**AfCFTA & Regional Trade Agreements: How Africa’s New Trade Deal Complements Existing Frameworks While Creating New Opportunities**

**Introduction**

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) marks a transformative step in Africa’s journey towards economic integration. Bringing together 54 countries, with a combined GDP of over $3.4 trillion and a population of more than 1.3 billion people, AfCFTA is the world’s largest free trade area zone by the number of participating countries. It aims to boost intra-African trade, industrial diversification and cross-border investment.

However, as implementation gains momentum, key issues have emerged among policymakers, businesses, and development practitioners. These concerns focus on trade preference continuity, regulatory coherence, and the role of existing institutions. Issues at hand include how this new continental framework aligns with Africa’s existing regional trade agreements such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), whether trade preferences are at risk and how can countries like Zimbabwe navigate this evolving landscape?

**Complementing, Not Replacing: The Legal and Institutional Design**

AfCFTA is designed to build upon, not dismantle Africa’s existing Regional Economic Communities (RECs). This is achieved through the principle of the “preservation of the *acquis*,” a concept borrowed from the French phrase, “*acquis communautaire*” referring to the body of existing laws, regulations and trade commitments that member states have already established through economic communities. In the African context, this refers to maintaining previously agreed-upon trade frameworks, regulations, and tariff concessions made through RECs such as COMESA and SADC. Under this framework, established gains like tariff liberalisation of intra-SADC trade or COMESA’s Simplified Trade Regime and digital customs platforms will remain in place. Instead of creating conflicting trade obligations, AfCFTA creates a dual-layered architecture in which regional progress is preserved while continental trade is expanded.

The legal foundation of this approach is codified in Article 5(f) of the AfCFTA Agreement, which commits to respecting and building upon existing regional trade arrangements. Article 19(2) introduces a “non-regression” clause: countries with higher standards of regional cooperation must maintain them, ensuring no backtracking. These provisions protect long-standing trade relationships and encourage further liberalisation.

**Real-World Testing: The Guided Trade Initiative and Pan-African Payment and Settlement System**

While the legal framework is clear, operationalising AfCFTA has presented both opportunities and challenges. A key pilot project, the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI), launched in 2022 enabled eight countries including Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, and Egypt to begin trading under AfCFTA preferences, albeit with only about 100 products. Products like batteries, tea, and ceramics were exchanged, offering valuable insights into the functioning of rules of origin(RoO), customs cooperation, and transit logistics.

The GTI has demonstrated AfCFTA’s potential while revealing implementation hurdles. These include fragmented logistics networks, varying levels of customs automation, and limited awareness among traders. In response, the AfCFTA Secretariat and member states are accelerating key initiatives such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), which aims to reduce transaction costs and eliminate the need for third-party currencies like the United States dollar. Now operational across the continent, PAPSS is a crucial step toward integrated and efficient intra-African trade.

**Opportunities and Implications for Business**

AfCFTA’s harmonised RoO and non-tariff barrier (NTB) monitoring mechanisms offer African businesses new opportunities. For instance, the 40% local content requirement under AfCFTA RoO pushes firms to source inputs from within the continent, thereby fostering the development of regional supply chains. Concurrently, the NTB online reporting mechanism has already resolved several cross-border trade disputes, helping to create a more predictable and transparent trade environment.

Businesses operating across multiple RECs also benefit from the AfCFTA’s “*variable geometry*” approach, which allows countries to liberalise at different timeframes based on readiness. This flexibility reduces disruption and respects national development contexts. A company in Zimbabwe can continue trading under SADC or COMESA rules while exploring new opportunities under AfCFTA for trade with countries in ECOWAS or North Africa.

Importantly, the AfCFTA architecture avoids overlapping or conflicting obligations. Instead, it introduces a phased integration process that adds value without dismantling the functional elements of existing regional frameworks. For the private sector, this continuity fosters strategic planning and long-term investment.

**Conclusion: A Foundation for Continental Prosperity**

AfCFTA offers more than market access, it provides a structured pathway for economic transformation rooted in African cooperation. By preserving existing REC achievements and using them as a foundation for wider integration, the agreement ensures stability during a period of ambitious transition. For Africa as a whole, this is not simply a trade reform, it is a strategic realignment that places the continent on a trajectory of shared prosperity, industrial development, and economic sovereignty.