

An African continental strategy for reversing the long-run economic effects of slavery¹

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Abstract

Africa's contemporary development challenges are deeply shaped by the long-run economic effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and subsequent extractive integration into the global economy. A growing body of economic history and development research shows that slavery weakened institutions, fragmented markets, disrupted human capital accumulation, and reduced Africa's bargaining power in global value chains. This policy commentary argues that reversing these legacies requires coordinated continental action rather than isolated national reforms. Focusing on the African Union's (AU's) comparative advantages in norm-setting, political convening, and peer accountability, the paper outlines a coherent continental strategy centered on eight AU Continental Flagship Initiatives. The long-run economic effects of slavery are not a closed historical chapter but enduring structural constraints that require coordinated continental responses. By leveraging its unique capacity to enable integration, restore economic scale, and reduce cross-border coordination failures, I suggest that the African Union can transform

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historical disadvantage into a foundation for inclusive, resilient development and renewed global agency for the continent.

1. Introduction

Development debates on Africa have often emphasized contemporary policy and governance failures (Di John, 2010) while underplaying the structural historical forces that shaped the continent's economic trajectory (Mentan, 2010). Among these, the trans-Atlantic slave trade constituted one of the most profound and persistent shocks to Africa's long-run development path (Rodney, 1972; Manning, 2010). Between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, millions of Africans were forcibly removed, political economies were militarized, and institutions were reshaped around extraction rather than production (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2010).

Recent empirical work demonstrates a robust relationship between historical exposure to slave exports and present-day outcomes, including weaker institutions, lower social trust, and reduced income levels (Nunn, 2008; 2020; Pierce & Snyder, 2020). These findings suggest that Africa's contemporary development challenges are not merely the product of recent policy choices, but the cumulative result of long-run structural distortions. This commentary builds on that literature to argue that meaningful reversal of these legacies requires continental coordination at a scale comparable to the original historical shock.

The economic damage caused by slavery was continental in scope, fragmenting regions, distorting trade routes, and undermining state formation across borders (Austin, 2015). Contemporary constraints, small markets, high trade costs, limited industrial learning, and weak bargaining power, are therefore best understood as coordination failures rather than isolated national shortcomings. Addressing these failures requires institutions capable of operating across borders and aligning incentives among sovereign states.

The African Union (AU) is uniquely positioned to play this role. While it lacks supranational enforcement powers, its strength lies in political convening, norm-setting, and peer accountability. Anchored in Agenda 2063 and operationalized through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), AU-led continental policy offers a pathway to restore scale, reduce fragmentation, and rebuild Africa's collective agency in the global economy (African Union, 2015, 2018). The long-run economic effects of slavery represent neither an immutable destiny nor a purely historical concern. They are structural legacies that continue to shape Africa's

development possibilities and therefore demand structural responses. This commentary argues that the African Union's greatest contribution lies not in project implementation, but in enabling integration, restoring scale, and reducing coordination failures that individual states cannot overcome alone.

By anchoring continental integration in productive capability, human capital rebuilding, institutional integrity, and collective bargaining power, the AU can help transform historical disadvantage into a foundation for inclusive and resilient development. In doing so, continental policy becomes not only a response to historical injustice, but a forward-looking strategy for shaping Africa's role in the twenty-first-century global economy.

2. AU Continental Flagship Initiatives

I propose eight African Union-led continental flagship initiatives (AU-CFIs) focused on integration, capability-building and sharing, natural resource and environmental governance, and delivery.

AU-CFI-1: AfCFTA delivery and accountability

Establish an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Delivery Unit and a public implementation scoreboard to resolve non-tariff barriers, improve customs performance, and reduce trade costs.

AfCFTA Delivery and Accountability must move from aspiration to execution if continental integration is to deliver tangible economic gains. While the AfCFTA provides the legal framework for market integration, its success hinges on consistent implementation across borders. The AU should therefore establish a small, dedicated AfCFTA Delivery Unit housed within the Office of the AUC Chairperson. This unit would function as a problem-solving mechanism rather than a reporting body, tasked with identifying and unblocking the most binding implementation constraints, particularly in customs procedures, non-tariff barriers, and corridor performance, working closely with the AfCFTA Secretariat and Regional Economic Communities (REC).

To reinforce accountability and transparency, the AU should launch a Continental AfCFTA Scoreboard, updated quarterly and publicly accessible. The Scoreboard would track a limited set

of high-impact indicators, including border clearance times, the number and resolution rate of non-tariff barriers, utilization of rules of origin, mutual recognition of standards, and the cost of intra-African payments. By focusing on outcomes rather than commitments, the Scoreboard would create a shared evidence base for reform and allow policymakers, businesses, and citizens to assess progress objectively.

Political leadership is essential to sustain momentum. The AU should convene a Heads-of-State “Corridor Cabinet” (that coordinates across multiple government) twice a year, bringing together leaders of countries linked by the continent’s top ten trade corridors, i.e., integrated networks of infrastructure such as highways, railways, ports, and digital systems, that connect production and consumption hubs to facilitate the efficient movement of goods, services, and data, supporting economic development within countries and across borders by linking key markets and supply chains. These meetings would focus narrowly on delivery, using Scoreboard evidence to apply peer pressure, recognize reform leaders, and spotlight persistent bottlenecks. Through political convening, REC harmonization, and a deliberate strategy of “name-and-fame” alongside “name-and-shame,” the AU can transform AfCFTA from a rules-based agreement into a functioning continental market that directly addresses Africa’s historical fragmentation.

AU-CFI-2: Continental standards and mutual recognition

Drive mutual recognition of standards in food, pharmaceuticals, and construction materials to eliminate invisible borders.

Continental Standards and Mutual Recognition are essential to transforming Africa’s fragmented markets into a single, functional economic space. While tariffs are falling under the AfCFTA, divergent product standards and duplicative conformity assessments continue to operate as “invisible borders,” raising costs and preventing firms, especially, for small and medium enterprises, which prevents them from scaling across borders. To address this constraint, the African Union should establish an African Mutual Recognition Framework covering a limited number of priority goods where trade and public-welfare gains are highest, including food products, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, fertilizers, and building materials.

Operationalizing this framework requires coordinated institutional leadership. The AU should strengthen and align the African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO) with national standards bodies to reduce duplicative testing, inspections, and certification requirements. This

coordination would not replace national regulators, but rather enable mutual recognition of trusted assessments, ensuring that a product approved in one Member State can circulate freely across others that subscribe to the framework. To support transparency and compliance, the AU should also publish a single continental directory of accredited conformity assessment bodies, providing firms and regulators with a clear and authoritative reference point.

By systematically removing standards-related barriers, the AU would directly reverse one of the most enduring legacies of historical fragmentation. Standards function as hidden barriers that divide markets even in the absence of tariffs; harmonization and mutual recognition therefore create scale where fragmentation once prevailed. A continental approach to standards would lower transaction costs, stimulate cross-border investment, and enable African firms to participate more effectively in regional and global value chains, turning regulatory alignment into a powerful instrument of economic integration and structural transformation.

AU-CFI-3: Pan-African infrastructure and trade corridor compacts

Politically endorse priority corridors with binding performance indicators on logistics and border clearance.

Africa's persistent infrastructure gaps, particularly in transport, energy, and logistics, remain a binding constraint on integration and industrialization. While national investments are necessary, their impact is limited without cross-border coordination. The AU should therefore identify and politically endorse a limited number of priority Pan-African trade corridors, focusing on those with the highest potential to reduce trade costs, connect production hubs, and unlock regional value chains. These corridors should be governed by binding intergovernmental compacts that commit participating states to shared performance targets.

The AU's role is not project execution but political coordination and accountability. By convening corridor countries at the highest political level and aligning RECs around common standards, such as axle loads, transit procedures, port access rules, and energy interconnection, the AU can ensure that infrastructure functions as a continental public good rather than a patchwork of national assets. Well-functioning corridors directly counteract the spatial fragmentation inherited from slavery and colonial extraction, enabling scale, mobility, and productive integration.

AU-CFI-4: Capability-based industrialization platform

Coordinate continental value chains and discourage harmful tax and incentive competition.

Industrialization is central to reversing Africa's historical role as a supplier of raw materials, yet experience shows that industrial outcomes do not emerge automatically from market integration alone. The AU should therefore coordinate a capability-based industrialization platform, centered on a small number of continental priority value chains such as agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, green minerals, textiles, and digital services. The objective is not uniform industrialization across all countries, but strategic specialization and learning within an integrated market.

The AU can add value by discouraging harmful competition among Member States, in particular, tax races and duplicative special economic zones, and instead promoting performance-based industrial support tied to productivity, exports, employment, and local supplier development. By aligning incentives and setting continental norms for industrial policy discipline, the AU can help ensure that industrialization builds durable capabilities rather than enclaves, addressing the long-run underdevelopment of productive systems rooted in Africa's externally engineered extractive past.

AU-CFI-5: Continental human capital compact

Set minimum human-capital benchmarks and mutual recognition of skills and qualifications.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade inflicted a profound and lasting shock to Africa's human capital accumulation, effects that compound across generations. Reversing this legacy requires a continental commitment to rebuilding skills, health, and knowledge at scale. The AU should champion a *Continental Human Capital Compact*, anchored in minimum benchmarks for early childhood development, foundational literacy and numeracy, maternal health, nutrition, and disease prevention, i.e., areas with the highest long-term economic returns.

Beyond basic investments, the AU should promote mutual recognition of technical and vocational qualifications and expand academic and professional mobility across the continent. An integrated African labor and skills market would increase returns to education, reduce skill mismatches, and support industrial upgrading. By treating human capital as a continental public good rather than a purely national responsibility, the AU can help restore the demographic and productive potential eroded by centuries of forced extraction.

AU-CFI-6: Domestic resource mobilization and integrity standards

Promote open contracting, beneficial ownership transparency, and customs reform.

Africa's capacity to finance its own development is severely constrained by illicit financial flows, weak tax systems, and governance failures, many of which have historical roots in extractive institutions (Sumaila, 2018; UNECA 2020; Sumaila et al. 2020). The African Union should therefore advance continental integrity standards as a core pillar of economic transformation. Priority areas include open contracting, e-procurement, beneficial ownership transparency, and customs modernization, all of which directly strengthen state capacity and public trust.

The AU's comparative advantage lies in norm-setting and peer accountability. By establishing minimum standards and publicly tracking adoption, the AU can reduce leakage, enhance fiscal legitimacy, and expand the domestic resource base needed to fund infrastructure, education, and health. Strengthening public financial integrity is not merely a governance reform; it is a necessary condition for breaking the historical cycle of extraction without development.

AU-CFI-7: Critical minerals and natural resource coordination

Establish shared bargaining platforms and regional beneficiation hubs. Africa's natural resource endowment offers both opportunity and risk.

Without coordination, resource wealth can reinforce dependence and volatility; with collective action, it can support industrial upgrading and strategic bargaining power. The African Union should establish a continental coordination mechanism for critical minerals and other strategic resources, centered on shared model contracts, environmental and social standards, and regional beneficiation strategies.

By encouraging regional hubs for processing and value addition, rather than fragmented national efforts, the AU can help Member States move up global value chains while avoiding costly duplication. Coordinated bargaining and standards would also strengthen Africa's position in negotiations related to the global energy transition. In this way, natural resources can be transformed from a historical liability into a foundation for industrial and technological development.

AU-CFI-8: Peace, security, and justice as economic infrastructure

Treat stability and rule of law as prerequisites for investment and trade. Persistent insecurity remains one of the most significant obstacles to integration, investment, and development in parts of Africa. The AU should continue to treat peace and security not as separate from economic policy, but as foundational economic infrastructure. Strengthening early warning systems, mediation capacity, and post-conflict stabilization is essential to protecting trade corridors, productive zones, and human capital.

In addition, the AU should deepen cooperation against transnational crimes such as trafficking, illegal mining, illegal fishing, and smuggling, that drain resources and undermine state authority (Sumaila et al. 2006; Iroanya & Simataa, 2024). By reinforcing justice, security, and the rule of law at a continental level, the AU creates the enabling conditions for markets, institutions, and human capabilities to flourish, thereby directly countering the instability and fragmentation rooted in Africa's historical experience.

3. Conclusion

The AU CFIs proposed herein form a coherent continental strategy aimed at reversing the structural legacies of slavery and extractive integration through a common causal logic. AfCFTA delivery, standards harmonization, and corridor-based infrastructure directly address Africa's historical market fragmentation by expanding scale, lowering transaction costs, and restoring connectivity across borders. Capability-based industrialization, coordinated natural resource and environmental governance, and human capital investment target the long-term erosion of productive systems and skills that accompanied centuries of population extraction and institutional weakening. Meanwhile, domestic resource mobilization, integrity standards, and peace and security interventions strengthen the institutional foundations required for sustained investment, trust, and collective action.

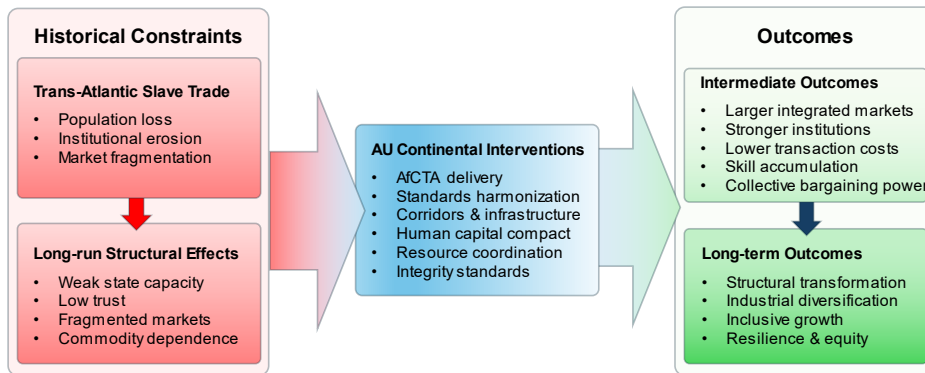


Figure 1. Theory of Change for an African Union–led continental response to the long-run economic effects of slavery. The diagram highlights how AU interventions that focus on integration, capability-building, human capital, integrity, and collective bargaining power can help redress the structural legacies of slavery and enable inclusive, resilient, and diversified growth outcomes across Africa.

This integrated approach reflects the Theory of Change articulated in Figure 1. Rather than treating underdevelopment as the result of isolated national failures, the framework recognizes slavery as a continental structural shock that produced persistent coordination failures, including, fragmented markets, weak state capacity, low trust, and limited bargaining power. AU-led interventions operate precisely at this structural level, where individual states face binding collective-action constraints. By focusing on norms, incentives, peer accountability, and political coordination, the AU reduces these constraints and enables intermediate outcomes such as larger integrated markets, improved institutional performance, skills accumulation, and coordinated bargaining that no country could achieve alone.

Crucially, this agenda aligns closely with Agenda 2063’s vision of “an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens.” Integration is not treated as an end in itself, but as a means to rebuild productive capabilities and restore Africa’s agency within the global economy. Human capital is framed as a continental public good, industrialization as a learning process rather than an enclave activity, and natural and environmental resources as strategic assets rather than sources of dependence. In this sense, the proposed AU strategy represents not only a response to historical injustice, but a forward-looking development compact, one that

transforms Africa's demographic scale, institutional diversity, and resource endowments into the foundations of inclusive growth, resilience, sustainability and shared prosperity.

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