The issue of regional integration has been one of the major aspects of the African international relations science since the great decolonization period of the 1960s (Coulibaly, 2006; Gbaguidi, 2013; Gazibo, 2007; Mandjem, 2019). Largely driven by a mimetic spirit, backed by the 'European model' of regional integration (Lequesne and Smith, 1997; Vennesson and Sindjoun, 2000), this issue has materialized in a proliferation of inter-state groupings and free trade agreements whose forms and effects have often varied from one situation to another (Bekolo-Ebe, 2000; Adedeji, 2002; Hugon, 2003). Indeed, from the OAU (1963) to the African Union (2002), from the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) to NEPAD (2001) via the Abuja Treaty (1991), and considering the geographical arrangement of the various Regional Economic Communities (RECs), it can be noted that membership of these various integration projects in Africa has been the translation of a broader aspiration for continental integration, with the various pan-African movements for shared values, collective self-governance and economic independence as historical landmarks (Gana, 2014; Saurugger, 2010). This is the context for the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in January 2021, which has its roots in the Lagos Plan of Action (1980) to NEPAD (2001) via the Abuja Treaty (1991), and considering the geographical arrangement of the various Regional Economic Communities (RECs). It can be noted that membership of these various integration projects in Africa has been the translation of a broader aspiration for continental integration, with the various pan-African movements for shared values, collective self-governance and economic independence as historical landmarks (Gana, 2014; Saurugger, 2010). This is the context for the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in January 2021, which has its roots in the Lagos Plan of Action and the Abuja Treaty (1991), as well as its inclusion in the African Union's Agenda 2063.

However, the AfCFTA was launched at the 10th Extraordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union (AU) in March 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda. To date, 54 of the AU Member States, including Cameroon, are signatories to the Agreement establishing the AfCFTA and 36 have deposited their acts of ratification.
Intended to boost intra-African trade (by acting on customs policies and tariffs, and by increasing preferential conditions between its members) on the one hand, and to accelerate a better integration of Africa into world trade (Ben Achour R. et al., 2019) on the other hand, the AfCFTA is the implementation of an ambitious vision of African states to materialize the convergence and integration efforts undertaken by the various regional economic communities. It thus aims not only to create a single continental market for goods and services, but also to establish free movement of economic operators, with the establishment of a customs union in 2022 and an African Economic Community by 2028 (Jacquemot, 2019; AU, 2019; Ben Achour R. et al., 2019). The AfCFTA is a promising project for African integration, since the agreement establishing it has been keen to link the material and immaterial determinants of continental integration.

However, although it is premature to make an objective assessment of the impact of the AfCFTA on the speeding up of the African integration project, it can be noted that the context of the launch of this free trade area is still marked by numerous obstacles whose effects could prove harmful to the achievement of the general objectives of the agreement establishing it. Apart from the political will of African leaders, conflicts, jihadist terrorism, cross-border crime, the plurality of currencies in Africa and the plurality of RECs are some of the obstacles that may seriously handicap the achievement of the objectives of the AfCFTA, and thus its continental integration project (Blanchard, 2019). For this reason, an important reflection has to be carried out in order to serve, at the same time, as a decision-making tool and as an instrument of strategic analysis for the choices of actions and operational strategies likely to facilitate the achievement of the ambitions of this important agreement.

This symposium intends to debate on the contribution of the AfCFTA to the process of structuring, (re) energizing, accelerating and developing African regional integration. Its objective is to share the views of academics and practitioners, in order to better analyse the theoretical benchmarks and practical levers of the establishment of this zone, to assess the chances of success and the potential impact in the completion of the African continental integration project.

Scientific approach

The advent of the AfCFTA has renewed the scientific debate on regional integration as a modality for managing globalization (Van Hamme, 2014) and, more specifically for Africa (Gbaguidi, 2013), as an effective register of resistance to the violence of the process of globalization currently driven by the West and Asia (Richard and Zanin, 2007). More broadly, the issue is not new to the social sciences, since there is a fairly abundant literature on the dynamics of integration on a global scale. Some of the analyses, which castigate the laudatory discourse on globalization, explain regional integration by the persistence of ‘distances’ in trade between different parts of the world (Crozet and Lafourcade, 2009; Hugon 2003) and are highly critical of this globalization, which is accused of being the source of international imbalances (Hetne and Soderbaum, 2000; Gana and Richard, 2014). Others, more often specialized in specific regions (Oyeyide et al., 1997; Dabene, 2009; Taillard, 2004), endeavour to analyse integration in terms of costs and benefits (Hugon, 2002; Baldwin, 1992), with an emphasis on the institutional capacities of the organizations responsible for conducting integration policies (Park et al., 2010; Mayda and Steinberg, 2006; Nwatchock, 2018).

In the specific case of Africa, when the question of integration is not posed in economic and commercial terms (Bekolo-Ebe, 2001; Hugon, 2003; Diagne, 2006), the social sciences attempt to interpret it from the angles of ‘power’ and collective action. Thus, while Darraçq and Guy Mvelle analyse the governance of the continental integration process through the prism of a constant articulation between the logic of
power and collective action (Darracq, 2011; Mvelle, 2013), Pascal Ménard, who is the author of the book on the governance of the continental integration process, is the author of the book on the governance of continental integration; Mvelle, 2013), Pascal Venesson and Luc Sindjoun set out to objectify the ‘unipolar’ posture of the integration path, focusing on southern Africa where a certain ‘structural realism’ allows South Africa to determine the trajectory of sub-regional integration (Vennesson and Sindjoun, 2000). Other authors go beyond this vision and note that African integration is taking place at the pace of a ‘polarization of space’ (Hugon, Briand and Blanc, 2003), with two main poles led by Nigeria in West Africa and South Africa in Southern Africa. Their reflection deplores the persistence of numerous ‘non-polarizing zones’, despite the existence of ‘large countries’ such as Cameroon in Central Africa, Côte d’Ivoire within the WAEMU, and Ethiopia and Kenya in East Africa -EAC. In any case, these authors highlight the various elements that facilitate integration, with the generalization of free trade areas (FTAs) or simply customs unions, capable of implementing preferential tariff and non-tariff policies (Lagadec, 2002).

It is precisely here that the interest of a reflection on the contribution of the new AfCFTA to the process of African regional integration arises, in particular because it renews the questioning of the continental choice of integration through the market. In what way could this choice of the ‘market’ produce ‘meaning’ in the completion of the African integration project? What possible limits (including cultural ones) can be placed on it and how can they be circumvented at the operational level?

This questioning thus gives the participants in this colloquium the opportunity to convene, on the one hand, a multidisciplinary approach, aiming at analyzing the AfCFTA as a variable of production of a political ‘meaning’ in the construction and consolidation of the African continental integration project. This will be done in particular through a look at the choice of rhythm and timetable proposed by the founding texts of this zone, and another look at the operational choice of an ‘immediate’ institutionalization, probably synonymous with an affirmation of African ‘maturity’ that could authorize a leap forward in the setting up of this zone. On the other hand, this colloquium will attempt to evaluate the stakes of the implementation of the AfCFTA in the dynamics of African regional integration, while remaining attentive to various constraints such as the persistence of numerous pre-existing external tariffs, the diversity of unconsolidated RECs, the power policies of member states, the survival of numerous exchange rate regimes and competing currencies, the dialogue between several legal regimes; in particular with the OHADA system, political barriers (borders and sovereignty), conflicts and other threats to peace, etc.

In addition, the conference will look at the interconnection effects between the regional context of the implementation of this project and the international environment. To this end, it intends to shed light on the rationales of the actors, the constraints and perspectives in terms of gains or losses inherent in the involvement of the major actors of the global economic system such as the WTO, the European Union (EPA), the major world powers as well as the emerging countries. At the same time, it will consider cross-cutting analyses on the effects that effective governance of the AfCFTA could have on the regional integration process, particularly in areas relating to the empowerment of community institutions, the hierarchy between community and national norms, the liberalization of intra-regional trade, the harmonization of RECs, the empowerment of integration financing mechanisms, and the promotion of peace and security. Finally, there will be more discussion on other aspects of governance such as the AfCFTA’s dispute settlement regime, its capacity to ensure the digitalization and digitization of procedures, its budgetary life and its consideration of ethics in the monitoring of trade in Africa.

It will therefore be an opportunity to bring together several scientific approaches (political science, economics, law, sociology, history, etc.), with contributions from practitioners whose operational experience may help to shed more light on the relevance of the launch of this zone and its real impact on the African integration process.
Areas of reflection

We encourage contributors to make presentation proposals based on the following areas:

1. **Scientific debates on the AfCFTA and African regional integration**
   - Theoretical tools for analyzing and evaluating regional integration;
   - The legal and economic foundations of African integration;
   - The AfCFTA and the Multilateral Trading System;
   - The AfCFTA: for an inclusive structural transformation of Africa;
   - The AfCFTA and the AU and RECs institutional reforms;
   - The state of play and the rationale for joining the AfCFTA (respective strategic calculations);
   - The historical trajectory of the African integration project: FTAs, RECs, Customs Unions;
   - The market, the economy and politics: what lever(s) for controlled integration in Africa?
   - Power, polarity or collective action: what dynamics around the AfCFTA?

2. **Operationalization of the AfCFTA: Context, contents and constraints**
   - The content of the texts and target areas;
   - Market integration and security challenges in Africa;
   - The AfCFTA and the diversity of legal regimes in Africa: harmonizing or cohabiting?
   - The AfCFTA and the diversity of African RECs: multi-speed integration?
   - The AfCFTA, African integration and political constraints (sovereignty, borders, political will, strategic rivalries, leadership disputes, economic production capacities, regional infrastructure development, etc.);
   - AfCFTA and EPAs: how to manage customs preference regimes?
   - The AfCFTA and the (re) revitalization of African economic diplomacy;
   - The AfCFTA and the natural resources economy;
   - The AfCFTA and the governance of public-private relations in Africa;
   - What rules of origin for the operationalization of the AfCFTA?
   - The AfCFTA's investment policy;
   - Competition policy and specialization logics of the AfCFTA;
   - The AfCFTA and trade defence measures.

3. **The AfCFTA and the external environment**
   - From Regional to Global: The Challenges of AfCFTA-WTO Dialogue;
   - Governing with Global Trading Powers: The AfCFTA and Europe, China and North America;
   - The AfCFTA and Trade with Emerging Economies;
   - The AfCFTA and bilateral customs preferences: what hierarchy of values?

4. **AfCFTA governance for a controlled regional integration**
   - The impact of the removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers on African regional integration;
   - The AfCFTA and the challenges of digitalization and e-commerce;
   - Transparency of trade procedures in the AfCFTA;
   - The funds mobilization system in the AfCFTA;
   - Dispute settlement regime in the AfCFTA;
   - Trade ethics and the protection of vulnerable sectors in Africa;
   - The sanctions regime for budgetary abuses by AfCFTA members.
Terms of participation

The speakers have the option of presenting their work in one of the above-mentioned areas in order to develop one of the sub-themes in French or in English. They are invited to submit an abstract of two pages maximum (in Word file, font size: Times New Roman 12, line spacing 1.5; including: the title of the paper, the problematic, the research methods, the theories used, the expected results and the key words).

The paper proposal should also indicate the full name(s) of the author(s), their academic or professional status and their institutional affiliation.

Academics, Researchers or Professionals interested in any aspect of this call for papers may submit a paper proposal simultaneously to the following three (03) addresses:

ousmanou.nwatchock@yahoo.com; nebaridley@gmail.com; youssefkary@gmail.com

The abstracts of the papers must reach the technical secretariat electronically at the addresses indicated, at the latest on June 30, 2021 at 23:59 (GMT+1).

Calendar

- Date of publication of the call: 28 May 2021
- Deadline for submission of abstracts: 30 June 2021
- Deadline for submission of papers: 30 August 2021
- Date of reply to authors: 15 September 2021
- Date of the conference: 23-25 November 2021

NB: IRIC reserves the right to select some relevant papers and propose a thematic issue of Cameroon Review of International Studies (CRIS). The authors of the selected papers will be informed by email in due course after the conference.

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