Beyond the pandemic: Implications of COVID-19 on regional economic integration in Southern Africa

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 19 January 2022
Received in rev. form 09 March 2022
Accepted 14 March 2022

Keywords:
COVID-19, pandemic, regional integration, SADC

JEL Classification:
F43, O18

A B S T R A C T

This study examined the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the much sought-after regional economic integration using Southern Africa as a case study. The eruption of COVID-19 stifled world economic activities and unleashed economic uncertainties. First, the disease forced countries into imposing restrictions that included total closure of businesses and borders and travel bans that resulted in reduced economic activity among countries. Second, Africa was expected to suffer economic reverse of between -2% to -5% in 2020 due to a sharp decline in output growth. This has had adverse implications on trade and financial markets across the region and scuppered the ambitions for regional economic integration. Using a desktop approach, the study critiqued and analysed the literature on regional integration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on prospects for enhanced regional economic integration. The findings revealed that COVID-19 plunged the prospects of regional economic integration into disarray. Owing to imposed restrictions business slumped, trade declined, poverty deepened and vulnerability of populations increased cumulatively negating the quest for regional integration. The study concludes that to manage the aftermath of COVID-19, regional economic coordination should be encouraged.

Introduction

Regional economic integration has featured prominently in discussions by African leaders as a common strategy for the development of the continent. These discussions have inspired propositions to establish regional free trade areas, monetary unions, common markets and an economic union encompassing the entire continent (Nsiah, 2020). To this end, 44 countries signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in Kigali in 2018.

However, the eruption of COVID-19 unleashed disruptive consequences on the world economies. Though the pandemic was a health crisis, it slowed down investments which resulted in job losses, caused a decline in tourism and international travel (Nsiah, 2020). Thus amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the African region suffered a projected economic reverse of between -2.1% to as low as -5.1% (Adegoke, 2020). This undermined the ambitions and quest by regions to integrate their economies. Despite facing a common global health crisis and economic challenges it caused, there was no coordinated regional response to the pandemic. In fact, countries sought self-preservation and imposed economic restrictions and controlled mobility as measures to control the spread of the disease.

Policy interventions such as national lockdowns, which were adopted to control the spread of the coronavirus, came with concomitant economic consequences that disproportionately hit weak and poor economies. Lockdown measures in several ways affected the production sectors, value chains, and trade exchanges and have seen G20 governments announcing fiscal interventions of about $8 trillion and other massive monetary measures (Bonaccorsia et al., 2020). It was the speed of the infections and magnitude of the economic disruptions that worried countries across the world. The national lockdowns left many economies reeling under the weight of low production, disrupted trade, and collapse of commodity prices. The restrictions on transport and travel further slowed down...
global economic activities. In the early days of the disease, panic among consumers and firms resulted in unusual consumption patterns and anomalous market trends (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020).

The legacy of national shutdowns and their aftermath effects on the regional economies have had severe hardships for an extended period. Projections pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic would be the most serious global economic crisis remising the Great Depression of the 1930s. Projections from the World Bank (2020) indicated that the world’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was anticipated to decline considerably in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Economies of the global north were expected to suffer a 7% shrink in 2020, whereas the emerging and developing economies were projected to shrink by 2.5% (Vidyaa & Prabheesh, 2020). The annualised global economic growth in 2020 was expected to be reduced by a rate of -3.4% to -7.6%, with a recovery of 4.2% to 5.6% for 2021 (Jackson et al., 2021).

Without exception, global trade was expected to slump by more than 13% in 2020, a figure that surpassed the decline that was caused by World War 2 (Vidyaa & Prabheesh, 2020). This grim picture was reduced to a fall in trade by 5.3% in 2020 but projected to recover by 8.0% in 2021 (Jackson et al. 2021). However, the economic downturn was not as projected but was still bad enough to cause some shocks across economies. Despite being one of the regions with few cases or deaths from COVID-19, many countries in Africa implemented wide-ranging and often mandatory measures (Hale et al., 2020). Like in the rest of the world, lockdowns have been costly in Africa-they stopped economic activity, hit public finances with reduced revenue, and increased spending on health and social protection (Adam, Henstridge & Lee, 2020). As countries became inward-looking due to the COVID-19 pandemic trade among countries plummeted. This, therefore, means that the benefits that accrue from the open participation in the global economy were forfeited owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused the suspension of domestic economic activity, drop in production, loss of jobs, livelihoods, and an upsurge in poverty and vulnerability. Under these circumstances, questions on the prospects of regional economic integration have been raised.

Though a lot has been researched on regional economic integration, the COVID-19 pandemic gave a new dimension to the subject. The pandemic presented unprecedented economic challenges to regional integration and this study sought to examine the implications of the pandemic on the prospects of economic integration. This was done through a qualitative approach that critiqued and analysed the literature on regional economic integration and the COVID-19 pandemic. Desktop research was used to collect data from journal articles, books and policy position papers and declarations, and treaties. The data were subjected to systematic thematic analysis to locate the themes that were related to the objective of the study. The objective of the study was to provide an overall understanding of the macro-economic shocks of the pandemic at a regional level and how these affected the prospects for regional integration. The article starts with an introduction that sets out and contextualised the research problem. The introduction is followed by a literature review section which was categorised into four segments: 1. Conceptualising regional integration, 2. History of Regional Economic Integration and its Importance, 3. Regional Economic Integration in the Southern Africa Development Community, and 4. Constraints to Deeper Regional Economic Integration. The literature review section is followed by a section on the data and analysis of the research findings. The article ends with an evaluation of the results and recommendations on post-covid-19 regional economic integration.

**Literature Review**

**Conceptualising regional integration**

A region is not a clearly defined entity because it has varied connotations that differ with culture and time. Of course, a region can be defined on the basis of geography, economic activity, and jurisdiction or by social and cultural characteristics (UNU/CRIS and Allied Consultants, 2002). There is, however, no consensus for the definition of integration or its substantive content or form. It is not the primary intention of this article to delve into the intricacies and contestations of the definition of the term ‘integration’. However, an attempt was made to shed light on the different understandings of the concept of regional integration.

Conceptually, a lot has been written on the subject of regional integration. In a Handbook on Regional Integration in Africa, Vickers (2017) explains that regional integration is a multifaceted process that enables countries within a demarcated geographical space to strengthen their level of interaction in economic, security, political, and social issues. This in other words means that regional integration is the coming together of countries in the same vicinity with the view of pursuing cooperation on economic, political, security, and social issues. However, regional integration has mainly focused on economic cooperation among countries in the same region or sub-region.

There are four theories that are often at the forefront when regional integration is discussed. Among them, the most common views regional integration as involving lowering and removing trade barriers among the countries in a region or sub-region so that trade between those countries can increase (Gumede, 2019). This according to Gumede (2019) is a school of thought that originated with Jacob Viner and falls within the linear integration models. These models advocate for a free trade area, a customs union, a common market, a monetary union, and ultimately a political union. Another one is open regionalism that advocates for liberalising trade globally to foster an integrated global economy. Then there is the new geography theory that propounds that smaller countries should cooperate with bigger countries so that they benefit from international trade (Gumede, 2019). This theory does not agree with horizontal integration. And lastly, there is the developmental integration theory that encourages countries to cooperate to protect emerging industries through the application of interventions like import interventions and industrialisations (Gumede, 2019).
However, integration scholars have subjected these theories to a barrage of criticism for various reasons. One of the reasons that have seen these theories being criticised is their over emphasis and inclination to the economic variables at the expense of other equally important variables in promoting integration (Olorotuba, 2018). For this reason, this study adopted the developmental regional integration as the theoretical framework to guide this study. Developmental regional integration advocates for free access to markets by member states among other related variables. Though it is inclined to economic cooperation, other factors such as social development and the free movement of people are taken into account.

### History of Regional Economic Integration and its importance

The history of regional integration in Africa is long and complex. Since the formation of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) in 1963, the idea of regional integration got impetus and resulted in the formation of other regional groupings and institutions. The concerted efforts to integrate Africa during the colonial era were hugely aligned to political unification with the view of galvanizing the continent towards political independence. This resulted in the division of the continent into two diametrically opposed groupings—those who advocated for an immediate unification of independent African states (Casablanca Bloc) and those who pushed for a gradual and cautious political unification of Africa (Monrovia Bloc). The Monrovia group pushed for the formation of regional economic communities that would act as building blocks for an African Economic Community (Gumede, 2019) that would potentially lead to the political unification of Africa (Leshoele, 2020). Since then, regional integration has continued to dominate the debates on Africa’s development agenda as attested in continental institutions such as the 1980 Lagos Plan of Action (LPA), the Abuja Treaty of 1991 that established the African Economic Community (AEC), and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development.

Regional economic integration can be traced back to the United Nations (UN) Economic Commission on Africa that was mandated to promote socio-economic development among member states. Regional economic integration (REI) is a process that mandates countries to eliminate economic and non-economic barriers among them (Balassa, 1961). The domination of the world by trading blocs from North America, Europe, and South East Asia has made African regional economic integration imperative (Madyo, 2008). Globalization and the long-held view that REI provides sustained economic growth to small markets provided an impetus to the doctrine of REI (Bah, 2013). Lebale et al. (2009) argue that regional integration could, among other things, lead to the pooling of resources and enlarged markets that stimulate production, trade, and investment. The expectation is that deeper integration among regions would allow sustained and robust political and economic development that would result in enhanced mobility of goods, services, capital, and labour (Adeniji & Agaba, 2014). Such reasoning has informed the argument that regional integration provides sustainable trajectories for developing countries to foster economic prosperity. According to Schiff and Winters (2003), REI allows especially small countries to attain sustained economic growth through economies of scale, new trade opportunities, and increased investment.

Following the establishment of ECA in 1958, integration attempts were made in the 1960s with the view of combating economic decay in many African economies (Naceur, 2002). These efforts culminated in the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) in 1980 which provided a conceptual framework for economic integration in Africa. Through the LPA, member states collectively committed themselves to promoting economic and social development with a view of achieving self-sufficiency and sustainability (Mutunga, 2017). According to Hartzenberg (2011), the LPA was an undertaking that called for solidarity, self-reliance, and internally driven development underpinned by industrialization. To consolidate this milestone development, sub-regional and regional institutions were set to achieve self-reliance and sustainability. According to the LPA, the economic regional integration trajectory was set to go through 3 stages: free trade, customs union, and economic community.

Eleven years after the LPA, the Abuja Treaty was signed in 1991 and gave birth to the African Economic Community. Through the Treaty, African countries committed themselves to the goal of establishing a continent-wide economic and monetary union by 2028. Article 28 of the Abuja Treaty highlights the role of Regional Economic Communities (REC) as building blocks for AEC. In this regard eight (8) RECs were established in Africa, which are the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Countries (COMESA), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), East African Community (EAC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). The overarching goal of the RECs was to advance the establishment of Free Trade Areas (FTA), customs unions, and eventually, a single market that would culminate in a continent-wide economic and monetary union (the African Economic Community) by the year 2028 (Tuluy, 2016).

For decades now the African continent espoused the goal of an African Economic Community (AEC) but progress in this regard has been painstakingly slow. Following the reconfiguration of the OAU into the African Union in 2002, there were renewed prospects for deeper integration between and among regional markets in Africa. Pursuant to these prospects, negotiations to promote a Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) commenced at the AU summit in 2015 seeking to establish an AEC by 2028 (Cheluget & Wright, 2017). Despite a sluggish start towards an African Economic Community, the process has increasingly been gaining momentum and traction in recent years. In 2018, 44 countries signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in Kigali Rwanda. The signatories increased to 52 in 2019 and this displayed the widespread support of the idea of continental free trade by African countries. The agreement sought to create tariff-free economic zones that would spur business growth, boost intra-continental trade, spark industrialization and create jobs (Nsiah, 2020). In May 2019, the AfCFTA came into force following its ratification by
the minimum number of member states (22 according to Articles 23 of the Agreement). In theory, the AfCFTA became the world’s largest common market.

However, prospects of Africa’s economic integration are under a severe threat from the coronavirus pandemic. SADC as one of the RECs on the continent provides the focus of this paper as a case study on the implications of COVID-19 on regional economic integration. In this regard, the launch in 2015 of the Tripartite Free Trade Area (TFTA) comprising COMESA, the East African Community (EAC), and SADC is a crucial step towards a continental economic union.

Regional Economic Integration in the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) is preceded by the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC) which had a political agenda (Schoeman, 2002) of countering South Africa’s hegemonic power in the region (Mlambo, 2020). However, SADCC was morphed into SADC in 1992 with a more economic agenda of integrating markets in the region to improve the livelihoods of its population through intensified regional trade. The membership of SADC is constituted by all countries in Southern Africa with the exception of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Tanzania that joined from Central Africa.

Unlike its predecessor (SADCC), SADC sought to promote deeper economic integration rather than cooperation. The SADC Treaty reconfigured a loose organization into a legally binding arrangement that sought to facilitate closer economic integration among members to become a building block for the continent’s African Economic Community (AEC) (Tanyanyiwa & Hakuna, 2014). Elimination of trade tariffs was to be central in making member states increase trade regionally. Through the Regional Indicative Development Plan (RISDP), SADC member states agreed on policies that were meant to implore trade regionally and for countries to get rid of trade barriers (Gathii, 2011). Given perceived benefits (economic growth and employment) of trade liberalization, SADC sought to harmonise trade policies. The elimination of tariffs and customs duties enable states to increase their exports volumes hence economically benefitting the region (Than & Gates, 2001). Article 6 of SADC’s Protocol on Trade commits every member state to abolish trade barriers and refrain from establishing new ones. Despite such commitments, economic integration among SADC member states has remained a challenge owing to several reasons. This is shown by the levels of intra-trade in the region which has remained low. This situation has been exacerbated by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the future of SADC’s economic integration looks complex.

SADC’s regional economic integration is driven by its organs. The principal one is the Summit, which is made up of Heads of State and/or Government from all member states. It is the supreme decision-making body of the regional organization. Since decisions are taken by consensus, this body is weakened by the pursuit of national interests which often eclipse the interests of the region. According to Chingono and Nakana (2008), SADC member states often pursue policies that promote their interests at the expense of other members’ interests. Under such circumstances, the effectiveness of the regional body is undermined. The dissolution of the SADC tribunal following its ruling on the land dispute in Zimbabwe is a case in point here. Moreover, incompatible political and economic systems among member states have further complicated the challenges of integration in the SADC region. At independence, SADC member states adopted varying ideological systems that have determined the different economic directions the countries have taken (Nathan, 2003). Nathan (2003: 3) further notes that ‘in the absence of sufficient congruence, states are unable to resolve or transcend their major disputes, achieve cohesion and act with a common purpose in crisis situations. Such inconsistencies have often undermined the vitality of the SADC organs and implicitly undermined regional integration.

Economic integration is sometimes referred to as market integration, and it involves the process through which barriers of trade in goods, services, capital, and movement of people between two or more countries are eliminated (Mutasa, 2003). Scholars of economic integration posit that integration starts with a preferential trade area (PTA), moves to a Free Trade Area (FTA), to the customs union and common markets, and ultimately an economic and political union. From 2008 SADC intended to establish a free trade area, a customs union by 2010, and a common market by 2015 under which trade barriers such as payment of duty and restriction of movement of factors of production are eliminated. However, the region failed to meet the 2010 target and a new target was set to have a customs union by 2015. The economic integration in SADC is envisaged to result in the gradual structural change that ultimately leads to economic development and to economies of scale. The economies of scale enable countries that are in an integration scheme to specialise and develop sufficient productive capacity to compete (Landsberg, 2002).

Constraints to deeper regional economic integration

Despite the prospects of potential gains that accrue as a result of regional economic integration, the progress made so far toward integration is not commensurate to the wishes. According to Tuluy (2016), there are three (3) impediments that militate against deeper regional economic integration: density and quality of the physical infrastructure, the inadequacy of soft infrastructure, and the complexity of the historical concept of regional integration. The African continent suffers from poor physical infrastructures such as roads, energy, and railways and this makes the costs of doing business skyrocket and hence reduces the competitiveness of the region (Bond, 2016). The World Bank in 2014 ranked many African countries near the bottom on trade logistics apart from South Africa that was ranked in the top quartile (3.43). Owing to this Perkins and Robins (2011) argue that the cost of transporting goods in East Africa, for example, is 30% higher than in South Asia, and over 60% higher than in the USA, resulting in a reduction of annual GDP growth by 1 percent. Among the RECs in Africa, the range of road density is 214 km/1000 km² in SADC to 105km/1000 km² in the
The African continent has eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) that are recognized by the African Union. These RECs have been mentioned in the preceding section under ‘Regional Economic Integration’. Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the RECs had their core objectives. For SADC, among its other objectives, the region aimed to achieve economic development, alleviate poverty and enhance the standard and quality of life of the region through regional integration. At the regional level, the African Union looked forward to implementing the AfCFTA in July 2020. These core objectives were either delayed or suspended due to the fallout as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic resulted in the suspension or cancellation of programmes as countries turned resources and time to the health emergency.

It is interesting to note that some themes frequently emerged in the data that was gathered. The first of these themes was the behavior of the SADC member states in their response to the pandemic. The majority of the states adopted an inward-looking approach as they attempted to contain the spread of the disease and this was a departure from the spirit and letter of regional integration. According to Kalinina (2020), the initial reaction of states to the COVID-19 crisis was to look inward and to act alone. The first instinct for nations when the pandemic hit their shores was individualistic self-preservation measures to mitigate the effects of the virus and they forgot that they were members of regional groupings (Benyera, 2021). This was manifest in border closures, disruption of supply chains, and slumping regional economic activity. African Development Bank warned the consequences of the unilateral behavior of states as a response measure to the covid-19 pandemic. The continent risked reversing the regional integration gains achieved over the years. Wilkinson (2020) agrees that the COVID-19 pandemic held a major setback to regional integration in Africa. This, according to him was caused by the delay that was brought by COVID-19 in operationalising the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the restrictions on trade that were imposed within Africa as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Trade-in essential commodities and services were restricted across the continent as borders were closed in the process hindering trade. Wilkinson (2020) argues that 13 countries in Africa restricted the export of medical supplies, including items such as face masks, hand sanitizer, and personal protective equipment.

The coronavirus pandemic comes at a time when RECs are grappling with a myriad of challenges that militate against deeper economic regional integration. RECs in Africa including SADC are dogged by poor infrastructure, high transaction costs, and tariffs that keep trade among member states very low (Wilkinson, 2020). The promotion of an AfCFTA goes a very long way in supporting regional integration by dismantling tariffs and other related trade barriers. That 44 countries have signed for the AfCFTA that seeks to create tariff-free economic zones across the continent speaks volumes on the role of trade in regional integration. Though questions
have been raised on the costs of trade on integration, especially on smaller economies, trade integration remains a very crucial aspect of the regional integration agenda. However, the advent of COVID-19 posed a great danger to the realisation of an AfCFTA. This was confirmed in March 2020 when the launch of the free trade area was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. This postponement was informed by the measures that African countries adopted in order to contain the pandemic. Measures such as the closure of borders hence restricting the movement of people and investments, protectionist tendencies to cushion domestic business and enormous channeling of resources towards health matters are opposed to ensuring economic regional integration (Nsiah, 2020).

So, amidst the ravaging coronavirus pandemic, Africa’s prospects of achieving considerable economic integration remain largely hanging in the balance. The launching of the AfCFTA (scheduled for January 2021) was envisaged to increase income gains by 7% by 2035, or nearly US$450 billion (World Bank, 2020). There was the belief that the AfCFTA pact will create the largest free trade area in the world by connecting approximately 1.3 billion people across 55 countries with a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around US$3.4 trillion (World Bank, 2020). There is an expectation that the continental free trade area will boost trade among African countries and also allow the continent to develop its own value chains in the process lifting millions out of poverty. This comes at a time when trade between countries is depressed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The movement of people has been restricted by the pandemic and this has adversely impacted the progress that the AfCFTA could make. Borders were closed to international movement even for economic purposes. Though it is too early to make an evidence-based assessment of how the AfCFTA has fared so far, the impact of the COVID-19 on the process of integration cannot be ignored.

Though Africa comparatively was one of the least affected regions by the coronavirus pandemic, the continent has, however, not been spared the economic blizzard that has come as a result of the health crisis. The economic downturn that accompanied the coronavirus pandemic has therefore stifled the chances of economic integration. This is because the inward-looking policies such as the closure of borders, adopted by most African countries to fight against the health pandemic do not encourage integration. There was no coordinated regional response to the economic challenges presented by COVID-19. This leaves a begging question as to the purpose of regional organisations when they cannot coordinate their members in the face of a common challenge. Most countries in the SADC region (Botswana, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, and Swaziland) imposed strict lockdowns that included closing their borders to limit the spread of COVID-19. This is happening notwithstanding the dependence of these economies on imports. Under these circumstances, COVID-19 has had an adverse impact on international trade that would result in economic decline and stagnation. As the pandemic persists the economic decline has resulted in the loss of government revenue and loss of employment. The World Bank estimated that amidst the pandemic, Africa suffered a projected loss of between $37 billion to $79 billion due to a sharp decline in output growth with key trading partners such as China and Europe (Nsiah, 2020).

Africa remains one of the most fragmented continents across the world and its trade and border crossings remain very restricted. Despite the theoretical promotion of the AfCFTA, trade among African countries remains remarkably low owing to an array of reasons including lack of product diversification, high trade costs, rudimentary transport and communication, unsustainable power production, and lack of trade instruments. Though SADC formalized its Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) in 2003, according to which a free trade area was to be established, followed by a customs union, common market, and ultimately, a monetary union (Bronauer & Yoon, 2018), this has remained largely unimplemented. The overarching objective of the RISDP was to deepen integration in the region with the view to accelerate poverty eradication and the attainment of other economic goals (SADC, 2012). This is in sync with SADC’s vision of a common future where the region’s people enjoy economic well-being, improved standards of living, freedom and social justice, and peace and security (van Nieuwkerk, 2020). The fight against poverty and the quest for improved standards of living as key features of regional integration has been impeded by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of businesses and virtually all economic activities to comply with national lockdown measures resulted in the loss of income for many households and inadvertently deepened poverty. A surge in the level of poverty and vulnerability in South Africa and Zimbabwe is an indication of how COVID-19 has negated the trajectory of integration in Southern Africa. Reports of 2.2 million people losing their jobs in South Africa in the second quarter of 2020 are indicative of how devastating the coronavirus has been.

One of the targets for SADC’s economic integration is to improve the livelihoods of its people through trade promotion. However, it is important to mention here that economic activity in the SADC region is underpinned by the informal sector. But in order to mitigate intra-community transmission, social distancing measures were implemented (Quaresima et al. 2020) which measures have made informal trading impossible. High levels of economic informality and urban unemployment in developing countries mean that people do not have a sustainable store of wealth and have limited savings (Ebrahim, 2020; Ray et al. 2020). The SADC region hosts a considerable population who are dependent on the informal sector economy, and the national lockdown and the attendant social distancing measures stripped many of their sources of basic income for survival. The latest survey for the Quarterly Labour Force in South Africa established that approximately 3 million were employed in the informal sector which constitutes around 18% of the total employment (Ebrahim, 2020). Though official data is absent, the figures of those who are employed in the informal sector are even higher across the region. This informal employment is often the only source of income for many households, ensuring that they stay out of poverty and hunger. The COVID-19 induced crisis stalled the informal sector and plunged many families into poverty in the process defeating the regional fight for improved livelihoods. This seems to confirm the projection by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa that estimated that approximately 29 million Africans will be pushed below the poverty line of US$1.90 and 19 million jobs will be lost as a result of COVID-19 (UN-ECA, 2020). Therefore, the pandemic did not only trigger a
health crisis but also unleashed socio-economic issues that negated the global sustainable development agenda on poverty eradication (Nicola, 2020; Pirouz, 2020).

Among other key objectives, regional integration seeks to achieve intra-regional trade hence the promotion of the AfCFTA. Regional integration is seen as a pathway to ensure easier access to bigger markets, therefore, increasing the levels of trade and in the process enhancing economic growth. To promote this SADC established a preferential free trade agreement that sought to eliminate tariffs on certain imported goods. This has seen intra-regional exports in SADC rising at an annual rate of 9% between 2011 and 2013. An increase in intra-regional trade creates employment, supports and expands markets, and boosts foreign direct investment. It should also be noted that an increase in intra-regional trade volumes manifests deepening regional integration. However, the surge in regional trade slumped at an average rate of 8% per annum from 2014 up to 2017 (Bronauer & Yoon, 2018). This reversal was a result of a slump in global commodity prices and several non-trade barriers that hinder regional trade (Bronauer & Yoon, 2018). Comparatively, in 2017 SADC’s intra-regional trade was 10% and that of Asia was 24% and that of the European Union was 40% (Chidede, 2017). This by implication means that 90% of SADC’s trading partners are outside the SADC region. Although SADC has over the years crafted several protocols to deal with trade barriers, the implementation of such protocols has suffered from the lack of an enforcement mechanism. It is in these circumstances that the region was hit by the coronavirus pandemic further restricting regional trade. The reversal in intra-regional trade is a major step backward in the quest for regional integration.

One of the early policy responses to contain the coronavirus was the closure of borders and restriction of movement by many countries. SADC member states imposed strict lockdowns that restricted intra and inter-regional migration. In early 2020, South Africa, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe suspended cross-border movements including suspension of all domestic and international flights and the closure of seaports. This measure had a direct impact on tourism (UNWTO, 2020; Horaira, 2021) which is one of the hallmarks of regional integration. According to Nyaruwata and Mbasera (2021), COVID-19 reversed the gains that the SADC region had accumulated since the formation of the Regional Tourism Organisation of Southern Africa (RETOSA) in 1997. Closure of borders, lockdowns, quarantine measures, and bans of travelers coming from COVID-19 hotspots all contributed to the decline and total collapse of the tourism industry in the SADC region. As survival tactics, businesses responded by retrenching workers, cutting salaries and wages, sending staff on long unpaid leave or employing staff on a temporary basis (Dube, 2021; UNDP, 2020). How countries individually banned travelers from perceived COVID-19 hotspots undermined the notion of regional integration.

**Recommendations**

Though COVID-19 caused economic disruptions, it proffered regional opportunities for the SADC region in the future to forge ahead with regional economic integration. The region should address the infrastructural deficiencies that have impeded the transit of goods and services for a long time. SADC’s range of road density is low compared to RECs across the world and this has impeded deeper regional integration in the region. Inadequate infrastructure impedes economic growth: the transit of raw materials and goods to customers is difficult and intra-regional trade cannot flourish. It should be emphasized that foreign direct investment flows where there are infrastructural advantages of doing business. To achieve the region’s (SADC) vision of improving the people’s standards of living, a vast range of infrastructural services are key to improving the quality of life of people.

From a demand and supply perspective, the COVID-19 crisis caused depression in demand and disruption in the supply of goods. Despite this being a great challenge, this would provide a great opportunity for the manufacturing sector across Africa in the aftermath of the pandemic. Governments and businesses should focus on industrial innovation and new technologies to seize new business opportunities such as the production of essential medical supplies. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of food security and the supply of crucial health supplies for all countries. In this regard, Zeng (2020) argues that Africa should leverage its rich agricultural resources by improving agricultural infrastructure and efficiency and improving its agro-processing capacity. This would need the African continent to embrace aggressively digital technologies for both production and retailing of goods and services.

It is important to mention that managing the aftermath of COVID-19 and supporting the recovery path would be done much better if regional coordination is encouraged. The African Union should remain focused on pushing for the AfCFTA and support member states towards the implementation of this milestone achievement. This should be accompanied by concerted efforts by African countries to harmonise their trade-related regulations, customs controls and reduce both tariff and non-tariff barriers to boost intra-regional trade. In fact, the coronavirus crisis has provided a new impetus for the realization of the AfCFTA. Both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and UN Economic Commission for Africa have alluded that a free trade area has the potential to increase growth, raise welfare and stimulate industrial development in Africa (Ismail, 2020). Because many countries are small and their infrastructure least developed, a free trade area presents a unique opportunity to unleash their economic potential. However, further research in the future is recommended on the impact that AfCFTA is going to have on regional economic integration. It is currently in its infancy and its success or failure in this regard could not be investigated by this current study.

**Conclusion**

The coronavirus pandemic has tested the efficacy and prospects of regional economic integration in Southern Africa. When faced with a common challenge, the SADC region member states responded in an individualistic and uncoordinated manner. The national
lockdowns, closure of borders and restriction of international travel, are measures that negate and undermine the aspirations of regional economic integration. The unsystematic manner in which countries closed and opened their economies leaving travelers stranded demonstrates a lack of commitment by member states to statutes of regional integration. This caused business to slump, trade declined, and poverty deepened resulting in the negation of regional integration.

Acknowledgement

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, E.Y.; Methodology, E.Y.; Data Collection, E.Y.; Formal Analysis, E.Y.; Writing—Original Draft Preparation, E.Y.; Writing—Review And Editing, E.Y.; All authors have read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

Funding: The publication of this article was funded by the University of South Africa-Research and Innovation

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to that the research does not deal with vulnerable groups or sensitive issues.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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