

The African Continental Free Trade Area

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The economic integration of the continent is advancing with the African Continental Free Trade Area, whose agreement was signed in 2018 and under which trading began in 2021, with the aim of abolishing most customs duties between African states and creating a market of more than a billion consumers.¹ Its implementation is slow, because rules of origin, infrastructure and currencies remain fragmented, but its effect on intra-African trade, historically weak, is beginning to be measurable.

For Geneva's traders and banks, continental integration opens up new, intra-African flows that traditional commodity trading, geared towards exports out of the continent, ignored: fertilisers and agricultural products moving from one African country to another, refined products from the new African refineries, including the one in Nigeria, metals processed on the continent. It also changes the legal framework, with common trade rules, dispute settlement mechanisms and a pan-African payment and settlement system, which Geneva's operators need to know.² Geneva, seat of the World Trade Organization and of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, is one of the places where this integration is conceived and negotiated, which gives its practitioners the access to information that Chapter I described.

1 Notes

1. Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area, adopted in Kigali on 21 March 2018, in force since 30 May 2019 following the deposit of the twenty-second instrument of ratification, operational phase launched in Niamey on 7 July 2019, start of trading scheduled for 1 January 2021; 54 signatories out of 55 member states of the African Union and 44 ratifications at the end of 2022; International Trade Centre, "Zone de libre-échange continentale africaine

The African Continental Free Trade Area

(ZLECAf)” (African Continental Free Trade Area, AfCFTA), macmap.org (accessed September 2026). ↩

2. Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, promoted by Afreximbank with the AfCFTA Secretariat and launched commercially in January 2022 to settle intra-African trade in local currencies; “Le PAPSS, un nouveau système panafricain de paiement pour faciliter le commerce intra-africain”, Africa24 TV (accessed September 2026). ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-the-african-continental-free-trade-area