

Why Eritrea has Delayed Signing the African Continental Free Trade Area? Investment and Customs Policies of Eritrea in Relation to the Regional Integration

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Abstract: *In the African continent, economic policies that facilitate exports and imports among member states with no or lower tariffs, open to the Market and information, and remove trade barriers could have tangible benefits to different economic growth and the majority of small-medium businesses. Eritrea's provisional government adopted liberal investment law at the end of the year 1991 to accelerate economic growth ambitions in the country. This investment proclamation is expected to have significance in promoting a high level of investment and ensuring self-sustaining economic growth when the government fully implemented it. The government's fundamental development principles are the key means of fighting and alleviating poverty, protecting national sovereignty, and bringing peace and cooperation based on mutual benefits with neighboring states. Eritrea has been committed toward regional Integration by applying the regional reduction of the customs tariff, like what it did in February 1998 with legal notice no. 36/1998 (Regulation to reduce the tariff for the common Market for eastern and southern Africa member state) when it became a member of COMESA. Eritrea's macro-policy, which was drafted in 1994, has not fully achieved what the citizen expected due to U.N. sanctions, the state of no war and peace, and systematic isolation. Eritrea's short and long term objectives have been these concrete principles that are listed in the macro-policy: building strong national unity, Self-sustaining growth, accelerating the process of democratization, prevailing peace and stability in the region, opening up to harmonious and cooperative external relations as well as the Enhancement and promoting regional and international economic cooperation. When we see the Eritrea's political ideology seems unique. And the country has a single-party system, which is the people's front for democracy and justice (PFDJ). Eritrean government believes the Socio-economic Integration begins with the neighboring countries. That is why the government was working toward economic cooperation among the bordering countries and later could expand to the farthest countries.*

Keywords: Regional Integration, Economic Integration, African Continental Free Trade Area, Macro-Policy, Investment policy, and Customs tariff

1. Introduction

Many social scientists define regional Integration (R.I.) as a concept. One of them is (Lombaerde, 2006). He has explained R.I. as the processes of complex social transformations characterized by the intensification of relations between independent sovereign states. It creates new forms of organization, coexisting with traditional forms of state-led governance at the national level. The regional integration processes that emerged after the Second World War were originally mainly about economics and trade; but it has become pure that especially since the 1980s, with the wave of 'new regionalism', regional Integration can be viewed as a multidimensional process that implies, next to economic cooperation, also dimensions of politics, diplomacy, security, culture, and so on. (Seck, 2014) and (AfDB group, 2010) opined regional Integration from the economic side that is defined as the outcome of cooperative arrangement and processes, the implementation of intergovernmental treaties and market-led strategies, which produces the platform for economies in a region to become more closely interconnected. In other words, (Chand, 2005); has been explained it use the diplomacy perspective, in which R.I. is that inwardly focused with 'collective diplomacy' that has an outward focus and is motivated by the pursuit of collective foreign policy objectives.

Regional Integration is one part of international economics that has been growing in significance for many decades. The term itself has a relatively short history; indeed, (Machlup, 1977) was unable to get a single instance of its usefulness prior to 1942. By 1950, however, the term had been given a specific definition by economists specializing in international trade: 'it denotes a state of affairs or a process which involves the amalgamation of different economies into larger free trading regions.

Since the early days of African decolonization's, regional Integration in Africa is stated the primary goal for both African governments and international donors. (Marinov, 2014) opines that R.I. should address the dynamics of the globalized economy to ensure competitiveness through the prime options available in the area of international trade. It is even more critical in Africa's case because of the colonial heritage, poor management, and numerous conflicts. Regional integration cause countries to specialize according to their regional comparative advantage, not their global one (Fujita, 2007). Additionally, Marinov (2014); also discuss economic Integration; it is the removal of various barriers to trade between countries. It indicates the growing economic interaction between countries.

Eritrea has suspended various policies like Economic, Fiscal, Monetary, and investment policies due to bloody war with neighboring Ethiopia in 1998-2000 and has been

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continued up to now claimed to U.N. sanction that lifted on November 15, 2018. Eritrea's provisional government passed the country's first law on investment. The government, eager to accelerate the economic growth, enacted an Investment proclamation NO.18/1991 several months after the country got independence. This investment proclamation encouraged both domestic and international investors to invest in Eritrea. According to Investment Proclamation No. 59/1994, Eritrea has adopted an open and market-oriented economic policy. They were assigning the private sectors a leading role in the country's economic activities to function with no restrictions or discrimination. This proclamation No. 59/1994 deals with investment incentives. The incentives may be classified into three categories; Fiscal incentives, financial incentives, and other incentives.

Economic Integration is also defined as an economic agreement among different countries targeting to improve the welfare, characterized by the reduction or elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade, coordination of fiscal and monetary policy with the aim of achieving full Integration, including standard fiscal, financial, economic and social policies administered by independent supranational institutions. This economic Integration's main objectives are that the member countries use their resources, such as all of the factors of production efficiently. In short, it means achieving economic prosperity, security, peace, democracy, and human rights.

Overview of Regional Economic Communities and the African Continental Free Trade Area

Regional economic Integration was an important topic in Africa, while most African countries began to get independence from the early 1960s. Due to the colonial rule and the effects of Africa's division, it could be difficult for newly-independent African countries to make progress in a global system dominated by the superpower, wealthy and industrialized countries of the Northern hemisphere. African governments should work in unity. As such, the quest for Integration and cooperation was highly influenced by pan-African desires for collective solidarity, peace, unity, self-reliance, and development. This surely has led to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.), and now we called African Union (A.U.) and, later, the establishment of regional groupings and institutions to promote regional Integration.

The African Economic Communities (AEC) was established by Article 2, 3, and 4 of the Abuja Treaty on June 03 1991, with the following objectives (African Union, 1991) Some of the fundamental objectives of the economic communities are;

- To promote cultural, social, and economic development, and promote economic self-reliance and self-sustained development;
- To create, on a continental area, a framework for the mobilization, development, and utilization of the material and human resources of Africa in order to accomplish self-reliant economic development;
- To harmonize and coordinate policies between economic communities to boost the gradual formation of the community.

The 51 Head of States signed this Abuja treaty, and later, the remained states joined. It mainly focuses on establishing economic communities and, side by side, promoting and supporting the existing economic grouping. Therefore, AU and its institutions have supported African countries to create new grouping and improve the already established economic communities. There are eight (8) known and recognizes RECs as building blocks of the African Union. These eight are Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), East African Community (EAC.), Common Market for eastern and southern Africa (COMESA), Economic Community for the Central African States (ECCAS), Economic Community for the West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authorities for developments (IGAD), Community Sahel Saharan state (CEN-SAD), and Southern African Development Community (SADC). These regional economic communities are expected to serve their member States by implementing the regional integration plan. The idea of good faith treaty obligations is the basis on which member countries must make regional integration decisions and ensure its performance and implementation.

Based on the Abuja treaty's primary objective, the formation of the AfCFTA became a significant cornerstone in the long term of African Integration. The AfCFTA is a continent-wide free trade area for those states which have deposited instruments of ratification. This agreement adopted by the 10th extraordinary session of the assembly in Kigali, Rwanda, on 21st March 2018, and entered in force on 1st January 2021 (African Union, 2019). Its basic objective of the AfCFTA is to create a single continental market for goods and services and gradually pave the ground for the establishment of a continental free of customs. It is also expected to expand trade within Africa through smooth coordination and harmonization of trade facilitation and liberalization and instruments throughout the R.E.C.s and the whole of Africa. The CFTA is also expected to improve competitiveness at the enterprise and industry-level by exploiting scale production opportunities, continental market access, and better allocation of resources (Tralac, 2019).

These are aspiring of the agreement listed by tralac (2019) related to Goods and Services. Broadly, the aims of the treaty related to goods are Gradual removal of tariffs; Progressive removal of non-tariff barriers; Improving the efficiency of customs-related activities, trade-related facilitation, and transit; Cooperation on technical obstacles to trade and sanitary; Development and promotion of regional and continental value chains; and Socio-economic development, diversification and industrialization across Africa.

The overarching goals of the agreement related to services are: promote the competitiveness of services; Enhancing sustainable development; Foster investment activities; Accelerate efforts on the development of regional value chains; and gradually liberalize trade in services.

Obviously, various economic policies that facilitate exports and imports among member states with no or lower tariffs, open to the Market and information, and remove trade barriers offer tangible benefits to small and medium-sized enterprises. The history's biggest free trade agreement has a

market size in the region of greater than \$3 trillion. But some sceptics have marked impending difficulties, especially those that affect small- medium-sized enterprises (Akeyewale, 2018).

Eritrea's Macro-Policy and Political Ideology Related to AfCFTA

Macro- policy refers to the policy generally concerned with macro-economic policies, especially with inflation, employment, unemployment, domestic and international trade, monetary and fiscal, investment and exchange rate, c (Andersen & David Gruen, 2011). Which directly affects the countries and can go beyond it up to the regional situations.

To deeply emphasizes that Eritrea has been the victim of western and their menial neighboring countries and the nominal African organizations due to the countries independent political and economic ideology- which is self-reliance. The country was under no peace, no war for the past eighteen years. This has been done intentionally by the menial neighboring with Western working on the regime change plan in Eritrea. However, this all provoking buried with their menial; still, there is pressure from those giant financial funders of Africa. By mentioning the well-known Eritrean proverb called "The camel keeps on marching, while the dog keeps on barking!" the Eritrean government would not be relaxed and will march toward its long-term objectives, which are stated in the Macro-policy- building strong national unity, Self-sustaining growth, accelerating the process of democratization, prevailing peace and stability in the region, opening up to harmonious and cooperative external relations as well as the Enhancement and promoting regional and international economic cooperation.

However, several objectives of the macro-policy drafted in 1994 were not achieved due to the various challenges faced in the country; the government has done a lot. A concerted effort is underway to transform the war-ravaged and isolated economy into a modern one characterized by self-sustaining and inclusive growth. Some government-affiliated individuals opined that the Eritrean government has been working toward regional cooperation since the peace and friendship agreement signed with Ethiopia and the Horn Of Africa (HOA) region countries in 2018, which ends the state of no peace, no war.

Additionally, some of the macro policies can have significance on the way to regional Integration. Such as a) the promotion of regional Investment-investments that are of mutual benefits and that promote regional cooperation with neighboring countries; b) Trade policy-promote regional cooperation and economic Integration; c) Institution building and institutionalization- establishing a national body or unit to monitor and amend as necessary institutional policies, and d). the International economic cooperation policy-encourage trade, scientific, technical, and cultural cooperation with all nations, etc.

Furthermore, Eritrea's political ideology seems unique. And the country has a single-party system, which is the people's front for democracy and justice (PFDJ), similar to other leftist revolutionary movements that emerged victorious

from war, most notably the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Chinese. This people's party had evolved significantly from its ideological roots, but even as the emphasis has shifted to building up Eritrea and developing the country's economies, it has preserved some elements of socialist thought. The country's political ideology is not dogmatic and closed. It is open to new ideas and experiences; it is a dynamic that develops and is enriched through practical experience. And the national charter of the party evolves from the government/party's ideology.

These government's dreams are; National Harmony - For the people of Eritrea to live in harmony, peace, and stability, with no distinction along with regional, ethnic, linguistic, religious, gender, or class lines; Political Democracy- the people of Eritrea, should be active in participating and should become a decision-makers in the administration area of the country and conduct with their rights fully guaranteed by law; Socio-economic Development - For Eritrea to advance economically and socially in the discipline of technology, education, and the standard of living; Social Justice – Equal distribution of services, opportunities, wealth and special observation to be paid to the most underprivileged part of society; Cultural Rejuvenation – Sketching on our rich cultural heritage and the nonconventional values built during the armed struggle, to form an Eritrean culture portrayed by a, solidarity between men and women, respect for humanity, love of country , respect for the law ,love of truth and justice, hard work, self-reliance, self-confidence, inventiveness, and open-mindedness; International and regional Cooperation - For Eritrea to become a esteemed member of the various international communities, by coexisting in cooperation and harmony with its neighbors; and by contributing, to the range of its capability, to global and regional peace, security, and development.

In addition to the above government's ideology and visions mentioned, some of the government officials believe that these fundamental development principles would accompany the government's vision, such as; a). **Self-reliance doctrine** – Eritrea must be as self-reliant as possible and be independent; b). **Collectivism thought and promoting social cohesion** - An enormous amount of sacrifice for the country's sake has been paying and is essential in achieving and maintaining independence. So this doctrine helps to build a strong nation depending on sharing the load and raising social justice; c). **Strong leadership** – leadership has a great role in overcoming huge challenges, therefore focusing on a common goal; d). **Resilience** – backing up from difficulties should be the norm of the society, and effort should be doubled to achieve society's goals; e). **Internal solution for Internal problem** – Eritrea's problems are must be solved by its leaders.

Moreover, the government's fundamental development principles are the key means of fighting and alleviating poverty, protecting national sovereignty, and bringing peace and cooperation based on mutual benefits with neighboring states.

Investment Policy and Customs tariffs in Eritrea

Eritrea's provisional government adopted liberal investment law at the end of the year 1991 to accelerate economic growth ambitions in the country. This investment proclamation is expected to have significance in promoting a high level of investment and ensuring self-sustaining economic growth when the government fully implemented it. The investment proclamation of No. 18/1991 and No. 59/1994 allows the participation of private sectors and encourages domestic and foreign investment in Eritrea.

Eritrea's government views the investment from foreigners and cooperation as an important vehicle that supplements the limitation of accessories of production technology, management, and marketing skills and capital. Considering the role of foreign investors, the newly modified investment policy to be implemented shortly is highly focused and gives priority to the domestic and national investors to invest in their country with respecting the country's rules and regulations. Currently, starting a business in Eritrea could be difficult due to government regulations and a lack of a favourable business environment. "Starting a Business" In Eritrea measures the number of procedures, time, cost, and paid-in minimum capital requirement for a small- to medium-sized limited liability company to start up and formally operate in each economy's largest business city (World Bank Group, 2020).

Table 1: Doing Business 2020, Starting a Business In Eritrea Comparing to Other Selected East African Countries and Regional average Sub-Saharan African.

Country	World Rank	Starting Business Score %	Ease Doing Business Overall Score (World Rank)
Rwanda	35	93.2	76.5 (38)
Kenya	129	82.7	73.2 (56)
Regional Average Sub-Saharan Countries	-	80.1	-
Tanzania	162	74.4	54.5 (141)
Ethiopia	168	71.7	48.0 (159)
Eritrea	185	52.9	21.6 (189)

There is a report's paradox from different international organizations regarding the country's investment and economic freedom. Some international reports show that Eritrea is one of these countries, which is the most difficult country to invest in; maybe these reports are right because Eritrea was under continuous western pressure and isolation due to governments' free and independent ideology so as the investment policy couldn't implement as expected. The government can not deny that there are plenty of limitations of commitment to reforming the hamper of investment freedom. Beyond that, the underdeveloped regulatory and legal frameworks and some structural difficulties undermine the investment of private sector development, alikeness the monetary system-shortage of hard currency severely affect the investment plans.

Further, Eritrea's government established the Eritrea Investment Center (EIC) to attract and facilitate potential investment in the 1990s. This independent entity was empowered to identify investors, help, and identify in implementing investment plans and projects through

necessary consulting. But this Center (EIC) suspended its government's mission due to unexpected and sudden border conflict and the elongated state of no peace, no war between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

When we see the customs tariff regulation and its role in promoting domestic and international trade, Eritrea's government made a free of customs duty to all exportation from inside the country to motivate the domestic producers. Eritrea has been committed toward regional Integration by applying the regional reduction of the customs tariff, like what it did in February 1998 with legal notice no. 36/1998 (Regulation to reduce the tariff for the common Market for eastern and southern Africa member state) when it became a member of COMESA. Eritrea accepted the COMESA tariff reduction agreement and reduced the customs tariff set under the Eritrean Customs tariff regulations legal Notice No. 18/1994 and applied only to goods imported into Eritrea from COMESA member states. Eritrea had the responsibility to implement the decision agreed on by the member state- of Article 46 of the COMESA treaty, which states that every member country has agreed to reduce and ultimately eliminate their Customs tariff for goods to be trades among them.

The study realized that, however, the agreement of AfCFTA demands member states to remove Custom tariffs from 90% of goods, permitting free access to goods, commodities, and services throughout the continent, the regional economic communities still have not exploited their optimum capacity of sharing what they have.

Even if the AfCFTA has significance on the short and long-term economic and social development of the member countries by reducing or removing Custom tariffs, the governments should first focus on their regional groupings to effectively utilize the region's resources and efficiently.

In addition to that, Eritrea's government had implemented the tariff reduction agreement of the biggest African regional grouping COMESA, with the highest expectation of smooth Intra-African Trade start from the neighboring countries going down to the southern part of Africa. Unfortunately, the government complained that Eritrea couldn't accomplish its long-term regional objectives, which were a prosperous and integrated HOA. region by reducing or eliminating their tariffs because of the hidden ethnic interest of TPLF. Which had been dominating the politics of Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018 and has disrupted the region's waves of peace and prosperity to implement its hidden agenda – creating Tigray nation by dividing Ethiopia ethnically and weakening regional grouping –IGAD.

Why has Eritrea delayed signing the AfCFTA?

The reasons for the postponement of Eritrea from signing the AfCFTA could be varied, said one of the top government officials who is working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to him, Eritrea has been working relentlessly toward regional economic Integration since independence, to be specific, since September 1993 at the fourth IGADDs summit of Head of State and governments in Ethiopia's capital - Addis Ababa. He revealed that when Eritrea was officially admitted as the seventh member of

IGADD, it was continuously pushing the member countries to reinvigorate IGADD to produce a much broader mandate and ambitious objectives that embrace cooperation in almost all social-economic, political, and environmental fields.

At that time, he continued, Eritrea's economy was destroyed by the war for independence. The conclusion of thirty years of war between Eritrea and Ethiopia created a comparatively peaceful zone. The subsequent good bilateral relation and cooperation between Eritrea and Ethiopia created a favorable and conducive new environment for beneficial economic cooperation and economic Integration. He then said to achieve the ambitions of the quick economic recovery of the war-torn zone, the government of Eritrea implemented the economic, investment, and trade policies and also was actively participating in the various meeting of the IGADD and Eritrea was one of the first initiators of the IGAD to expand its mandate and objectives to both political and development issues.

He further explained the intensive meeting and consultation of the member countries in 1996. The IGADD became Intergovernmental Authority On Development (IGAD) with a new organizational structure and expanded mandate. As a result, Eritrea's government fully opened the border with neighboring countries. The strategic Eritrean port of Assab gave full access and transferred the port's administration to Ethiopia to utilize it entirely what the Eritrean government did- mutually benefited.

The government official added that Eritrea didn't need to be restricted within the IGAD region; the government's ambition was to expand Eritrea's connectivity and economic Integration beyond the IGAD region up to southern Africa. That's why Eritrea became a member of COMESA and CEN-SAD.

He emphasized that, unfortunately, these all ambitions and dreams of the Horn of African people were killed by a few elites of TPLF who opened a full-scale war against Eritrea in 1998. Later the government's human and capital resources were allocated toward securing national sovereignty and subsequently suspended the fundamental economic development policies such as Investment, Monetary, Trade, Fiscal and other policies with the foundation of democracy, which is the constitution. The top government official believes that the war between Eritrea and Ethiopia had negatively affected the region's socio-economic development. That's why the IGAD became the weakest regional economic community in Africa.

He mentioned that the landmark peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia signed in Asmara in 2018 has a great role in the revitalization of the dormant regional economic community- IGAD. Also, this agreement would have ingredients for improving regional economic Integration in Eastern Africa and far from the region to the whole of Africa. He concluded that by mentioning the proverb "to change the world, first change yourself," so Eritrea's government's premier agenda is to activate the regional economic grouping then, after fully harnessing the resources of the sub-region, the government could join the continental trade area.

The importance of regional cooperation and economic Integration to tap into potential benefits of the AfCFTA for the overall development of the continent is much appreciated. Economic Integration through effective implementation of the continental trade agreement could create more inclusive and sustainable growth and create millions of jobs. Socio-economic Integration begins with the neighboring countries. That is why the Eritrean government has been working toward economic cooperation among the bordering countries and could expand to the farthest countries.

According to (Yemane Gebreab, 2020) "*Eritrea's long-held stance is crystal-clear. First articulated at the 1994 OAU Summit, Government of Eritrea's' (GOE's) pragmatic position, transcends abstract platitudes to focus on incremental/achievable results; i.e., nurturing first the building blocs or RECs.*"

Eritrea's government has fully provided a ground for United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) - east Africa had a meeting for the first time in Eritrea in November 2019; the participants were from government representatives, private sectors, RECs, and civil societies from fourteen eastern African countries. This is a sign of Eritrea's willingness to honest and effective economic cooperation. Peace is the milestone for socio-economic collaboration, and no one can deny the role of peace and friendship agreement with Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia in the region's economic Integration.

The government claims that the regional community IGAD and A.U. betrayed Eritrea for the past twenty years. The AU as one of the adherent organization of the Algiers peace agreement in December 2000 between Eritrea and Ethiopia (Organization Of African Unity, 2000), it should have taken its responsibilities, but it did nothing rather than serving one-party agenda till the TPLF regime fled to the Tigray-Ethiopia region and the new PM came to power in 2018. Then the two States leaders came together and signed another peace agreement that strengthens the neighboring countries' relationship without any mediator.

Finally, the government's stance on signing the AFCFTA is rigid and unique. Eritrea believes that trade is the most important tool for economic growth and fundamental for development and Eritrea's economic policies favor regional cooperation. The ineffective R.E.C.'s system of the H.O.A. region was discouraging; instead of obeying and working based on its rules and regulations, it became an instrument of one or two countries. Eritrea has been continuously demanding IGAD and A.U.'s reformation to serve their people and hear people's voices. Regardless of these organizations' weakness, Eritrea's government still working and devoting to nurturing, strengthening, and effectively utilizing the resources of the Horn of Africa regional bloc, and later could be joined to the AFCFTA, but could not be within the coming five years based on Eritrea's plan.

2. Conclusion

The study came up with Eritrea's Macro- policy and political ideology concerning AfCFTA and explained why Eritrea

delays signing the AfCFTA. It also revealed the investment and custom policies of Eritrea in relation to AfCFTA. According to the study, the government's political ideology and its stance strongly and negatively influence joining the continental free trade area. Eritrea is a single-party system, and its ideology was built in the long war of independence. This ideology reflects a free self-reliant country that aims to build up the country and develop the economies and is not developed within a night; it took long practical experience, and it is not dogmatic; it is open to new ideas and different experiences. The government ideology is based on self-reliance doctrine, collectivist thought, and promoting social cohesion, strong leadership, resilience, and internal solution for the inner problem; these elements make it unique.

Eritrea's macro-policy that was drafted in 1994 is building strong national unity, self-sustaining growth, accelerating democratization, prevailing peace and stability in the region, and opening up to harmonizing and cooperative external relation as well as the Enhancement and promoting regional and international economic cooperation. Based on these concepts, Eritrea is ready to cultivate regional economic integration benefits by implementing the economic cooperation agreement made regionally and then going further to the continental level.

The study found that none of these macro-policies principles has been implemented since it was suspended during the war in 1998-2000. Despite Eritrea's eagerness to see an economically integrated region, the study found that Eritrea is not ready for now to be part of the continental free trade area and will not sign the continental agreement in the coming years due to its rigorous stance of strengthening the Horn of Africa region or IGAD first.

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