

Significance of Dialogue, Peace, Security and Stability for Meaningful Expression of the African Continental Free Trade Area in Sub-Saharan Africa in a Fast-Changing Global Village

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500226>

Received: 10 April 2026; Accepted: 13 April 2026; Published: 27 May 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines the nexus between dialogue, peace, security and stability and their role in enabling meaningful expression of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in Sub-Saharan Africa within a rapidly changing global village. Drawing on qualitative interviews with four foreign country representatives resident in Zimbabwe and an analysis of secondary sources, including policy documents, conference papers and academic literature, the study argues that sustainable AfCFTA implementation is inseparable from the continent's capacity to foster dialogue-centred peacebuilding and political stability. The study is anchored in regional integration theory and conflict transformation frameworks, with a focused examination of selected conflict-affected sub-regions and country cases including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Mali, Somalia and Zimbabwe. Findings indicate that political instability, armed conflict, economic sanctions and weak institutional frameworks significantly undermine AfCFTA's prospects. It is strongly recommended that AfCFTA leverage dialogue as a structural imperative, prioritising peace, security and stability as foundational conditions for continental economic, social and political prosperity.

Keywords: peace, dialogue, security, stability, globalisation, AfCFTA, conflict transformation, regional integration.

INTRODUCTION

Development initiatives and agendas across Sub-Saharan Africa have greatly suffered from sustained hard and soft violence that has produced chronic instabilities threatening peace and security. Peace and stability constitute one of the key ingredients of political, social and economic prosperity (Kumar & Mall, 2015). The process of integrating into wider areas as a means of expanding the sphere of influence of nation-states through trade and commerce has long carried the underlying assumption that integration is a pathway to peace and stability in conflict-prone regions. Without peace, social and economic dreams are shattered (Songwe, 2020). Models of regional integration have evolved into various categories encompassing Free Trade Areas, Preferential Trading Areas, Common Markets, Economic Unions, Economic and Monetary Unions and Economic and Political Unions, each conferring differing obligations and binding measures on their member states. These individual economic bodies carry varying roles and responsibilities aimed at making the continent a tranquil arena of social, economic and political enterprise where citizens may enjoy the fruits of their heritage in a peaceful and stable environment.

“Only a united Africa can redeem its past glory, renew and reinforce its strength for the realisation of its destiny. We are today the richest and yet the poorest of continents, but in unity our continent could smile in a new era of prosperity and power” — Kwame Nkrumah, President of the first independent Sub-Saharan African State of Ghana, 1957, cited in Chikowore (2002).

Historically, the ideology of meaningful regional integration emanated from the developed world, particularly in Europe, where regional integration produced a world-class model comprising 27 member states that form the European Union. The EU's foundational objectives were explicitly to bring peace, security and stability to a

continent long ravaged by war. Against this backdrop, there were at least 15 countries with active armed conflicts and 20 multilateral peace operations in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2019 alone (Songwe, 2020). This reality underscores the significance of dialogue as a key construct in peacebuilding and the maintenance of security and stability for meaningful expression of Africa's continental free trade ambitions. This paper focuses specifically on how political instability affects AfCFTA implementation in selected conflict-affected sub-regions and country cases, with particular attention to the Sahel, the Great Lakes region and Southern Africa. It argues that the continent cannot be left behind in development and that the significance of dialogue, peace, security and stability for meaningful AfCFTA expression must be systematically prioritised. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework; Section 3 presents the literature review; Section 4 addresses the AfCFTA's purpose and potential; Section 5 outlines the methodology; Section 6 presents outcomes and discussion; and Section 7 concludes with the recommendations of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in three intersecting theoretical traditions: regional integration theory, peacebuilding theory and conflict transformation theory. Together, these frameworks provide the analytical scaffolding necessary to examine the relationship between dialogue, peace, security, stability and AfCFTA implementation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Regional integration theory, particularly neo-functionalist and inter-governmentalist perspectives, holds that economic integration among states generates spill-over effects that deepen political cooperation and reduce the likelihood of conflict (Moravcsik, 1998). The AfCFTA, as Africa's most ambitious integration initiative, is premised on similar logic: that deepening intra-African trade and economic interdependence will reinforce political stability and continental solidarity. However, as this study demonstrates, the inverse relationship is equally significant; political stability and security are preconditions for meaningful integration rather than merely its outcomes.

Peacebuilding theory, as elaborated by scholars such as Lederach (1997), frames peace not merely as the absence of war but as the active construction of just, stable and inclusive social, political and economic relationships. Within the AfCFTA context, peacebuilding must be understood as an enabling infrastructure for trade; without it, investor confidence is eroded, cross-border mobility is curtailed, and supply chains are disrupted. Conflict transformation theory, associated with Miall (2016) and Berghof Handbook frameworks, offers a further lens through which to examine how deep-seated structural conflicts, rooted in inequality, resource competition and governance deficits, can be addressed through dialogue-centred approaches. Rather than merely managing conflict, conflict transformation seeks to address its root causes, rendering it particularly relevant to the AfCFTA context, where unequal development trajectories and historical grievances can readily generate instability. The three frameworks converge around dialogue as a central mechanism: dialogue that enables integration, dialogue that builds peace and dialogue that transforms the structural conditions breeding conflict. This study applies these lenses to selected Sub-Saharan African sub-regions and cases.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globalisation, Trade and the Shifting Global Order

Globalisation and global value chains have come under sustained attack in recent years. Several governments within mature democracies, including the United States, have retreated from the principles of free trade and multilateralism, engaging instead in increasingly protectionist behaviours (UNECA, 2016). The European Union itself has been considering the support of 'European champions' as a hedge against Chinese state-backed competition and pressure from Washington-based rivals. Technology has been placed at the front lines of superpower rivalry, as evidenced by the intense pressure exerted by the United States on its allies to exclude China's technology firm Huawei from 5G infrastructure rollouts. The World Trade Organisation has been progressively undermined as an institution, and its future trajectory remains uncertain. Trade and economic policies have been weaponised in the tit-for-tat trade war between China and the United States in ways that have produced negative ripple effects across the global economy. As Maurice and Allan (2016) observe, regional integration groupings such as the EU are being tested, and once-buried old tensions are making unwelcome reappearances. These tensions, over eurozone fiscal arrangements, migration, labour movement and the

distribution of prosperity, create an unstable breeding ground that has direct implications for smaller and more vulnerable economies seeking to leverage integration for development, including those within the AfCFTA framework.

Within this volatile global context, peace, security and stability emerge as what Kumar and Mall (2015) describe as the foundational conditions for sustainable development and prosperity. When peaceful coexistence prevails between citizens within a nation and between neighbouring states, opportunities for social, cultural and economic interaction and integration multiply rapidly. The African Union's Agenda 2063, which places peace and security among its highest aspirations, and the 'Silencing the Guns' initiative, which aimed to end all wars and civil conflicts by 2020, reflect the institutional recognition of this relationship. Significant progress has been made in this direction, despite the persistent narrative of Africa as a continent perpetually at war with itself (Mall, 2016).

Conflict and Instability in Sub-Saharan Africa: Case Study Contexts

Violent conflict and political instability remain acute in several Sub-Saharan African sub-regions directly relevant to the AfCFTA. In the Sahel, protracted armed conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Chad have precipitated insecurity, displaced populations, suppressed investor confidence and undermined the economic infrastructure upon which regional trade depends. The African Union's Peace and Security organ has played an active role through dialogue, mediation and negotiation in attempting to contain these conflicts (Songwe, 2020), though with uneven results. In the Great Lakes region, the DRC continues to experience large-scale armed conflict that imposes enormous economic costs. This study indicates that annual economic growth in countries experiencing intense conflict is approximately 2.5 percentage points lower on average, with cumulative negative impacts on GDP increasing over time. Furthermore, conflict diverts public finances from development to military spending, compounding economic vulnerability.

In Southern Africa, the SADC region has experienced its own instabilities, including political and social unrest in Eswatini, the insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province and poverty-induced social disorder in South Africa. The achievements secured in Mozambique thus far are largely attributable to concerted SADC and AU-led dialogue, peacebuilding and mediation efforts, demonstrating that dialogue-centred approaches can yield tangible stability dividends directly beneficial to regional integration.

The case of Zimbabwe is analytically instructive. Zimbabwe's status as a country under economic sanctions places it in a structurally disadvantaged position relative to AfCFTA partners such as South Africa and Egypt, whose production costs are comparatively lower. The resulting economic deterioration has generated both peaceful and violent protests, creating a cycle of insecurity and instability that further erodes Zimbabwe's position as a reliable market partner. This case illustrates how political conditions at the national level translate directly into AfCFTA-level complications, reinforcing the argument for dialogue-centred engagement both within and between member states. Somalia and South Sudan represent cases at the end of the conflict spectrum. These states' ongoing civil wars mean that meaningful participation in AfCFTA mechanisms remains largely aspirational, underscoring the foundational nature of peace and stability to any viable integration project. Critically engaging with Songwe (2020) and the African Union's own assessments, this study concurs that around 30 per cent of AfCFTA member countries were affected by conflict in 2019, representing a structural threat to the Agreement's collective ambitions.

Dialogue as a Structural Imperative

The literature consistently positions dialogue not as a peripheral diplomatic nicety but as a structural imperative in the peacebuilding and integration nexus. As Miall (2015) argues in the Berghof Handbook framework, conflict transformation requires multi-dimensional engagement that goes beyond mere conflict management to address structural causes. For the AfCFTA, this means dialogue must extend beyond trade negotiation to encompass political disagreements, distributional concerns and governance deficits that generate instability. Lens (2019) captures the stakes well: Africa cannot afford to remain mired in conflicts whose consequences are correctable through peaceful negotiation. The continent produces the raw materials that power global renewable energy transitions, yet struggles with basic developmental provision, a contradiction that only coordinated, dialogue-centred integration can meaningfully address. This is reinforced by the AU Peace and Security Architecture,

which deploys a range of tools from preventive diplomacy to AU peacekeeping forces and post-conflict reconstruction programmes, all animated by the logic that dialogue-enabled peace is the foundation for enduring economic development.

The African Continental Free Trade Area: Purpose and Potential

The 10th Extraordinary Summit of the AU Heads of State and Government on 21 March 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda, marked a historic moment with the signing of the AfCFTA, the Kigali Declaration and the Free Movement Protocol (Songwe, 2020). In so doing, AU member states committed to launching a continental-wide free trade area with the capacity to negotiate trade agreements as a single entity rather than as a fragmented grouping of individual countries. The overarching vision for the AfCFTA was planted some four decades previously when African leaders ratified the Lagos Plan of Action (1980), which gave birth to the Abuja Treaty (1991) and, ultimately, the African Economic Community. Both instruments were conceived as the ‘model and engine for Africa’s integration,’ with integration understood not as an option but as an imperative (Mall, 2016).

Africa’s Agenda 2063 sets out the overarching purpose: to build an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven and managed by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena (AfDB, 2018). The AfCFTA is a key component of this agenda and the creation of a Pan-African Economic Community by 2063. Its potential is substantial: a single market for a youthful population projected to reach 1.7 billion by 2030, of whom some 600 million are expected to constitute a middle class. The AfCFTA’s broad objectives include doubling intra-African trade by 2022, supported by the continental customs union established under the Abuja Treaty. Currently, intra-African trade in goods and services stands at a mere 15% of total trade, compared to 60% in Asia, 70% in the EU and 54% within the USMCA bloc (AfDB, 2018). Addressing this deficit requires not only technical trade facilitation but also the political stability and security architecture that makes sustained commerce possible.

The principle of free movement of persons is among the most consequential elements of the AfCFTA framework. Free movement supports economic dynamism and builds a continental sense of identity among citizens. The EU’s open-skies agreements, for example, made air travel affordable across borders and catalysed labour mobility, tourism and cultural exchange. For Africa to replicate this, mutual agreement through dialogue is indispensable, covering not only tariff schedules but also cross-border transport harmonisation, investment frameworks and competition policy (Lens, 2019). Critically, AfCFTA’s ambitions are complicated by unequal development trajectories among member states. Seven African countries account for approximately 60% of total intra-African merchandise exports, leaving the majority with the remaining 40% (AfDB, 2018). Economically weaker states, particularly least developed countries, landlocked economies and small economies such as Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique, are legitimately concerned about the fiscal revenue implications of tariff reductions and the potential destruction of nascent local industries. Trade liberalisation, as experience has consistently demonstrated, produces unequal gains and losses between countries at different stages of development. This distributional challenge is itself a source of potential instability, making dialogue within the AfCFTA framework an economic and political necessity, not merely a diplomatic formality.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design, selected as the most appropriate approach for examining the complex, context-dependent relationships between dialogue, peace, security, stability and AfCFTA implementation. Qualitative inquiry, as Creswell (2007) affirms, is particularly well-suited to capturing the ‘microscopic’ social and cultural dimensions of complex phenomena, dimensions that quantitative methods cannot adequately render. The primary data were generated through semi-structured telephonic interviews conducted with representatives of four African countries resident in Zimbabwe. The decision to conduct interviews telephonically was necessitated by restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, which precluded face-to-face engagement. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct diplomatic and policy-level exposure to AfCFTA processes and regional security dynamics. This sampling approach is consistent with qualitative research design principles: as Creswell (2007) notes, qualitative samples are purposive and outcome-directed rather than statistically representative.

Interview questions were designed to probe participants' perspectives on the relationship between political stability and AfCFTA implementation in their respective national and sub-regional contexts, the role of dialogue mechanisms in conflict prevention and trade facilitation and the specific challenges that insecurity and instability pose to meaningful participation in the AfCFTA framework. Participants were assured of full confidentiality and anonymity in accordance with applicable diplomatic protocol requirements and research ethics standards. No personal identifying information was recorded or retained. Responses were analysed thematically, with emerging themes cross-referenced against secondary sources including academic journals, policy reports, AU institutional documents, conference papers and speeches by Heads of State and Government. The triangulation of primary interview data with secondary sources strengthened the analytical rigour of the findings, allowing patterns and contradictions in the data to be identified and examined. The study's scope is intentionally exploratory and qualitative; it does not claim quantitative representativeness but rather seeks to offer theoretically grounded, empirically informed insights into the dialogue-peace-AfCFTA nexus across selected conflict-affected contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa.

OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

Peace and Stability as Foundational Conditions for AfCFTA

Across all interviews, participants affirmed unequivocally that peace and stability are necessary preconditions for achieving the desired objectives of the AfCFTA. The consensus view was that the AfCFTA's single market ambitions, for goods and services, facilitated by the free movement of persons in accordance with Agenda 2063's vision of 'an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa', cannot be realised in the absence of sufficient political stability. Most participants agreed that meaningful dialogue is urgently required precisely because some countries do not fully subscribe to the AfCFTA agenda, particularly larger economies such as South Africa, Egypt and Ghana, which possess the market weight to pursue bilateral trade arrangements independently. Such tendencies, if unaddressed through dialogue, risk undermining the collective architecture of the Agreement.

Participants cited the gravity of large-scale conflicts in the CAR, DRC, Mali, Somalia and South Sudan, observing that the region remains prone to conflict, with approximately 30 per cent of AfCFTA countries affected in 2019. Beyond the immeasurable human suffering, these conflicts impose high economic costs: annual growth in intensely conflict-affected countries averages approximately 2.5 percentage points lower than in stable states, with cumulative GDP impacts worsening over time. Furthermore, conflict diverts public finances from development investment to military expenditure, compressing the fiscal space needed for AfCFTA implementation infrastructure.

Dialogue as Preventive Diplomacy and Trade Enabler

Participants consistently affirmed the centrality of dialogue as both a conflict-prevention mechanism and a trade-enabling instrument. As one participant observed, 'when we focus on the chaos and disruption of conflicts and wars, we place our trust in the gun to effect change rather than in the strength of our collective wisdom and desire to improve our lives — we normalise destruction over construction and inevitably fail to see the potential lying in our people, our land and the resources it holds.' This sentiment reflects the conflict transformation literature's insistence on redirecting collective energy from destructive to constructive engagement.

The 'Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development' theme, consistent with AU Agenda 2063 and anchored in the African Peace and Security Architecture, represents the institutional operationalisation of this logic. Participants affirmed that all available tools must be deployed: from preventive diplomacy and dialogue-centred conflict prevention and resolution, to AU peacekeeping forces managing crises, to post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts that create the stable foundation for enduring economic growth. The AU Peace and Security organ's active role in Mozambique, the Sahel and the Great Lakes, through mediation and negotiated ceasefires, demonstrates that dialogue-centred approaches can produce measurable stability dividends, as evidenced by the relative progress achieved in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province.

The Zimbabwe Case: Sanctions, Instability and AfCFTA Marginalisation

The case of Zimbabwe emerged as a particularly instructive illustration of how national political conditions produce AfCFTA-level complications. Participants discussed how Zimbabwe's status under economic sanctions places it at a structural disadvantage relative to AfCFTA partners: its comparatively elevated production costs reduce its competitiveness within the prospective single market, while political and social instability, manifest in both peaceful and violent protests, signals unreliability to potential trading partners. As one participant noted, other countries feel insecure engaging with Zimbabwe as a market partner, effectively turning the country into what was described as a 'red zone of social, political and economic instability.'

This case reinforces the argument that AfCFTA dialogue must extend beyond tariff negotiations to encompass political dimensions, including the management of sanctions regimes, the resolution of governance conflicts and the reintegration of marginalised member states into the continental economic community. Economically weaker states, including Zimbabwe, Malawi and Mozambique, face compounded disadvantages from both internal instability and the structural asymmetries of the AfCFTA framework itself. Dialogue must address these distributional concerns if the Agreement is to generate equitable developmental outcomes.

COVID-19 and the New Dimension of Insecurity

Beyond armed conflict, participants highlighted the COVID-19 pandemic as a novel and compounding dimension of insecurity with direct implications for AfCFTA. The pandemic disrupted intra-African mobility, suppressed trade flows, diverted government resources and exposed the continent's vulnerability to external shocks in ways that man-made conflicts alone do not fully capture. This observation is significant: it suggests that the AfCFTA's dialogue and security frameworks must be broad enough to encompass not only political and military threats but also public health emergencies that have the equivalent capacity to suppress cross-border trade and investment. Participants called for a common understanding, effectively a social contract, among AfCFTA states around managing such shared threats collectively and equitably.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that dialogue, peace, security and stability are not peripheral enablers but foundational conditions for meaningful AfCFTA expression in Sub-Saharan Africa. Drawing on regional integration theory, peacebuilding theory and conflict transformation frameworks, and examining evidence from conflict-affected contexts including the Sahel, the Great Lakes, Southern Africa and the instructive case of Zimbabwe, the paper has demonstrated that political instability produces direct, measurable costs for AfCFTA implementation: suppressed investor confidence, disrupted supply chains, fiscal diversion and the marginalisation of weaker member states. Three synthesised conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, AfCFTA's distributional challenges, in which a small number of stronger economies dominate intra-African trade flows, are themselves sources of potential instability that only sustained, inclusive dialogue can address. Trade liberalisation without equity-sensitive dialogue risks generating the grievances that fuel conflict. Second, the AU's existing peace and security architecture, including the 'Silencing the Guns' initiative and SADC Standby Forces, provides a meaningful institutional platform, but these mechanisms require deeper resourcing and political commitment if they are to function as effective enablers of AfCFTA implementation. Third, dialogue within AfCFTA must be understood as a multi-dimensional imperative encompassing political, economic, social and even public health dimensions, as the COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated.

The way forward requires concerted multi-level engagement. At the continental level, regional and international organisations, including UNCTAD, working closely with the African Union Commission, should strengthen technical assistance to smaller and more vulnerable AfCFTA negotiating parties. At the national level, a bottom-up approach, engaging governments, the private sector, civil society and the international community in a reciprocal exchange of ideas, resources and trust, is essential for identifying and addressing the specific impediments to AfCFTA implementation in each context. At the political level, relinquishing short-term national priorities in favour of long-term regional integration interests requires sustained political will, rooted in the understanding that AfCFTA's collective gains are far greater than any individual state's unilateral alternatives. Dialogue, in sum, should be treated as an imperative and never merely an option if Sub-Saharan Africa is to

realise its integrated development dream in line with Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063. An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena, remains both the aspiration and the obligation of the AfCFTA generation.

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