, and Collaboration

This study advances theoretical debates by linking power, rationalisation theory, and collaboration theory. Power explains asymmetries in capacity and influence, showing why integration is uneven. Rationalisation theory explains how these asymmetries are justified discursively, reframing dependency and inefficiency as legitimate or necessary. Collaboration theory highlights conditions for cooperation despite asymmetry, emphasising the need for fairness, trust, and institutional mechanisms.

Together, these frameworks provide a composite explanation for the paradoxes of African integration. Integration persists despite inefficiencies because rationalisations sustain legitimacy, while collaboration frameworks maintain a minimum level of cooperation. However, power imbalances explain why outcomes remain skewed. This synthesis provides both explanatory depth and practical guidance, demonstrating that integration cannot succeed without simultaneously addressing power, narratives, and institutional collaboration.

Summary of Discussion

In summary, African integration outcomes are shaped by structural power asymmetries, persistent dependency, and weak institutional frameworks. The paradox of dependency versus autonomy highlights the risks of external reliance, while trust, inclusivity, and cultural legitimacy are essential for long-term success. Integration requires continuous engagement, institutional reform, and adaptive feedback loops, rather than one-off agreements. Africa's experience offers lessons for other regions grappling with uneven integration, while the theoretical contribution lies in linking power, rationalisation, and collaboration as interdependent explanations of integration dynamics.

Conclusion

This study examined the interplay of power and economic integration in Africa, highlighting the ways in which political, institutional, and external dynamics shape the trajectory of regional cooperation. The analysis revealed that integration efforts such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) face persistent barriers. Political instability, corruption, and overlapping regional frameworks weaken institutional performance. Economic challenges, including high debt levels, structural dependence on commodity exports, and inadequate infrastructure, constrain progress. Social and cultural factors particularly inequalities, limited public engagement, and mistrust further complicate collaboration. In addition, external actors, through both historical legacies and contemporary conditionalities, exert significant influence on Africa's policy space. Regional institutions demonstrate mixed outcomes: while AfCFTA provides unprecedented ambition, its implementation remains uneven, and the performance of RECs varies widely across subregions.

Theoretically, this study contributes by linking power dynamics, rationalisation theory, and collaboration theory to explain Africa's integration paradox. Power accounts for asymmetries in capacity and influence, showing why outcomes remain skewed. Rationalisation theory demonstrates how inefficiencies and dependencies are justified through discursive strategies that maintain legitimacy. Collaboration theory underscores how cooperation is sustained despite these imbalances, but also why it remains fragile in the absence of fairness and trust. Together, these frameworks provide a composite lens that explains why integration persists despite uneven gains and frequent setbacks.

Several practical recommendations emerge from the analysis. First, clearer policies and institutional reforms are needed to streamline overlapping mandates and reduce duplication among RECs. Harmonisation mechanisms should be strengthened to ensure coherence with AfCFTA. Second, stakeholder engagement must be expanded to include communities, private sector actors, and civil society organisations, ensuring that integration is not perceived as elite-driven but inclusive. Third, institutional strengthening is crucial: governments and regional bodies must invest in administrative capacity, infrastructure, and data systems that support implementation and monitoring. Fourth, accountability mechanisms should be reinforced through independent oversight, transparent reporting, and enforcement of commitments, reducing the scope for corruption and political manipulation. Finally, financial reforms are essential to manage debt burdens and expand fiscal space for integration-related investments.

The study has several limitations. It relies primarily on secondary data sources, meaning that findings are based on existing research and policy documents rather than new empirical fieldwork. While this approach allows for breadth, it limits the depth of insights into the lived experiences of policymakers, communities, and businesses directly affected by integration policies. In addition, the study focused primarily on African contexts, which may limit generalisability to other regions, although the findings do have broader relevance for developing economies facing similar challenges.

Future research should address these limitations by conducting empirical case studies that capture the perspectives of key stakeholders, including policymakers, trade officials, and local communities. Comparative research across regions would further enrich understanding of how Africa's experience fits within global debates on integration. Quantitative studies such as surveys of public attitudes or econometric modelling of trade flows could complement qualitative insights, providing stronger evidence for policy design. In addition, the growing role of digital platforms and new technologies in shaping integration should be a priority for future work, as these are transforming trade, finance, and regional connectivity across the continent.

In conclusion, African integration remains both urgent and complex. Addressing asymmetries of power, fostering inclusive narratives, and reforming institutions are essential to ensure that integration delivers equitable benefits. Only through stronger governance, stakeholder participation, and adaptive institutions can Africa transform its integration frameworks from aspirational projects into engines of collective prosperity.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research received no external funding.

References

African Export–Import Bank. (2024). *African Trade Report 2024: Reigniting Growth through Regional Integration.* Cairo: African Export–Import Bank.

Choquez-Millan, M. F., Lechtape, C. L., Löhr, K., Schröter, B., & Graef, F. (2023). Uncovering power asymmetries in North-South research collaborations – An example from sustainability research in Tanzania. *Futures*, *156*, 103316. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2023.103316

Cramer, C., Sender, J., & Oqubay, A. (2020). Uneven, contradictory, and brutal economic development in Africa. In *Oxford University Press eBooks* (pp. 14–45). https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198832331.003.0002

Debrah, Y. A., Olabode, O. E., Olan, F., & Nyuur, R. B. (2024). The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Taking stock and looking ahead for international business research. *Journal of International Management*, *30*(2), 101120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2024.101120

Dept, I. M. F. A. (2023). Regional Economic Outlook, Sub-Saharan Africa, October 2023. In *International Monetary Fund eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400253508.086

DiPrete, T. A., & Fox-Williams, B. N. (2021). The Relevance of Inequality Research in Sociology for Inequality Reduction. *Socius Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, *7*(3), 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/23780231211020199

Ferreira, A. (2021). The curious case of Stablecoins-Balancing risks and rewards? *Journal of International Economic Law*, *24*(4), 755–778. https://doi.org/10.1093/jiel/jgab036

Fofack, H., & Mold, A. (2021). The AFCFTA and African Trade-An introduction to the special issue. *Journal of African Trade*, *8*(2), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.2991/jat.k.211206.001

Godefroid, M., Borghoff, V., Plattfaut, R., & Niehaves, B. (2024). Structural power imbalances in global organisations: analysing IT governance from a postcolonial perspective. *European Journal of Information Systems*, *34*(3), 529–550. https://doi.org/10.1080/0960085x.2024.2325358

Grant, J. A., Issa, A., Söderbaum, F., & Yusuf, B. (2022). Regionalism beyond state-centrism: African regionalism in comparative perspective. *International Journal Canada S Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, *77*(3), 449–468. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020231156136

Landström, K. (2024). On epistemic freedom and epistemic injustice. *Inquiry*, *9*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174x.2024.2323561

Leshoele, M. (2020). AFCFTA and Regional Integration in Africa: Is African Union government a dream deferred or denied? *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, *41*(4), 393–407. https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1795091

Mahlangu, J. (2025). The political economy of African countries has long been shaped by an activist paradigm. *Advance*, *31*(2), 145–162. https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.174652063.32671798/v1

Ngono, A. M., Nkoa, B. E. O., Depret, M., & Asafor, C. E. (2025). Economic resilience in Central Africa in the face of COVID-19: corruption, a hindrance or a key factor? *BMC Health Services Research*, *25*(1), 1204. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-025-13163-0

Ogutu, M. O. (2025). Africa's Trade Agency in a fragmented landscape: The promise and Limits of the AFCFTA in Africa–EU trade. *African Studies Quarterly.*, *23*(2), 51–75. https://doi.org/10.32473/asq.23.2.136669

Parashar, S., & Schulz, M. (2021). Colonial legacies, postcolonial 'selfhood' and the (un)doing of Africa. *Third World Quarterly*, *42*(5), 867–881. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1903313

Rosenberg, J., Strauss, I., & Isaacs, G. (2021). COVID-19 impact on SADC labour markets: Evidence from high-frequency data and other sources. *African Development Review*, *33*(S1), 12–27. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8268.12528

Simola, A., Boysen, O., Ferrari, E., Nechifor, V., & Boulanger, P. (2022). Economic integration and food security – The case of the AfCFTA. *Global Food Security*, *35*, 100651. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2022.100651

Songwe, V., Macleod, J. A., & Karingi, S. (2021). The African Continental Free Trade Area: a historical moment for development in Africa. *Journal of African Trade*, *8*(2), 12. https://doi.org/10.2991/jat.k.211208.001

Tieku, T. K., & Yakohene, A. B. (2023). Analyzing the African Continental Free Trade Area (the AfCFTA) from an Informality Perspective: A Beautiful House in the Wrong Neighborhood. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *3*(3), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad043

Wiegratz, J., & Price, S. (2024). Donors and international aid in neoliberal Africa: taking stock of the 2010s. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, *45*(4), 569–595. https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2024.2436150