
Exploring Algeria's role in the African Continental Free Trade Area: A strategic SWOT analysis for export diversification

BERDOUS Kahina*

Organizational Management laboratory (LAREMO)
Mouloud Mammerie university in Tizi-ouzou- Algeria

Kahina.berdous@ummto.dz

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ASMANI Arezki

Organizational Management laboratory (LAREMO)
Mouloud Mammerie university in Tizi-ouzou - Algeria

Arezki.asmani@ummto.dz

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Abstract:

In the purpose of liberation from the reliance on hydrocarbons, Algeria has joined certain free trade areas such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The aim of this study is to carry out a SWOT analysis of Algeria's integration into the AfCFTA in order to diversify the exports. This will involve identifying internal strengths and weaknesses, and external threats and opportunities.

Following the country's integration to the AfCFTA, Algeria has a groupe of strengths that will allow the entrance to the African market, but also some weaknesses that the country will have to overcome. This major continental market offers several opportunities for Algerian products, while also presenting a number of threats.

Keywords: SWOT, Free Trade Area, AfCFTA, Exports, Diversification.

Jel Classification Codes:F13, F15.

*Corresponding author.

1. Introduction:

With public finances weakened by fluctuating oil prices on world markets, it has become essential for Algeria to break away from the dependency on hydrocarbons.

With the ratification of the agreement establishing the AfCFTA and the publication in the official journal, Algeria has demonstrated the willingness to integrate the African regional value chain in order to diversify its non-hydrocarbon exports.

The AfCFTA could increase merchandise trade within Africa by 53%, while trade with the rest of the world could grow by 15% in the long term, once the reforms are fully implemented (IMF, 2023).

In this work, we will address the following question: following the integration of the AfCFTA to diversify its exports, what are Algeria's strengths and opportunities? And what are the weaknesses and threats it faces?

The aim of our study is to carry out a SWOT analysis to identify Algeria's internal strengths/weaknesses and external threats/opportunities following AfCFTA integration, which could influence its ability to diversify its export markets within the framework of this regional integration.

In order to explore this issue, we have formulated the following two hypotheses:

H1: Following its integration into the AfCFTA, Algeria has significant strengths and opportunities that will enable the country to diversify its non-hydrocarbon exports and strengthen its position in African regional trade.

H2: As an integral part of the AfCFTA, Algeria will face threats and weaknesses that will hamper the regional integration and diversification of non-hydrocarbon exports, and limit the country's ability to capitalize on its strengths and opportunities.

To carry out an internal (strengths/weaknesses) and external (threats/opportunities) diagnosis of Algeria's integration into the AfCFTA to diversify the exports, our research adopts the SWOT analysis tool. We opted for a multi-source methodological approach, which first enabled us to describe a theoretical framework linked to the AfCFTA. Secondly, we analyzed various reports from official sources (IMF/World Bank, African Union and official AfCFTA websites) related to the subject of our research.

Our work is thus structured around three main points. The first will be devoted to a presentation of the AfCFTA. The second will focus on the theoretical framework of SWOT analysis, and the last will set out Algeria's strengths and opportunities in the AfCFTA, as well as the weaknesses and the threats.

2. Introduction to AfCFTA

2.1. Birth of the AfCFTA

In 1963, 32 Heads of State who had achieved independence met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to sign the charter creating the first African continental institution, the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Although this charter did not focus on economic integration in Africa, but rather on decolonization and the political unity of independent African countries, it did lay the foundations for African economic integration.

Before it came into being, the AfCFTA went through a long process marked by various events, each representing an essential stage in its development. The following figure summarizes these events.

Diagram n°01: Key dates in the creation of the AfCFTA.



Source: Created by the authors.

The idea of economic integration in Africa has endured since the ABUJA Treaty was signed in 1991 and came into force in 1994. This treaty was a key milestone in the creation of the African Economic Community (AEC).

The agreement set out the stages of economic integration in Africa. Article 28 states: "During the first stage, Member States undertake to strengthen existing regional economic communities and to create new ones where they do not exist, with a view to the progressive establishment of the Community." (OAU, 1991)

In 2002, in Durban, South Africa, the African Union (AU) took over from the OAU, and its Constitutive Act explicitly addressed economic integration in Africa, in contrast to the OAU Charter.

Thus, article 3-c of the act stipulates that one of the AU's objectives is to "accelerate the political and socio-economic integration of the continent". (AU, 2000)

African Economic Communities (AECs) are the pillars of the African Union (AU) (AU, 2018), and there are 08 AECs recognized by the AU to facilitate the implementation of the AfCFTA.

The AfCFTA was first officially mentioned in 2012. The decision to create it was taken at the 18th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The AfCFTA is the latest in a series of regional and continental economic integration agreements adopted in Africa, and the most ambitious in terms of objectives. The AfCFTA is an important AU project, in line with Agenda 2063 (AU, 2015).

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Indeed, at the summit, a decision was taken to intensify intra-African trade and accelerate the creation of the AfCFTA. It was also recognized that the intensification of intra-African trade is a fundamental factor for sustainable economic development, job creation and the effective integration of Africa into the global economy (AU, 2012).

At the 25th African Union summit in Johannesburg on June 14th and 15th, 2015, African heads of state officially launched negotiations for the AfCFTA. A preliminary roadmap and terms of reference for the negotiating forum were drawn up. These documents will serve as a framework for the next steps and define the organizational structures needed to move forward with the establishment of the AfCFTA (AU, 2015).

An extraordinary AfCFTA summit was held from March 17th to 21st, 2018 in Kigali, Rwanda, during which the agreement creating the said zone was presented and it was signed on the same occasion by 44 of the 55 AU member state countries, including Algeria.

Concerning entry into force, article 23 of the agreement stipulates that "this agreement and the protocols on trade in goods, trade in services, rules and procedures relating to the settlement of disputes shall enter into force thirty (30) days after the deposit of the twenty-second (22nd) instrument of ratification (AU, 2018). This occurred on May 30th, 2019, following the deposit by the Saharawi Republic of its instrument of ratification on May 29th, 2019, marking the start of the project's legal implementation.

At the 12th Extraordinary Summit of the AU held on July 07th 2019 in Niamey, Niger, the Heads of State took the decision to launch the operational phase of the AfCFTA. (AU, 2019)

The operational phase was launched with the adoption of the main instruments of the AfCFTA that will enable the operationalization of the African market.

The operational phase of the AfCFTA was scheduled for 2019 (AU, 2019) but has been delayed due to ongoing negotiations on tariff concessions and rules of origin and also because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, the AfCFTA Secretariat launched the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) to test the operational, institutional and legal environment of the AfCFTA.

To make the operational phase of the AfCFTA a reality, the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) was launched in October 2022 at the 7th meeting of the AfCFTA Council of Trade Ministers held in Accra, Ghana. This initiative initially brought together (08) states (Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, Tunisia) from across Africa with an initial list of products to be traded based on regional value chains (Ceramic tiles, batteries, tea, coffee, processed meat product, corn starch, sugar, pasta, glucose syrup, dried and sisal fiber).

As global supply chains reorganize for greater post-Covid-19 resilience, AfCFTA could also become an effective framework for reducing Africa's vulnerability to future disruptions, while accelerating the process of sectoral and structural transformation of regional economies (Afrexim Bank, 2021).

The following table shows the current status of African countries and their membership of AfCFTA.

Table n°01: Situation of African countries in the AfCFTA.

No commitment	Signed only	Signed and ratified
Eritrea (1)	Benin – Liberia- Libya- Somalia- Southern Soudan- Madagascar (6)	47

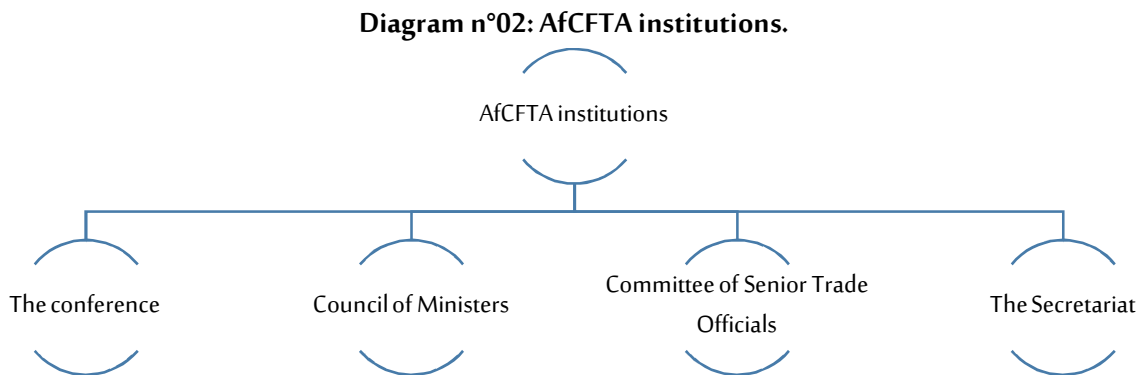
Source: created by the authors based on data from the official AfCFTA website.

Algeria initiated the ratification procedure in 2020. The agreement was promulgated on December 29th, 2020, following parliamentary approval and publication in the official Journal by presidential decree n°21-133 of April 05, 2021, ratifying the agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area.

.2.2 The organs of the AfCFTA

In its founding text, the AfCFTA was endowed with a set of administrative bodies to ensure its smooth operation. These bodies are responsible for ensuring proper management and application of the rules.

The following diagram shows the main AfCFTA bodies.



Source: Created by the authors.

- The conference

The Conference is composed of the Heads of State of all AU member countries.

As the supreme decision-making body of the AU, it exercises oversight and provides strategic guidance on the operation of the AfCFTA, including the Action Plan to Boost Intra-African Trade (BIAT) (AU, 2018).

- Council of Ministers

A Council of Ministers is established, comprising African ministers responsible for trade, or other ministers, authorities or officials duly designated by the States Parties (AU, 2018).

The Council of Ministers supervises the application of the Agreement, takes decisions and ensures their implementation. It collaborates with other AU organs, sets up committees, approves budgets and work programs, and submits recommendations to the Assembly for adoption. Its decisions are binding on member states, which must implement them.

- Committee of Senior Trade Officials

The Committee of Senior Trade Officials is made up of Secretaries-General or Directors-General, or any other official designated by each State Party (AU, 2018).

This committee implements the decisions of the Council of Ministers, develops programs for the AfCFTA and ensures a smooth operation. It may set up working groups, supervise the application of the provisions of the Agreement, and give instructions to the Secretariat for specific missions.

The Committee meets at least twice a year, and submits its reports to the Council of Ministers, while including the RECs in an advisory capacity.

- The Secretariat

The AfCFTA Secretariat, created by the Conference, is an autonomous institution with an independent legal personality, separate from the African Union Commission. It is financed by the overall budget of the African Union, and its functions are determined by the Council of Trade Ministers.

2.3. AfCFTA instruments

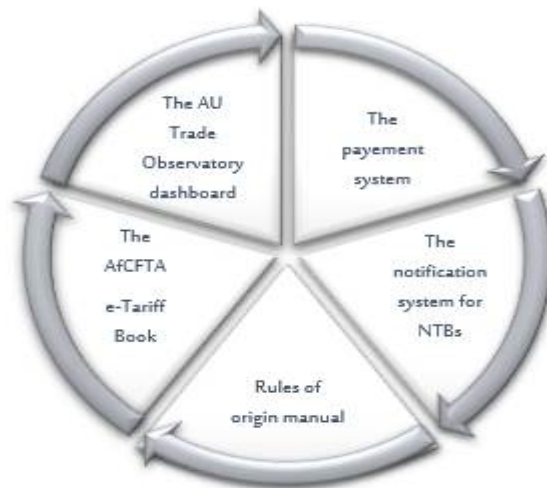
To guarantee its success, the AfCFTA has allocated the instruments necessary for its operation, covering various aspects of regional integration in Africa.

These instruments are designed to facilitate trade, improve transparency, and reduce trade barriers. They were adopted for the first time at the 12th extraordinary summit of the AU in Niamey in July 2019, when the operational phase of the AfCFTA was officially launched.

Some of these tools are already operational, while others are under construction. The following is a presentation of these various instruments.

The following figure summarizes the five (05) main instruments adopted at the 12th AU Summit.

Diagram n°03: The AfCFTA instruments.



Source: Created by the authors.

- The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) (www.papss.com)

Cross-border payments are one of the main obstacles to trade in Africa. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) is part of the AfCFTA region's solution to this problem.

PAPSS enables fast, secure and cost-effective money transfers across African borders. It facilitates commercial transactions, salary payments and real-time money transfers. In collaboration with African central banks, PAPSS connects commercial banks and fintechs to support cross-border payments. This system plays a key role in the AfCFTA by simplifying financial transactions between African countries and supporting economic integration.

The system was developed in collaboration with the African import-export bank AFREXIMBANK.

The system has been operational since its launch in January 2022 in Accra, Ghana. Currently, 14 African central banks and more than 115 commercial banks are already connected, and others are in the process of integration.

Algeria has not yet officially joined the system.

- The African notification system for non-tariff barriers (NTBs)(www.tradebarriers.africa)

Annex 5 of the Trade in Goods Protocol establishes a mechanism for the notification, monitoring and elimination of NTBs, whereby public and private sector stakeholders can lodge a complaint concerning a specific obstacle to trade that they have encountered in the process of transporting goods and services across borders.

The system is available via the platform's website. There is a user manual explaining the steps involved in registering a complaint.

- Rules of origin manual (AfCFTA, 2022)

Rules of origin (RO) have been addressed in Annex 2 of the Trade in Goods Protocol. The Rules of Origin Manual provides detailed guidelines for their application. This is one of the technical aspects of setting up the AfCFTA.

The RO determine which goods are eligible for preferential tariffs, depending on their origin. Their main aim is to ensure that only goods produced or sufficiently processed in an AfCFTA member state benefit from tariff reductions.

- The ZLECAF e-Tariff Book (www.etariff.au-afcfta.org)

The e-Tariff Book allows to consult tariffs and tariff concessions for each member country. Its main features include an interactive map search, enabling you to select countries and obtain the corresponding tariff information. It also offers filtering options by product and sector, facilitating access to market-specific tariff

data. The platform is designed to support intra-African trade by providing real-time information on applied tariffs.

It should be noted that Algeria is one of the countries that have submitted lists of tariff concessions, which have been verified.

- The AU Trade Observatory dashboard (www.ato.africa.fr)

This dashboard is available via an online platform. It is a crucial tool for monitoring, analyzing and promoting intra-African trade. It provides real-time trade data on intra-African trade, tracking volumes, tariffs and economic indicators. It helps assess the impact of the AfCFTA, supports decision-making by governments and businesses, and improves transparency by centralizing the continent's trade information.

3. SWOT analysis: literature review

3.1. Definition

In order to define SWOT analysis, we can begin by explaining the meaning of this abbreviation.

SWOT is an acronym that corresponds to the first letters of the four English words:

S:Strengths;

W:Weaknesses;

O:Opportunities ;

T: Threats. (Collectif Demos, 2012)

SWOT can also be defined as "a business strategy tool". (www.leblogdudirigeant.com)

3.2. SWOT matrix

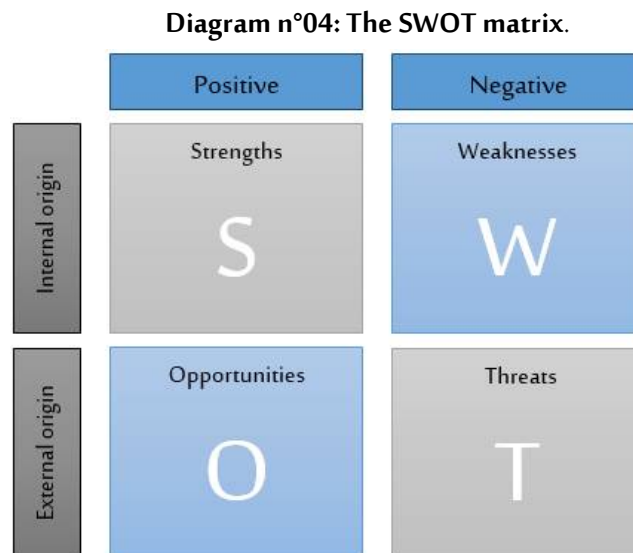
An important development in SWOT analysis is the SWOT matrix proposed by Dr. Heinz Weirich. (www.BrightHubPM.com)

The SWOT matrix is a visual analysis tool that focuses on two levels:

- Strengths (+) and weaknesses (-) correspond to the analysis of internal elements;
- Opportunities (+) and threats (-) correspond to the analysis of external elements.

The SWOT matrix enables the user(s) to identify and highlight the strengths and weaknesses linked to a project, as well as the opportunities and threats linked to the environment concerned by the project. It is used to structure thinking, identify, and build strategies. This simple design tool is in demand by many decision-makers (www.LeBlogduDirigeant.com).

The following figure shows the SWOT matrix.



Source: Adapted from (www.e-marketing.fr)

3.3. Applying SWOT to the public sector

In a move towards *new public management*, the public sector borrowed tools from the private sector. This movement aimed to make public administrations more efficient by adopting management practices from the private sector, such as management by objectives, performance evaluation and decentralized decision-making.

Historically, SWOT analysis was developed by a working group at Stanford University in the 1960s, but Professor Albert Humphrey (Puyt, Lie, & Madsen, 2024) is often associated with its creation, as he played a crucial role. Initially, SWOT analysis was applied to a company's environment.

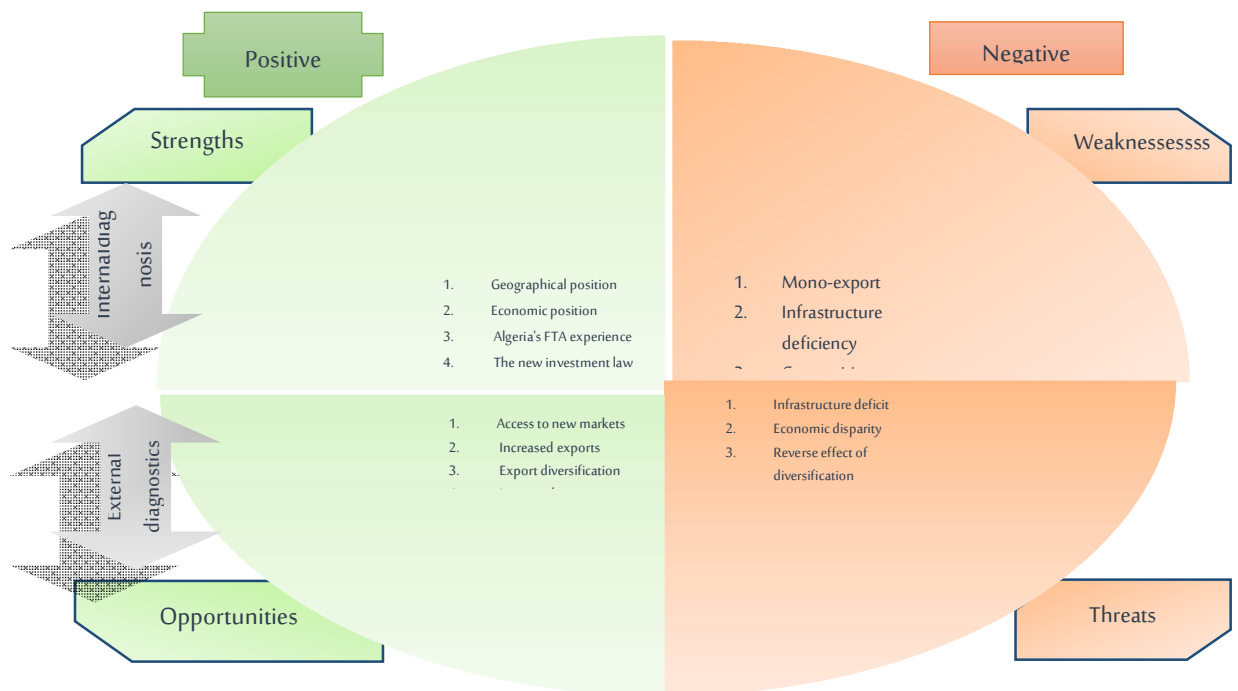
The initial aim was to understand why long-term planning frequently failed in large companies, and to offer a simpler, more applicable method for managing these challenges. SWOT analysis has gained in popularity for its simplicity and adaptability in a variety of contexts.

As a result, this analytical tool became so widespread that around the 1980s (Hood, 1991) it began to be applied in the public sector like any other borrowed tool, as governments and public administrations began to integrate strategic management tools into their planning and decision-making processes.

4. Results and discussion

The following figure shows our results following the application of SWOT analysis to Algeria's integration into the AfCFTA.

Diagram n°05: Results of the SWOT analysis of Algeria in the context of AfCFTA.



Source: Created by the authors.

4.1. Internal diagnosis

4.1.1. Strengths

- **Geographical position:** Located in the north of Africa and in the center of the Maghreb, with 7 countries on its borders, Algeria is considered the gateway to Africa. It is a crossroads between Africa, Europe and the Middle East. This strategic geographical position makes it a crossroads for air, sea and road transport.
- **Economic position:** Algeria is one of the 5 giants of the African continent (IMF, 2023) in terms of GDP (Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, Algeria and Morocco). They are the locomotives of the continental value chain, and the continent's economic future depends on them.
- **Algeria's experience in free-trade zones:** in addition to its membership of the AfCFTA, Algeria is a member of the Greater Arab Free Trade Area GAFTA and has an association agreement with the European Union. In this way, Algeria has acquired a good deal of experience, especially in negotiations to ensure the positioning of Algerian products on the continental African market.
- **The new investment law (JORADP, 2022):**

On July 24th, 2022, Algeria adopted a new investment law. This law is part of the drive to diversify the economy and improve the business climate. It introduces three new incentive schemes: priority sectors, geographical zones and structuring investments. The Priority Sectors scheme mainly covers industry, agro-

industry and pharmaceuticals, renewable energies, technology and innovation, logistics and infrastructure. These sectors benefit from customs facilitations and tax advantages.

This law introduced a number of reforms to boost the attractiveness of the sector to both domestic and foreign investors.

- **Young workforce:** with an average population age of 26.6 (www.fr.Statista.com), Algeria has a young workforce. This can be a major asset in the continental value chain, offering significant advantages such as capacity for innovation and adaptation, productivity and longevity on the labor market.
- **New Job Opportunities and industrialization:** access to a large market and combined consumer and business spending of \$4 trillion (IMF, 2018) can boost demand for Algerian products. Increased demand will require additional manpower for companies, creating new job opportunities. Also, to increase production, companies can use technology to modernize their production infrastructure, which is a factor in industrialization.
- **Natural resources:** Algeria's soil and subsoil are rich in a variety of natural resources. In Africa, Algeria is classified as a country rich in natural resources (IMF, 2023). Its oil and natural gas reserves give it an advantage in trade. In this way, Algeria can become an energy supplier for African countries not endowed with natural resources.
- **Political will:** Algeria has signed and ratified the AfCFTA framework agreement, demonstrating its willingness to actively integrate into the African market. In addition, Algeria has embarked on a vast reform and modernization project that will facilitate its integration into Africa, such as infrastructure (the trans-Saharan project) and the opening of Algerian bank branches in other African countries (Mauritania and Senegal).

4.1.2. Weaknesses

- **1.Mono-export:** Algerian exports are dominated by hydrocarbon exports. Indeed, hydrocarbons account for almost 90% of total exports, a reminder of the country's lack of export diversification, heavy dependence on hydrocarbons and public finances sensitive to the volatility of oil prices on the world market. With exports little diversified, there are few products to place on the market.
- In fact, in 2023, non-hydrocarbon exports amounted to just 5,058 million dollars, or 9% of total exports, compared with 50,496 million dollars for hydrocarbons, or 90% of total exports (Bank of Algeria, 2024).
- **Infrastructure deficiency:** despite the efforts made by the public authorities, infrastructure, an essential element for the transport of goods, remains weak and underdeveloped in Algeria, especially in certain regions.
- **Competitiveness challenges:** in the context of the African market, Algerian companies may be faced with foreign competition that is more advanced in terms of innovation and modernization, such as South Africa or

Kenya, with their diversified and industrialized economies. Algerian companies may not be ready to face up to this competition, which could lead to a loss of competitiveness and their disappearance if they do not adapt to new market requirements.

– **Complexity, legal instability and bureaucracy:**

- Constraining factors for investors include legal instability (regular changes to tax codes), the complexity of laws and the multiplicity of codes (tax and commercial), as well as bureaucracy (cumbersome administrative procedures requiring multiple steps).

All these factors contribute to a business climate that investors see as difficult. In 2020, Algeria ranked 157th out of 190 economies in the World Bank's Doing Business ranking (www.doingbusiness.org). This position reflects the difficulties associated with setting up a business, obtaining building permits, access to electricity and other key indicators of the business climate.

4.2. External diagnosis

This section deals with the external diagnosis of the SWOT analysis, i.e. Threats and Opportunities.

4.2.1. Threats

- **Infrastructure deficit:** with a surface area of 30.37 million square kilometers, Africa is the world's second largest continent. This immense surface area presents a disparity in the state of infrastructure. In some regions, they are well developed (North Africa and South Africa), while in others they remain inadequate (Sub-Saharan Africa). The lack of infrastructure is a major obstacle to the connectivity of local markets.
- **Economic disparity:** with 54 member states, Africa is made up of African countries with divergent economic levels, which could have a different effect on the gains to be made from their integration into the AfCFTA zone and could thus be a source of tension and conflict.
- **Reverse effect of diversification:** Algeria's trade openness within the AfCFTA could lead to a widening of its trade deficit, thus having the opposite effect to that expected. This is the case with the association agreement with the European Union, which led to a sharp increase in imports from Europe without an equivalent rise in exports to the same zone.
- **Political and Safety situation in Africa :**
- The political situation in Africa varies from country to country. According to the IMF, almost 40% of the continent's countries are classified as fragile or conflict-ridden. (IMF, 2023)

Algeria shares borders with seven (07) countries (Tunisia, Libya, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Western Sahara and Morocco) with varying political and safety situations. Some, like Morocco and Mauritania, are stable, while others, like Libya and Mali, are precarious, making border areas dangerous.

A difficult political and safety situation can slow down economic integration in Africa.

– **Legal framework of the AfCFTA:** Algeria's commitment to the AfCFTA puts it under constraining pressure. Indeed, Algeria has embarked on a process of reform and liberalization of certain parts of its economy, such as the lowering of non-tariff barriers and the simplification of certain customs procedures. They are also committed to respecting all the standards and protocols designed within the framework of this free-trade zone.

– **Low intra-African trade:**

Trade between the 55 African countries represents only around 15% of their total imports and exports. Most of Africa's trade is with other countries (IMF, 2022). partners outside Africa, such as Europe, China and the United States. Indeed, the main reason for this situation is that African countries mainly export raw materials and import manufactured goods.

Algeria's trade with African countries is less than 3%.

This situation is due to the inexperience of African economic partners, and their unfamiliarity with market conditions and consumer cultures.

4.2.2. Opportunities

- **Access to new markets:** By joining the AfCFTA, Algeria will be able to explore new markets. This large continental market is rich in opportunities, with 1.2 billion people and a combined GDP of 2.5 trillion dollars (IMF, 2018).
- **Increased exports:** the IMF estimates that the volume of intra-African trade will rise by 80% (IMF, 2020) thanks to the gradual elimination of tariff barriers between AfCFTA member countries. This will enable Algeria to increase its exports at lower cost to its African partners.
- **Export diversification:** access to a large market and increased exports open the door to economic diversification, particularly in areas such as agriculture, industry and technology, where Algeria can offer new products.
- **Improved competitiveness:** Joining a major trading bloc encourages local companies to boost their competitiveness. By cooperating with companies in fast-growing African countries, they are motivated to take advantage of the opportunity by adopting modern technologies and innovating to meet international standards
- **Attracting FDI:** by joining the AfCFTA, Algeria could become an investment destination for FDI from African countries, particularly in the sectors promoted by the new investment law and thanks to the innovations it introduces.

- **Regional cooperation:** Algeria's participation in the AfCFTA promotes cooperation with other African countries in sectors such as research, education and technology. This creates opportunities to strengthen skills and share technologies, thus promoting common progress.
- **Political and economic influence:** By playing a leading role in a major pan-African initiative, Algeria could strengthen its role and influence in economic and political decisions affecting the continent.

5. Conclusion:

The integration of free trade zones, in particular the AfCFTA, is a strategy adopted by the public authorities to help diversify Algerian exports and potential sectors.

On the one hand, Algeria is at the crossroads of three continents and the gateway to Africa. With its natural wealth, its favorable economic position in Africa, its young population and its political will, it has the potential to be one of the locomotives of the regional value chain.

On the other hand, Algeria faces several weaknesses that must be surmounted, such as dependence on hydrocarbons, a lack of infrastructure, and legal complexity and instability. Algerian companies must prepare themselves to face up to the competitiveness of African companies from the most developed countries.

Furthermore, Algeria has opportunities with African countries, such as access to new markets that will enable it to increase and diversify non-hydrocarbon exports, thereby boosting the competitiveness of Algerian companies and attracting FDI. In addition, regional cooperation and political will are key to all of these factors.

In the face of these external opportunities, there are threats that need to be averted, such as a backlash against diversification, the difficult political and security situation in certain African countries, and the current economic climate.

Lastly, there's no denying that the public authorities are in the process of implementing the elements needed to make this regional integration a success. It's only the start-up phase, and an assessment is still too early, but to be successful, we need to take full account of the strengths and opportunities, to manage the weaknesses and deal with the threats, in order to make the most of this integration.

It's clear that the public authorities are currently putting in place the essential elements to make regional integration in Africa a success for Algeria. November 2024 marked the official start of Algeria's trade with its African partners under the AfCFTA. However, we are still in the early stages of this complex process. Consequently, it seems premature to make an assessment at this stage.

To ensure the success of this regional integration, a strategic approach is required. It is essential to make the most of Algeria's strengths and opportunities, while identifying and effectively managing its weaknesses. In addition, it is crucial to develop strategies for dealing with potential threats. By adopting such an approach,

Algeria can not only overcome the challenges, but also maximize the benefits of regional integration. This approach is the key to turning regional integration into a tangible success.

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