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## THE AFRICAN UNION AS A MODEL OF CONTINENTAL INTEGRATION: EXPERIENCE, CHALLENGES, AND PROSPECTS

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The article investigates the integration processes within the African Union (AU) and examines the structural imbalances that hinder the formation of a unified economic, social, and political space across the continent. The purpose of the study is to identify the main challenges affecting inter-state integration and to assess the prospects for enhancing cooperation among member states. The subject of research includes economic, social, and institutional indicators of African Union member countries, with a particular focus on trade, logistics, human development, and political integration. The study employs a comparative and analytical methodology, combining quantitative analysis of socio-economic indicators, trade statistics, and governance indices with a dissimilarity index to evaluate disparities between countries. Data from international statistical sources and AU reports were used to construct matrices of intra-union trade, logistics performance, human development, and political and social integration. The methodology allowed for the identification of clusters of countries with similar characteristics and the analysis of structural gaps among economically advanced and fragile states. The results reveal significant heterogeneity among AU member states. Economic disparities are pronounced, with countries such as Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria leading in GDP and intra-regional trade, while smaller or fragile economies such as the Central African Republic, Chad, and Somalia lag behind. Social and political indicators demonstrate that most countries face low levels of human development, high multidimensional poverty, and weak institutionalization of democratic norms. Additionally, logistical inefficiencies and limited transport infrastructure restrict intra-regional trade and hinder investment. The dissimilarity index highlights high divergence across 24 of 45 analyzed country pairs, indicating structural obstacles to deeper integration. The study concludes that the African Union's integration is constrained by economic, social, and political imbalances, underdeveloped logistics, and limited intra-regional trade. Addressing these challenges through coordinated policies and targeted investment in infrastructure, governance, and human capital is essential for accelerating the AU's path toward full regional integration.

**Keywords:** African Union, regional integration, economic disparities, logistics performance, human development

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In the contemporary era of globalization, integration processes constitute a crucial driver of global economic development and the reinforcement of regional stability. For African countries, which have long grappled with the legacies of colonialism, political fragmentation, and economic dependence, the establishment of the African Union represents a significant milestone in the consolidation of political, economic, and security efforts. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of integration among the continent's states remains constrained by a range of internal and external factors, including economic disparities, political instability, institutional weaknesses, and competing national interests.

The significance of this topic stems from the need for a comprehensive analysis of the factors impeding integration within the African Union, as well as the search for effective mechanisms to enhance cooperation among its member states. Examining these challenges is essential not only for understanding the particular dynamics of Africa's development but also for evaluating broader trends in the evolution of the international economic architecture in the Global South.

The purpose of this article is to identify the principal challenges to integration among African Union member states and to outline prospects for addressing them in the context of establishing a unified economic space across Africa.

Despite the growing importance of African cooperation, the African Union faces several obstacles that hinder deeper regional integration. One of the major challenges confronting the organization is the disparity in intra-regional trade levels. The share of intra-African trade in the total trade of member states is highly uneven, with more developed economies acting as regional trade hegemony, thereby slowing the economic advancement of weaker countries. This trend becomes particularly evident when examining the largest and smallest exporters within the African Union and their corresponding export volumes (Fig. 1).

As illustrated by the presented statistics, the top five exporters within the African Union purchase more than USD 5.6 billion worth of goods and services from intra-organizational partners. In contrast, the smallest exporters of the Union spend no more than USD 20 million on imports from the African region. Notably, these minor exporters are not limited to island states or territorially small economies that lag behind regional leaders due to limited resources; they also include countries such as the Central African Republic and Chad, which fall behind primarily due to underdeveloped export capacities. A similar disparity is observed in intra-African imports among member states (Fig. 2).

Thus, the leading importers among the Union's members significantly outperform those at the lower end of the ranking. While the largest importers sell more than USD 4.7 billion worth of goods, the smallest importers account for no more than USD 90 million.

Consequently, this trade pattern within the Union contributes to stagnation in the development of smaller economies, as the exchange of goods is not mutually beneficial and, in some cases, results in the economic exploitation of the weaker party.

On the other hand, despite close trade ties between African countries, intra-regional trade does not play a decisive role in the overall development of the Union. While intra-Union export-import relations are substantial in scale, trade with certain major external partners remains more critical for the African Union. More detailed statistics on this aspect can be found in Table 1.

As can be seen from the analysis presented, trade with China and India is advantageous for the African Union, as it increases the organization's overall revenue. However, this also raises the issue of the community's dependence on large economies and their influence over trade conditions. Moreover, although intra-Union trade is substantial, the statistics highlight a problem of insufficient integration and cooperation among member states, as the total trade volume within the Union and with its largest external partner differs by nearly 1.7 times.

This limited integration is largely associated with significant disparities in the economic and social conditions of member countries. For more developed countries in the region, it is economically more beneficial to cooperate with partners exhibiting similar indicators, the majority of whom are located outside the Union. In contrast, countries at lower stages of economic growth are unable to fully compete with regional leaders due to limited socio-economic capacities. This disparity is further illustrated by examining the differences in development indicators among ten countries, comparing their lowest and highest values, as shown in Table 2.

Thus, it can be concluded that the African Union faces profound imbalances in economic development, living standards, and stability across its member states. This is particularly evident in the disparities in economic development, manifested in the significant gap between relatively developed economies, such as Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria, and smaller or unstable countries, where GDP remains critically low. Such uneven distribution of resources, in turn, slows the development of a unified economic space and hinders deeper integration. An additional challenge is the political instability in fragile economies and persistent issues of food insecurity, which further exacerbate economic difficulties.

On the other hand, significant imbalances also exist in the social sphere. Countries such as Mauritius and the Seychelles experience relatively low political instability and have higher levels of human resource development, whereas in states such as Somalia and South Sudan, the population remains socially vulnerable. Moreover, it should be noted that the Human Development Index

(HDI) in the African Union does not demonstrate generally positive trends, as most member states (30 countries) fall into the category of very low HDI values. Consequently, approximately 55% of the Union's countries have low literacy rates and short life

expectancy, which limits the population's competence as human capital, reduces labor productivity, and slows the economic growth of integration.

Significant disparities are also observed in poverty and social inequality across member states. For example,

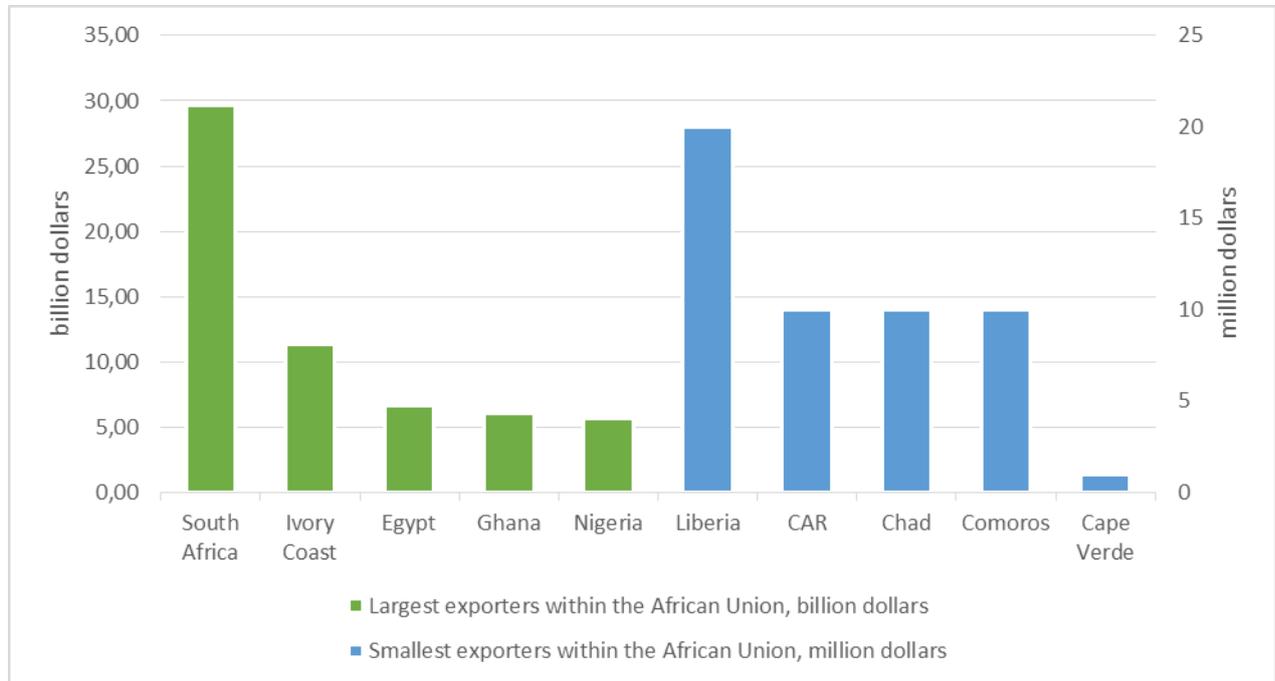


Fig. 1. Exporters within the African Union in 2023 (largest and smallest)  
 Source: compiled by the author based on materials from [1]

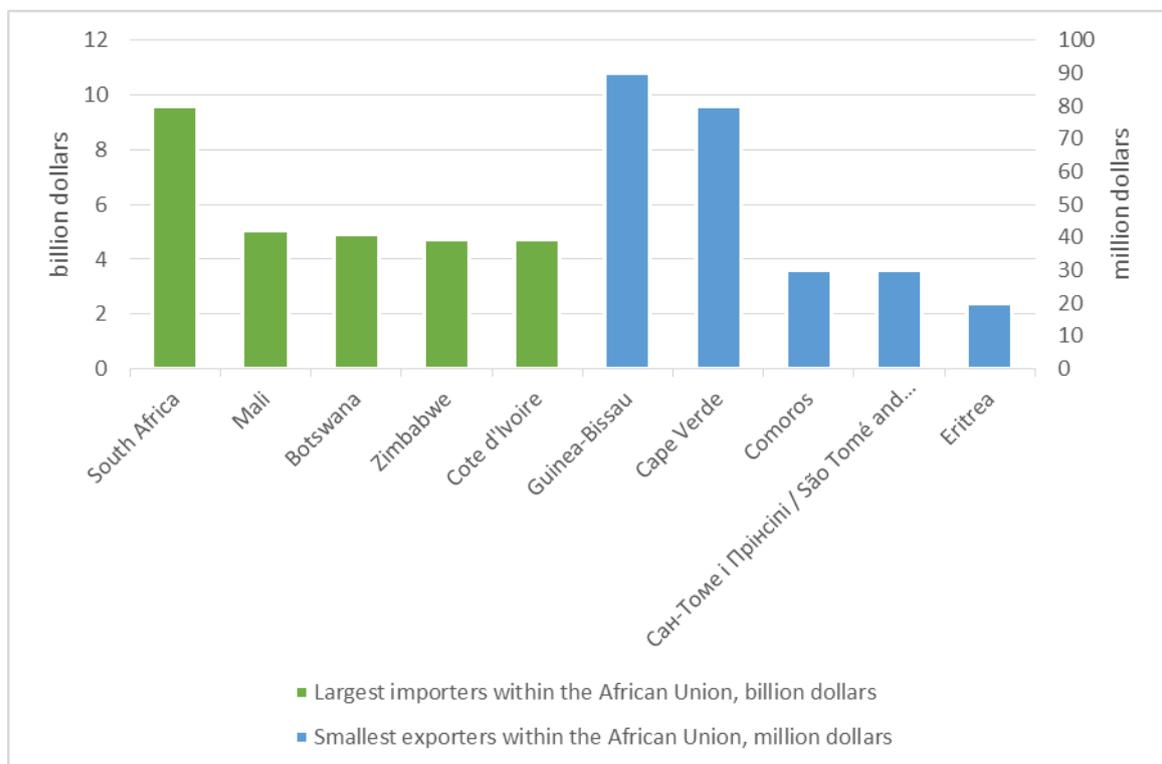


Fig. 2. Importers within the African Union (largest and smallest)  
 Source: compiled by the author based on materials from [1]

Table 1

**Major Trade Partners of the African Union in 2022**

Top Importers of the African Union	Imports to Country, USD billion	Share of Importer in Total Trade, %	Top Exporters of the African Union	Exports to Country, USD billion	Share of Exporter in Total Trade, %
China	90.70	12.7	China	187.00	32.2
Intra-African Trade	72.99	10.2	Intra-African Trade	95.01	16.4
India	31.6	4.4	India	38.2	6.6
USA	27.4	3.8	Spain	26.1	4.5

Source: compiled by the author based on [2]

Table 2

**Differences in Socio-Economic Indicators of African Union Member States**

GDP, USD billion, 2023		HDI, 2022		% of Population in Multidimensional Poverty, 2022	
Egypt	396	Seychelles Islands	0,802	Tunisia	0,79
South Africa	381	Mauritius	0,796	Seychelles	0,87
Nigeria	364	Libya	0,746	Algeria	1,38
Algeria	248	Algeria	0,745	Egypt	5,24
Ethiopia	164	Tunisia	0,732	South Africa	6,26
Seychelles Islands	2,1	Chad	0,394	Madagascar	68,42
Lesotho	2,1	Niger	0,394	Burundi	75,1
Guinea-Bissau	2,1	CAR	0,387	CAR	80,41
Comoros	1,4	South Sudan	0,381	Chad	84,17
São Tomé and Príncipe	0,68	Somalia	0,38	Niger	90,97
Inequality Index, 2022		Fragility Index, 2024		Food Security Index, 2022	
Algeria	77,2	Mauritius	38,7	Morocco	63
Egypt	71,5	Seychelles Islands	51	South Africa	61,7
Gambia	64,1	Botswana	53,6	Tunisia	60,3
Mali	60,8	Cabo Verde	57,2	Algeria	58,9
Mauritania	60,2	Namibia	59,3	Egypt	56
CAR	14,2	Chad	102,7	Sudan	42,8
Zambia	11,3	DRC	106,7	Nigeria	42
Namibia	5,6	South Sudan	109	Burundi	40,6
Mozambique	4,6	Sudan	109,3	Madagascar	40,6
South Africa	2,9	Somalia	111,3	Sierra Leone	40,5

Source: compiled by the author based on [3; 4; 5; 6]

differences in multidimensional poverty indicators show that in some regions of Africa, the population suffers from deprivation across three dimensions – monetary poverty, education, and basic infrastructure – far more severely than in others. This, in turn, creates unequal opportunities for residents of the continent, intensifies social tensions, and reduces the potential for standardizing socio-economic processes within the Union.

Finally, differences in food security among African countries deserve special attention. As illustrated by the data, some states are significantly better endowed with natural and financial resources and exhibit higher levels of food security. These disparities are largely linked to adverse climatic and demographic conditions; however, insufficient agricultural machinery and the lack of modern methods for cultivation, maintenance, and harvesting also contribute to food insecurity in the region (Fig. 3).

Referring to the presented cartogram, it can be observed that, although several African states have a moderate level of food security with values up to 63, the majority of member states face limited access to food and fall into the category of countries with very low food security indicators. Among the 25 global economies in this category, 21 are members of the African Union. Furthermore, approximately 65% of the Union’s population (excluding countries with missing data) lack adequate access to food, creating urgent challenges that require immediate attention. Consequently, the Union is highly vulnerable to both external and internal shocks, such as climate change, disruptions in international supply and financing, investments in agro-industrial development, technological capacity, and political or military instability in regions suitable for agricultural production.

Returning to the issue of disparities in development among African Union member states, it is appropriate

to analyze the Dissimilarity Index of Countries to gain a better understanding of the overall imbalance between economies. For a more comprehensive study, ten economic, social, and political indicators were selected and examined in ten African countries representing relatively high, medium, and low levels of economic size and social welfare. For more accurate results, attention was also paid to the territorial size and population of the countries, which were required to be approximately comparable across the sample, regardless of geographic location or the political influence of specific actors. The source data for the analysis of the Dissimilarity Index of African Union countries are presented in Table 3.

As can be observed, the values of the indicators are highly diversified. Even countries with similar levels of development exhibit imbalances in certain areas of integration. This, in turn, highlights the need to analyze dissimilarity not only among countries with different economic growth rates but also among those with comparable economic sizes. Accordingly, for each pair of countries in the sample, a Dissimilarity Index was

calculated, a matrix of the results was constructed, and the pairs were classified into three categories: low, medium, and high dissimilarity. The analytical results are presented in detail in Table 4.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that African Union member states are largely characterized by high levels of dissimilarity, with significant gaps across social, fiscal, governmental, and trade sectors. Among the 45 country pairs analyzed, 24 exhibit very high economic differences, with a Dissimilarity Index exceeding 50%, while 14 pairs show a medium level of dissimilarity (over 30%). Only 7 pairs demonstrate a relatively low level of dissimilarity, indicating comparable macroeconomic development. This trend highlights substantial disparities among the Union's member states. In particular, the Central African Republic stands out as having the highest levels of dissimilarity with all other countries, reflecting pronounced economic, social, and political divergences within the African Union that may impede further cooperation and integration processes.

Table 3

Source Data for the Analysis of the Dissimilarity Index of African Union Countries

Country	GDP (USD billion)	Net Migration (thousands)	Logistics Performance Index	Political and Social Integration Index	Fragility Index	Inequality Index	% of Population in Multidimensional Poverty	HDI	Intra-Union Exports (USD billion)	Intra-Union Imports (USD billion)
Egypt	396	305	3	3.33	82.8	71.5	5.24	0.728	6.61	1.63
South Africa	381	228	3.6	6	69.6	2.9	6.26	0.717	29.61	9.59
Nigeria	364	-58	2.4	4	96.6	55.1	33.04	0.548	5.63	2.36
Algeria	248	-26	2.1	5	68.6	77.2	1.38	0.745	2.69	1.94
Ethiopia	164	-12	2.12	3.33	98.1	48.7	68.74	0.492	0.89	0.76
Chad	13.2	497	2.37	2.33	102.7	45.8	84.17	0.394	0.01	0.33
Namibia	12.4	12	2.8	6.5	59.3	5.6	40.88	0.61	3.15	3.12
Somalia	10.97	46	1.9	2.67	111.3	35.2	67	0.38	0.04	0.72
Mauritania	10.7	3	2	4.33	87	60.2	58.45	0.54	0.44	0.53
CAR	2.6	-15	2.6	3	103.9	14.2	80.41	0.387	0.01	0.2

Source: compiled by the author based on [1; 3-6; 8; 9]

Table 4

Matrix of the Dissimilarity Index for the Sample of African Union Countries

	Egypt	South Africa	Nigeria	Algeria	Ethiopia	Chad	Namibia	Somalia	Mauritania	CAR
Egypt		11,68	46,29	41,92	40,04	46,51	67,70	60,15	74,57	88,10
South Africa	11,68		46,17	42,33	46,96	55,90	67,79	67,02	81,46	94,26
Nigeria	46,29	46,17		7,71	29,40	82,60	70,58	69,32	68,43	75,61
Algeria	41,92	42,33	7,71		29,77	84,12	72,91	69,83	61,06	78,56
Ethiopia	40,04	46,96	29,40	29,77		69,62	44,40	40,21	39,05	52,90
Chad	46,51	55,90	82,60	84,12	69,62		60,51	49,76	65,10	74,63
Namibia	67,70	67,79	70,58	72,91	44,40	60,51		17,38	22,67	30,95
Somalia	60,15	67,02	69,32	69,83	40,21	49,76	17,38		17,37	32,60
Mauritania	74,57	81,46	68,43	61,06	39,05	65,10	22,67	17,37		32,29
CAR	88,10	94,26	75,61	78,56	52,90	74,63	30,95	32,60	32,29	

Source: compiled by the author based on [1; 3-6; 8; 9]

On the other hand, the presence of clusters within the Union is typical: some countries with similar levels of economic development share closer socio-economic characteristics, which may indicate common economic models or political orientations. Examples include Egypt and South Africa, Algeria and Nigeria, Somalia and Mauritania, as well as Somalia and Namibia. Despite geographical distances, these countries are close partners and are positioned at higher levels of integration with each other compared to neighboring but politically distant states.

Another obstacle to deeper integration within the African Union is the low level of adherence to democratic

norms and procedures, as well as limited public trust among citizens. This issue can be further illustrated by examining the Political and Social Integration Index for each member state (Fig. 4).

The cartogram shows that only a small portion of African Union member states exhibit a high or adequate level of political and social integration. In contrast, the situation in the majority of economies is the opposite, as 80% of member states have medium or low index values (below 6).

This indicates a weak institutionalization of democratic norms within societies, resulting in political instability and low public trust in state institutions.

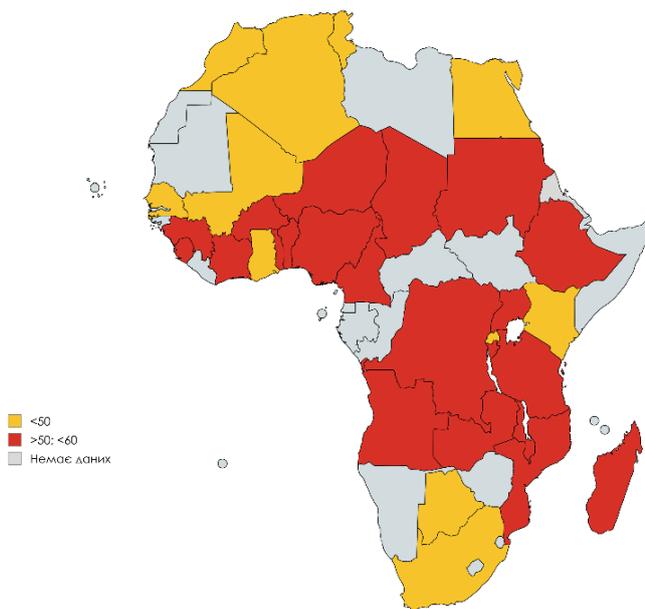


Fig. 3. Food Security Levels in the African Union by Country in 2022  
 Source: compiled by the author based on [7]

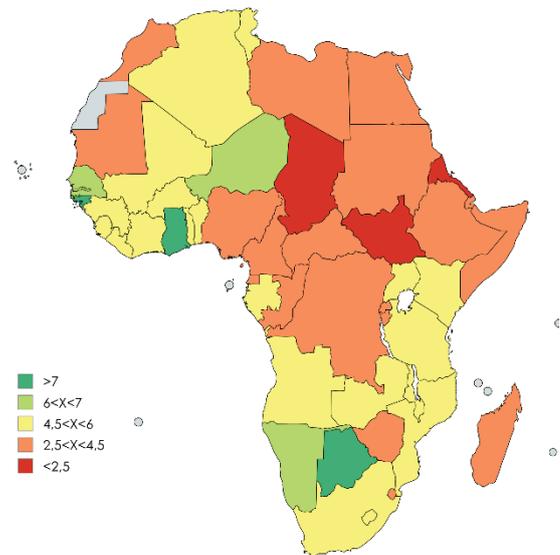


Fig. 4. Political and Social Integration Index in the African Union by Country in 2023  
 Source: compiled by the author based on [8]

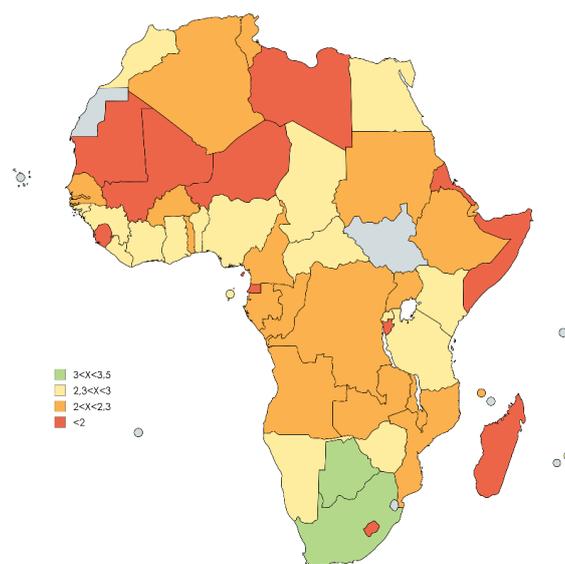


Fig. 5. Logistics Performance Index in the African Union by Country  
 Source: compiled by the author based on [9]

Moreover, the lack of common strategic orientations among countries complicates the processes of unification and standardization in addressing the Union's shared challenges.

In addition, low levels of public trust negatively affect inter-state cooperation, reducing the effectiveness of regional initiatives. As a result, implementing pan-African policies in the areas of economy, security, and social development becomes more difficult or even impossible, which further slows integration processes.

Another challenge for the African Union is the low level of logistics development in the region, which hinders expanded trade. This is particularly evident when examining the Logistics Performance Index (LPI) across member states (Fig. 5). The index assesses the overall state of logistics based on six criteria: efficiency of documentation processes, timeliness of cargo delivery, quality of trade and transport infrastructure, ease of shipments, ability to track and monitor shipments in transit, and the competence of logistics services. Consequently, the index provides a comprehensive evaluation of trade facilitation in the region, reflecting the effectiveness of transportation and cargo handling.

The cartogram shows that only two African countries – South Africa and Botswana – have sufficiently developed logistics, with scores above 3 out of 5. In contrast, the majority of African Union member states lack adequate transport capabilities, which hinders the free movement of goods and labor within the organization. High bureaucracy, customs delays, infrastructure deficiencies, and poor connectivity compel countries to prioritize individual trade with external partners over intra-regional exchanges. This, in turn, increases the Union's dependence on external imports and reduces the competitiveness of African products in the market.

Moreover, the low level of logistics also discourages investment in the region, as high supply chain risks make it unattractive for investors from more developed countries.

Therefore, the African Union faces a range of urgent challenges that impede integration in the region: significant economic disparities among member states, underdeveloped logistics, and limited readiness for implementing a common economic and social policy. Addressing these challenges could significantly accelerate progress toward full integration within the Union.

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## **АФРИКАНСЬКИЙ СОЮЗ ЯК МОДЕЛЬ КОНТИНЕНТАЛЬНОЇ ІНТЕГРАЦІЇ: ДОСВІД, ПРОБЛЕМИ, ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ**

У статті досліджуються процеси інтеграції в межах Африканського Союзу (АС) та аналізуються структурні дисбаланси, що ускладнюють формування єдиного економічного, соціального та політичного простору на континенті. Метою дослідження є визначення основних проблем, які впливають на міждержавну інтеграцію, та оцінка перспектив посилення співпраці між країнами-членами. Предметом дослідження є економічні, соціальні та інституційні показники держав-членів Африканського Союзу, з особливою увагою до торгівлі, логістики, людського розвитку та політичної інтеграції. У роботі застосовано порівняльний та аналітичний метод, який поєднує кількісний аналіз соціально-економічних показників, торговельної статистики та індексів управління з використанням Індексу несхожості для оцінки дисбалансів між країнами. Для побудови матриць внутрішньоорганізаційної торгівлі, ефективності логістики, людського розвитку та політичної і соціальної інтеграції використано дані міжнародних статистичних джерел та звітів АС. Методологія дозволила виявити кластери країн із подібними характеристиками та проаналізувати структурні прогалини між економічно розвиненими та вразливими державами. Результати дослідження демонструють значну гетерогенність країн-членів АС. Економічні дисбаланси є суттєвими: такі держави, як Єгипет, ПАР та Нігерія, лідирують за ВВП та внутрішньоорганізаційною торгівлею, тоді як менші або вразливі економіки, такі як Центральноафриканська Республіка, Чад та Сомалі, значно відстають. Соціальні та політичні показники свідчать про низький рівень людського розвитку, високу багатовимірну бідність та слабку інституціоналізацію демократичних норм у більшості країн. Крім того, недостатній рівень розвитку логістики та транспортної інфраструктури обмежує внутрішньоорганізаційну торгівлю та гальмує інвестиції. Індекс несхожості показує високий рівень розбіжностей у 24 з 45 аналізованих пар країн, що вказує на структурні перешкоди для глибшої інтеграції. Отже, інтеграція Африканського Союзу обмежується економічними, соціальними та політичними дисбалансами, низьким рівнем розвитку логістики та обмеженою внутрішньоорганізаційною торгівлею. Усунення цих проблем шляхом координації політик та цільових інвестицій у інфраструктуру, управління та людський капітал є ключовим для прискорення процесу повної інтеграції об'єднання.

**Ключові слова:** Африканський Союз, регіональна інтеграція, економічні дисбаланси, ефективність логістики, людський розвиток

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