

# Social Dimensions of Economic Integration: A Sociological Study in the Context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

**Meriem Bellakhdar (Ph.D)**

E-mail: me.bellakhdar@lagh-univ.dz

Amar Telidji University of Laghouat, Algeria

## Abstract:

The world has witnessed economic, political, and social transformations that have led to increasing interdependence among states, making regional integration an important mechanism for addressing the challenges of globalization and achieving development. Integration is not limited to trade and investment liberalization; it also extends to social, political, and cultural dimensions that affect employment, migration, living standards, and social inequalities. This issue is particularly important in Africa because of its social and cultural diversity, high proportion of young people, and widespread poverty, unemployment, and social and spatial inequalities. In this context, African integration efforts have evolved from the Organization of African Unity to the African Union and ultimately to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which entered into force in 2021. The Free Trade Area is not merely a trade-liberalization agreement; it may also have social effects in the areas of employment, migration, poverty, local development, youth and women's empowerment, and relations among border communities. Therefore, studying it sociologically makes it possible to understand the relationship between economic and social transformations and the extent to which economic integration can contribute to balanced social development.

**Keywords:** Cohabitation; Social Transformation; Family; Value System; Religious System; Muslim Societies.

## Introduction:

Over the past decades, the world has witnessed profound transformations affecting various economic, political, and social fields, leading to increasing interdependence among societies and states. In light of these transformations, regional integration has become one of the mechanisms adopted by states to address the challenges associated with globalization, expand areas of cooperation, and strengthen their capacity to achieve development.

Regional integration is not limited to the economic dimension associated with trade and investment liberalization; rather, it extends to social, political, and cultural dimensions, given the changes it produces in patterns of work, migration, social relations, living standards, and social and spatial inequalities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Received: 17/03/2026 ; Accepted : 25/08/2026 ; Published : 29/09/2026

From this perspective, economic integration has become an important subject in sociological studies because it is connected with transformations in the structure of society and with relations among different social groups.

This issue is particularly important in the African continent, which is characterized by considerable social, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and by a demographic structure dominated by young people, alongside widespread poverty, unemployment, social and spatial inequalities, and the persistence of conflicts and political instability in several areas.

Since independence, Africa has witnessed a number of initiatives aimed at strengthening cooperation and integration among its states, beginning with the Organization of African Unity, followed by the African Union, and culminating in the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which entered into force in 2021 as one of the most important continental projects aimed at strengthening economic interconnectedness among African states.

This area cannot be viewed merely as a trade-liberalization agreement, but rather as a project that may have direct and indirect effects on African societies, particularly in the fields of employment, migration, poverty, local development, social inequality, youth and women's empowerment, and relations among border communities.

Accordingly, studying the African Continental Free Trade Area from a sociological perspective makes it possible to understand the relationship between economic and social transformations and the extent to which economic integration can achieve balanced social development that encompasses different groups and regions.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

Despite the economic importance of African integration, its success is not linked only to removing trade barriers or increasing the volume of exchanges; it is also linked to the ability of African societies to benefit from its outcomes and transform economic growth into social development.

Differences in levels of development among African states, high rates of poverty and unemployment, the spread of the informal economy, weak social services, and political and security conflicts are all factors that may affect the nature of the outcomes of economic integration.

Hence, the study's problem revolves around the following main question:

To what extent can African economic integration, in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area, contribute to achieving social development and integration among African societies, and what are the main social challenges that hinder this process?

### **2. Importance of the Study:**

The importance of the study stems from the fact that African integration is not merely an economic phenomenon, but is also associated with broad social transformations.

Its importance is reflected in the following:

- Highlighting the relationship between economic integration and social development.
- Clarifying the potential social effects of the African Continental Free Trade Area.
- Analyzing the impact of integration on employment, poverty, and social inequality.
- Addressing the role of youth and women in the integration process.
- Highlighting the importance of border areas in African social and economic relations.
- Contributing to the expansion of sociological studies related to African integration.

### **3. Objectives of the Study:**

The study aims to:

- Clarify the concept of economic and social integration.
- Introduce the African Continental Free Trade Area.
- Analyze the social dimensions of economic integration.
- Identify the main social challenges facing African integration.
- Highlight the importance of incorporating the social dimension into African economic policies.

### **4. Methodology:**

The study adopts the descriptive-analytical method by describing the phenomenon of African economic integration and the African Continental Free Trade Area, and then analyzing their social dimensions and potential implications for societies and social groups.

The study also draws on a sociological approach that views the economy as part of the social structure and considers economic transformations to be closely connected with transformations in social relations, patterns of work, migration, inequality, and integration.

## **Chapter One: The Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of the Study:**

### **1. Concept of Economic Integration:**

In general, integration refers to the process of combining different elements with the aim of forming an interconnected whole. Economic integration is associated with removing or reducing barriers that hinder trade and economic relations among a group of states and with gradually moving toward higher levels of cooperation and coordination.

The term was defined on the basis of the Latin word “integrates,” which means completion or the whole. Integration was defined as the process through which a whole can be created or formed by assembling or adding separate parts to one another. Thus, integration means bringing parts together in a new form and eliminating discrimination among economic units in different states in order to achieve equality of opportunity for all factors of production, not only at the international level but also at the regional level (1).

In economic thought, economic integration refers to the process through which all obstacles impeding the smooth movement of trade among a group of participating countries are removed. This process passes through several stages, beginning with the removal of customs barriers and extending to the coordination and harmonization of the different economic policies of the states so that they become a single entity. Within this framework of integration, economists have expressed differing views regarding the formulation of a unified concept of economic integration (2).

Economic integration in developing countries aims to establish permanent and continuous compatibility between the resources and capabilities of the integrated entities and countries and their development requirements, thereby creating a suitable climate for accelerating growth and preparing opportunities for underdeveloped factors of production to advance the economies of countries toward growth and prosperity within an appropriate framework of practical planning that takes into account the conditions, objectives, and methods adopted to achieve development (3).

Over time, however, the term evolved and its concept broadened. It came to be defined as a process of creating interdependence among the economies of a group of states at different levels and on the basis

of certain foundations, using different approaches with the aim of increasing and strengthening the economic and social capacity of the member states (4).

Accordingly, African economic integration can be said to be a process aimed at unifying the economies of African states by strengthening trade, investment, and social cooperation among them in a manner that achieves shared and sustainable development.

## **2. Concept of Social Integration:**

The sociological approach does not limit the study of African integration to its economic aspect; rather, it is concerned with the accompanying social outcomes, such as the movement of workers and individuals, changes in employment opportunities, the development of consumption patterns, and changes in relations among groups and regions.

Social integration refers to the existence of relationships of cooperation, interconnectedness, and solidarity among members of society, its groups, and its institutions.

The concept of social integration in sociology has been particularly associated with the thought of Émile Durkheim, who studied the forms of solidarity that bind members of society together. In his analysis, he moved from mechanical solidarity, associated with similarity, to organic solidarity resulting from the division of labor, specialization, and interdependence.

Émile Durkheim is one of the most important sociologists whose ideas can be used to understand this relationship. In his book *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim distinguished between two types of social solidarity:

**Mechanical Solidarity:** It arises primarily from similarities among members of society in values, beliefs, and ways of life.

**Organic Solidarity:** It arises from differences in functions, the division of labor, and interdependence among individuals and groups. Individuals do not perform the same roles; rather, each depends on others because their functions differ (5).

Durkheim explains that organic solidarity is based on society being a system of different functions connected by reciprocal relationships. This idea can theoretically be used to understand how specialization and economic cooperation among African states may strengthen social interconnectedness (6).

## **Economic Integration as a Means of Building African Solidarity:**

From a sociological perspective, the importance of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is not limited to increasing trade. Its official objective is to create a single market for goods and services and facilitate the movement of people in order to deepen the continent's economic integration.

This may have the following social effects:

- Increasing contact and communication among African peoples.
- Encouraging migration and mobility associated with work, study, and business.
- Creating cross-border professional and economic networks.
- Increasing familiarity among different African cultures.
- Strengthening awareness of shared interests.
- Supporting the idea of a common African identity and belonging.

Here we find a very important connection with the issue of African economic integration. African states differ in their resources, economic capacities, and productive sectors; therefore, cooperation and the division of economic roles may create interdependence among them.

From this perspective, African integration can be viewed as a process that is not limited to the economic dependence of states on one another, but may also contribute to creating new forms of interdependence among societies.

### **3. Importance of Socioeconomic Integration:**

Economic and social integration is particularly important because it can strengthen solidarity among African states and peoples, support shared development, and contribute to addressing problems such as unemployment, poverty, and weak infrastructure.

Given the importance of regional economic cooperation, African countries have long sought to deepen the idea of integration as a means of accelerating and strengthening economic and social development. This began during the period following the independence of many countries of the continent in the 1960s, when African decision-makers called for unity, cooperation, and integration for Africa on the premise that “Africa must unite” (7).

Therefore, the African aspiration can be considered deeply rooted in African history. Although the initial objective was to gain political influence and a stronger voice on the international stage, this was also driven by a readiness to confront the challenges of globalization, interdependence, and the marginalization experienced by the African continent and its countries. The Organization of African Unity, established on 26 May 1963, represented one of the first building blocks for integrating African economies, with the aim of resolving conflicts among the countries of the continent, achieving development, and improving living standards in many African countries (8).

The importance of African economic integration can be summarized as follows:

- Promoting intra-African trade and establishing free-trade areas and customs unions that help reduce transportation and transit costs and increase the flow of goods and services among African states. This expands markets and production opportunities within the continent instead of relying on external markets.
- Supporting industrialization and enhancing value added through the development of regional value chains (such as agriculture, automobiles, and pharmaceuticals), strengthening manufacturing industries, and upgrading the value added of African products. This transforms the continent from a raw-material supplier into a global industrial actor.
- Improving the continent's competitiveness and reducing production costs by benefiting from economies of scale, in addition to attracting greater foreign direct investment through the existence of a unified market.
- Economic integration increases Africa's competitiveness in dealing with major economic blocs.
- Achieving economic stability, reducing external dependency, diversifying sources of income, reducing excessive dependence on external trading partners, strengthening food security, and reducing countries' vulnerability to global economic shocks.
- Enhancing the ability to protect African interests in matters of trade, investment, intellectual property, and debt.
- Improving infrastructure through joint regional projects, building cross-border roads, railways, and ports, and expanding energy and electricity-interconnection networks.

- Creating employment opportunities and reducing unemployment. Integration encourages the growth of productive, industrial, and service sectors; the expansion of companies and increased economic activity can create millions of jobs for young people.
- Strengthening political and security stability and reducing conflicts among states by creating shared economic interests and improving political and diplomatic relations.

## **Chapter Two: The African Continental Free Trade Area and Its Social Dimensions**

### **1. Establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area:**

The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area came within African efforts aimed at overcoming economic fragmentation and strengthening cooperation among states.

The first idea for establishing a continental free-trade area emerged at a meeting of African trade ministers held at the end of October and beginning of November 2010 in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. The idea was soon adopted by the African Union Summit in January 2011. At the 18th Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in early 2012, the summit formally adopted the decision to establish a free-trade area and set 2017 as the target date for its implementation (9).

The project represents an important development in the course of African integration because it brings a large number of African states together within a single continental trade framework.

### **2. The Social Dimension of the Free Trade Area:**

The importance of the agreement from a sociological perspective lies in the fact that its effects are not limited to economic institutions but may extend to individuals and groups.

Increased trade and investment activity may lead to:

- Creating new employment opportunities: Expanding markets and increased economic activity may open new employment opportunities, particularly for young people.
- Reducing poverty and improving income: A World Bank study on the economic and distributional effects of AfCFTA indicates that the agreement may affect poverty and income levels and their distribution, in addition to its effects on unskilled workers, young people, and women (10).
- Economic empowerment of women: Supporting women's participation in trade, particularly informal cross-border trade, is an important social aspect of African trade integration. The African Union has devoted a study to the opportunities AfCFTA provides for women working in informal cross-border trade (11).

Youth inclusion: The expansion of African markets and value chains may increase demand for skills and labor, making the development of young people's skills an important element in benefiting from the agreement.

Improving living standards: Increased production, trade, and investment may, depending on how gains are distributed and on accompanying policies, contribute to raising incomes and improving access to goods and services.

Strengthening African social integration: Increased economic interconnectedness among states may support cooperation and interaction among African societies alongside the economic dimension of integration.

It can be said that the social dimension of the African Continental Free Trade Area consists in making trade integration a tool for comprehensive development by supporting employment, reducing poverty, empowering women and youth, and improving the distribution of economic opportunities. However,

achieving these effects is not automatic; it requires accompanying policies that ensure that less competitive groups and regions benefit.

### **Chapter Three: Social Challenges of African Economic Integration**

#### **1. Poverty:**

Poverty is one of the most important challenges facing social development in Africa. Economic growth is expected to contribute to improving income levels; however, the extent to which poor groups benefit from growth depends on how fairly opportunities and wealth are distributed.

Therefore, economic integration requires social policies that ensure that the most vulnerable groups are not left outside the development process.

#### **2. Unemployment and Youth:**

Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, represents a major social challenge. Africa is characterized by a high proportion of young people in its population structure, making the provision of employment opportunities, vocational training, and education essential conditions for achieving social stability.

The Free Trade Area can provide new opportunities in industry, services, transport, trade, and agriculture, but this requires developing the skills and professional capacities of the population.

#### **4. Migration:**

Economic integration may lead to increased movement of people and workers among African states.

Migration may provide opportunities for work and learning and improve income, but it may also generate challenges related to social integration, discrimination, and competition for resources and services.

#### **5. The Informal Economy:**

The informal economy absorbs large numbers of workers in Africa, particularly women and young people.

The problem is that many of these workers do not fully benefit from social protection, insurance, and formal services.

Therefore, successful integration requires the gradual incorporation of the informal economy into the formal economy.

#### **6. Women:**

Women play an important role in small-scale trade, agriculture, and cross-border trade.

However, constraints related to financing, ownership, education, and training limit their ability to benefit from economic opportunities.

Consequently, the social dimension of integration requires strengthening women's economic participation.

#### **7. Border Areas:**

Border areas represent important spaces for interaction among African communities, but they often suffer from weak infrastructure and services.

The lack of adequate and appropriate means of transport creates a natural obstacle to the entry of products from each African country into the markets of other countries. Likewise, weak communication facilities and the lack of timely information affect the speed and efficiency of decision-making concerning exchange operations and interaction among member states in the integration process (12).

The Free Trade Area can turn these areas into centers of economic and social exchange, provided that security, roads, markets, and services are made available.

## **8. Conflicts and Instability:**

Armed conflicts and political instability constitute obstacles to the movement of people, goods, and investments.

Conflicts also lead to displacement, poverty, deterioration of social services, and destruction of infrastructure.

Therefore, economic integration requires a stable social and political environment.

Many African states are characterized by tribal dynamics and multiple ethnic conflicts and separatist movements. Civil wars have also occurred in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Sierra Leone, in addition to political disputes and border conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Uganda and Kenya, Malawi and Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia, and Algeria and Morocco (13).

## **Chapter Four: Toward Socioeconomic Integration:**

Socioeconomic integration means moving from an integration model focused solely on trade liberalization and increasing exchanges toward an integration process that places people and social development among its core objectives. In the African context, this approach is particularly important with the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area, because the success of integration is measured not only by an increase in the volume of trade but also by the extent to which it affects employment opportunities, income, poverty reduction, and economic inclusion.

This approach is based on a number of areas:

- Linking trade liberalization with employment: Directing the growth of trade and investment toward sectors capable of creating jobs, especially for young people.
- Economically integrating women: Removing barriers facing women in trade, particularly cross-border trade, and strengthening their access to African markets.
- Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises: Enabling local enterprises to access regional markets and benefit from opportunities offered by African value chains.
- Achieving a broader distribution of the gains from integration: Developing policies that help groups and regions that benefit less from trade openness to adapt and participate in economic activity.
- Developing human capital: Investing in education, vocational training, and skills so that people can benefit from employment opportunities created by integration.
- Strengthening social protection: Accompanying economic transformations with mechanisms to protect groups that may be temporarily affected by competition and increased openness.
- Achieving sustainable and inclusive development: Making economic integration a means of improving living standards and strengthening social inclusion, rather than a commercial objective in itself.

Socioeconomic integration is based on the principle that trade liberalization should be linked to clear social objectives. Increased trade becomes more closely connected with development when it is transformed into employment opportunities, improved income, empowerment of women and youth, support for local enterprises, and reduction of social and economic disparities. Therefore, the social dimension represents a complement to the economic dimension in the African integration project.

## **Conclusion:**

The study shows that African economic integration is a multidimensional process that goes beyond trade liberalization and the removal of customs barriers to encompass social, cultural, demographic, and political transformations.

The African Continental Free Trade Area constitutes one of the most important initiatives that may contribute to strengthening interconnectedness among African states and societies by expanding markets, stimulating investment, developing production, and creating employment opportunities.

However, transforming these economic potentials into tangible social outcomes requires addressing a number of challenges, foremost among them poverty, unemployment, social and spatial inequality, weak institutions, the informal economy, conflicts, and political instability.

The sociological approach also reveals that the success of integration is measured not only by the volume of trade among states but by the extent to which it affects the lives of individuals and groups, improves working and income conditions, reduces poverty and marginalization, and strengthens social inclusion.

Accordingly, the African Continental Free Trade Area needs to be part of a broader development project that links economic growth with social justice, places people at the center of the integration process, and ensures the participation of youth, women, vulnerable groups, and less-developed regions.

Thus, the future of African integration is linked to the ability of states and societies to move from mere economic cooperation toward building an African space based on interdependence, solidarity, and shared social development.

### **Recommendations:**

- Integrating the social dimension into African economic integration policies.
- Developing special programs for youth employment and linking education and training to labor-market needs.
- Supporting women's participation in trade and investment.
- Developing social-protection programs for vulnerable groups.
- Gradually integrating the informal economy.
- Directing investment toward rural and border areas.
- Improving transport and communication infrastructure.
- Strengthening university and cultural exchange among African states.
- Supporting conflict-resolution mechanisms and achieving stability.
- Involving universities, research centers, and civil society in assessing the social effects of the Free Trade Area.
- Adopting social indicators alongside economic indicators to measure the success of African integration.

### **Footnotes and References:**

1. Mohsen Ahmed Mahmoud Al-Khudairi, Economic Integration between Egypt and Sudan, Master's Thesis in African Studies, Department of Political and Economic Systems, Institute of African Research and Studies, Cairo University, 1980, p. 5.
2. Sami Hatem Afifi, Economic Blocs between Theory and Practice, Egypt: Egyptian Lebanese House, 2005, p. 28.
3. Mohsen Ahmed Mahmoud Al-Khudairi, Economic Integration between Egypt and Sudan, same reference, p. 6.

4. Concept of Economic Integration, Political Encyclopedia, accessed 11/02/2026, <https://politicalencyclopedia.org/dictionary/%D9%85%D9%81%D9%87%D9%88%D9%85%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A>
5. The Division of Labor after Durkheim; Oxford Bibliographies in Sociology; Oxford Academic, April 24, 2019. Accessed 16/02/2026, <https://academic.oup.com/reference/62417/reference-article-abstract/561723500>
6. The African Continental Free Trade Area, accessed 22/02/2026, <https://www.au.int/en/african-continental-free-trade-area>
7. Abdelghaffar Ghattas, "The Potential of Intra-African Trade and the Future of the African Continental Free Trade Area," Economic Researcher, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2022), p. 93.
8. Olubomehin, B. D., Kawonishe, D., & Studies, D., "The African Union and the Challenges of Regional Integration in Africa," November 2004, p. 5.
9. Said Bouras, Khalili, "The Importance of Cross-Border Trade in Promoting Algerian Exports toward Africa within the Framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area," Al-Asil Journal of Economic and Administrative Research, Vol. 8, No. 1, April 2024, p. 314.
10. World Bank, The African Continental Free Trade Area: Economic and Distributional Effects, 31 Jul 2019. See 22/02/2026, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/216831595998182418/pdf/The-African-Continental-Free-Trade-Area-Economic-and-Distributional>
11. African Union: African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). See 21/02/2026, <https://au.int/en/documents/677?utm>
12. The Division of Labor after Durkheim; Oxford Bibliographies in Sociology; Oxford Academic, April 24, 2019. Accessed 16/02/2026, <https://academic.oup.com/reference/62417/reference-article-abstract/561723500>
13. Mohamed Issa, "Obstacles to Regional Economic Blocs in Developing Countries: The COMESA Case Study," Al-Baheth Journal, No. 10, 2012, pp. 23–32.