




Chapter Four

Trade and Investment in a Shifting Global Landscape: The G20's Role in Promoting Sustainable Development in Africa

Siphumelele Duma 

Institute for Pan-African Thought & Conversation
University of Johannesburg 
*Johannesburg, South Africa*¹

Abstract

This chapter explores the importance of trade and investment for sustainable growth and development in Africa. It argues that the G20 presidency in South Africa, building on the efforts of its predecessor, Brazil, has the opportunity to advance the discussion on redefining the nature of the African continent's integration into the global economy. The long-standing predicament to achieving sustainable development in Africa has been the lack of structural transformation to diversify the economies away from the extractive sector. The G20 provides an ideal platform to re-arrange the economic relations between the Global South and the Global North. Participation in global value chains is currently viewed with scepticism in the Global South, given that these countries are usually reserved the bottom spots in the international division of labour. There is a need for a regulatory framework to direct FDI in developing countries so that it is not exploitative but development-oriented. The reform of the World Trade Organization should be deliberated in the

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direction of redefining the nature of the African economies' integration into the global economy. The intensification of efforts to curb illicit financial flows is important because these could be redirected to investment in infrastructure development.

Keywords: Trade; Investment; Global Value Chains; G20, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

The importance of trade and investment in any given economy's prosperity can never be overstated. What has often sparked debates among development economists and policy makers alike is the nature of trade policies and investment policies to adopt. A country's production structure determines where it stands in the international division of labour. The African continent has, pretty much throughout history, been positioned in an unfavourable position, relegated to the production and exportation of primary resources for processing externally. Hence, the efforts for structural transformation to inspire sustainable development. In the quest to do so, one of the most pronounced caveats to the African countries by scholars is that the late industrialisers should not attempt to replicate the models that were used by the Asian tigers and other 20th-century catch-up groups because of how fundamentally the environment has changed (Szirmai, 2012; Trindade, 2005; UNECA, 2016). Countries like those in Africa should adapt to the current conditions and devise strategies accordingly. The acceleration in the globalisation of trade, through the global value chains (GVCs), is one of these changes.

The world is still emerging from the economic downturn brought by COVID-19, with economies around the world slowly recovering (G20 SA, 2025). Many have described this period as the era of the polycrisis. Additionally, the world is adjusting to President Donald Trump's re-ascendance to arguably the most powerful office in global politics and economic order, and the "America first" approach to international engagements. Trump's tariffs on almost every country doing business

with the United States have fortified the major challenge of intensified protectionism.

The overwhelming call for the reform of multilateral institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), as can be seen particularly from the previous two successive G20 Presidencies of Brazil and South Africa, points to the dissatisfaction with the current order (G20 Brazil, 2024; G20 SA, 2025). Combined, these continue to change how the world has been understood over the years, more importantly, how the countries, especially in the global south, organise themselves to protect their interest pertaining to the global economic governance.

These trends trigger various questions about power in the existing world order and the future of global economic governance, particularly trade and investments, which are of greater interest to the countries of the Global South, particularly in Africa. This happens at a pivotal moment, when the Global South presides over the G20, regarded as the premier forum for international economic cooperation. The G20 members comprise 85% of global gross domestic product (GDP), 75% of international trade, and two-thirds of the world's population (G20 SA, 2025). While there may be arguments concerning the grouping's exclusive nature, to the extent that its membership is concentrated on a few countries, the weight it carries and potential influence are undeniable.

Against this backdrop, this chapter argues that the G20 presidency in South Africa, building on the successes of its predecessor Brazil, has the opportunity to advance the discussion on redefining the nature of the African continent's integration into the global economy. The long-standing predicament of sustainable development in African countries has been the lack of structural transformation to diversify their economies away from the extractive sector. The volatility of the global landscape dictates that it is untenable for the African countries to move forward with dependent economies.

This diversification is important because the nature of a country's integration into the global economy determines

its devastation during economic recession. If an economy is diversified, the shock can be mitigated relatively easily, compared to an undiversified economy. Furthermore, sustainable growth and development are linked to viable infrastructure, which is a critical enabler. The African Development Bank (AfDB) in 2022 estimated that the infrastructure financing gap in Africa is between USD 130 and 170 billion, meaning there is a need of USD 68 billion per annum to close this gap (African Development Bank, 2022). The G20 is an ideal platform to begin the conversation and re-arrange the economic relations between the Global South and the Global North. The participation in the global value chains (GVCs) is currently viewed with scepticism in the global south (Scholvin et al., 2022), given that these countries are usually reserved for the bottom spots in the international division of labour.

2. Major Trends and Challenges on Trade in Africa

Scholars and policymakers, such as Adedeji (1984), Ake (1981), Asante (1997), and Mkandawire (2014), have discussed regionalism and the lower levels of intra-trade within the African continent for decades. It has not just been that which has been the challenge, but also the trading structures that have made it so that the African economies trade more with the outside world than they do with each other. These are challenges sought to be resolved through the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), which aims not only to increase intra-trade but also to create a viable environment for investments (Adams et al., 2024; Erasmus, 2021; Odijie, 2019a). This intra-continental trade arrangement stems from the realisation of the indispensable nature of higher intra-continental trade; the long-term vision is also that, apart from building the biggest Free Trade Area (FTA) in the global economy, it could help accelerate the industrialisation process in Africa through the creation of regional value chains (RVCs) and free movement of the factors of production.

Above the lower trade levels within the continent, there is also a challenge of the intra-trade structures, which are heavily dominated by consumables, mainly sugar and tobacco (Clarke & Smedley, 2025). The history of economic development and industrialisation, especially in the high-income economies, shows that industrialisation can only accelerate in countries that heavily produce and trade in semi-durable and durable manufactured goods (Clarke & Smedley, 2025). Figure 1 depicts the aggregate structural composition of the Sub-Saharan

African economies and each economic sector's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product

(GDP) between 2000 and 2023, according to the World Bank's World Development Indicators. The manufacturing sector remains relatively inferior, contributing about 11% to the total economic output as of 2023. On the other hand, the service sector has been the most dominant by a huge margin, accounting for 45 per cent of the GDP.

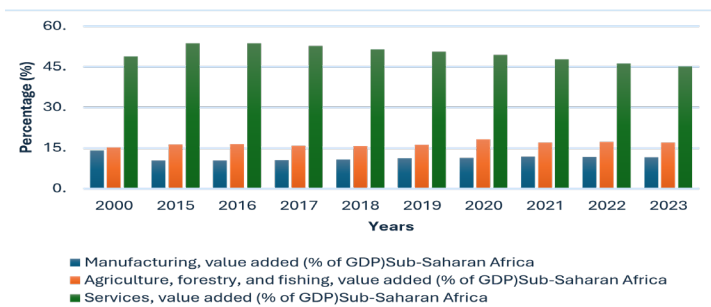


Figure 1: Sectoral composition of GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2000–2023. Source: World Bank, 2025

The composition of a country's economy determines what it can trade with other countries. The similarity of the African trading structures has meant that these economies would be heterogeneous (Odijie, 2019a, 2019b). As shown in Figure 2, the continent does not produce what it consumes, with huge imports of manufactured goods. This big demand for manufacturers has meant that these economies import more than they export, exacerbating trade deficits, and the bulk of these imports comes

from the high-income economies, especially Western Europe. The huge volume of merchandise exports from the African continent is destined for the high-income economies, as shown in Figure 2, a bulk of which is dominated by raw materials and commodities, as the manufacturers only account for about 21,46% of these exports. On the other hand, the manufactured imports are at 58,35% as of 2023.

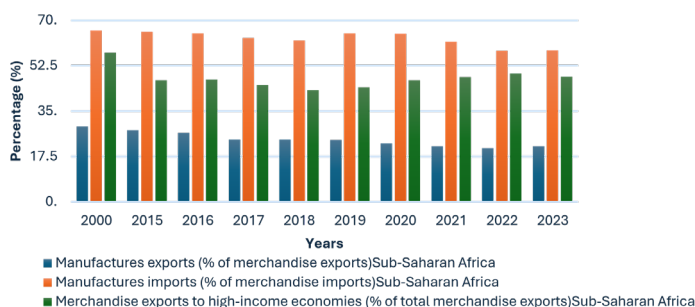


Figure 2: Trade Patterns: Manufactured exports, Imports and Merchandise Exports. Source: World Bank, 2025b

Evidently, the historical main driver of the African exports demand has been commodities, with several countries having one or two primary resources heavily dominating their export trade, like oil in Angola, diamonds in Botswana, sugar in Mauritius and Malawi, and copper in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Clarke & Smedley, 2025; Trends Research and Advisory, 2024). These trading structures and patterns, which have continued to reflect the colonial trade links between Africa and the former metropolises, have delayed the structural transformation and diversification.

3. Africa's Integration into the Global Economy: Barriers and Hindrances

Historically, the increase and decrease in the demand for doing business with Africa has been contingent on the global demand for primary commodities, and with African economies' reliance on these, it has meant their growth and prosperity depend on the commodities boom cycles (Duma, 2023; Page,

2018). This arrangement has led some voices in Africa to believe that integration into the global economy is not the best approach to growing economies, given how exploitative it is in its nature. Diversifying the economies and moving away from basic commodities has proved very complicated for countries in the current global trading system. In many instances, it has appeared that the current economic arrangement is, by design, configured to keep these countries as the producers of raw materials and agricultural goods.

For instance, in the 1980s, African leaders, in pursuit of economic structural transformation, wrote to the World Bank seeking assistance in creating industrial policies to build more sustainable economies by boosting the industrial sector, particularly manufacturing. In response, through what is commonly known as the Berg report, as it was coordinated by Elliot Berg, titled “Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action”, the World Bank Group (1982) argued that it was not a good idea to develop policies biased against the agricultural sector, asserting that the African economies should rather focus on their comparative advantage. This recommendation by the Berg report went against all key tenets of the Lagos Plan of Action, which proclaimed self-sufficiency for the African economies.

Critical minerals offer the African continent great opportunities to propel its pursuit of sustainable development and industrialisation, two of the main objectives underpinning Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. This is not only within the context of the AfCFTA, which could be harnessed to create RVCs and advantageously integrate African countries into the GVCs, but also with the creation of strategic trade and industrial policies to take advantage of the just energy transition.

The African continent could benefit significantly from the latter, as it accounts for over 30 per cent of the world’s mineral reserves, including nickel, lithium and cobalt (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2022). Moreover, critical minerals are essential across the economic sectors. This ongoing conversation around exploiting these precious minerals for the betterment of the

continent takes centre stage in 2025, as the G20 presidency is in (South) Africa. Since this grouping consists of the leading economies across the world, there is a great opportunity to facilitate discussions that seek to loud-hail the African agency in trade and investment.

This is important, specifically because the African economies are operating in the era of the ever-shrinking policy space for development. Where the use of most industrial policy measures is against the international trade regulations. For instance, while countries could get away with protectionist policies in the past to protect their infant manufacturing industries, they may have some consequences in today's environment. This means that if the Global South economies want to advance their development further, they would need as much cooperation as they can get from the big economies around the world, making the G20 the most relevant platform.

4. Foreign Direct Investment in Africa: Trends and Distribution

One of the main areas around which there is a remarkable unanimity in international economic cooperation is the importance of foreign direct investment (FDI) in building sustainable growth and development. In many attempts to engender industrialisation and sustainable development in Africa, among the top challenges has been access to adequate development finance, both private and public (Clarke & Smedley, 2025). While it is true that the continent has attracted some sizeable investment over the years, these have largely been concentrated on the natural resources and commodities, most notably oil, minerals and agricultural products (Trends Research and Advisory, 2024). For instance, this has made countries like South Africa, Nigeria and Angola the main FDI destinations in the extractive sector. However, this is unsustainable unless these investments are channelled toward encouraging value addition in this sector.

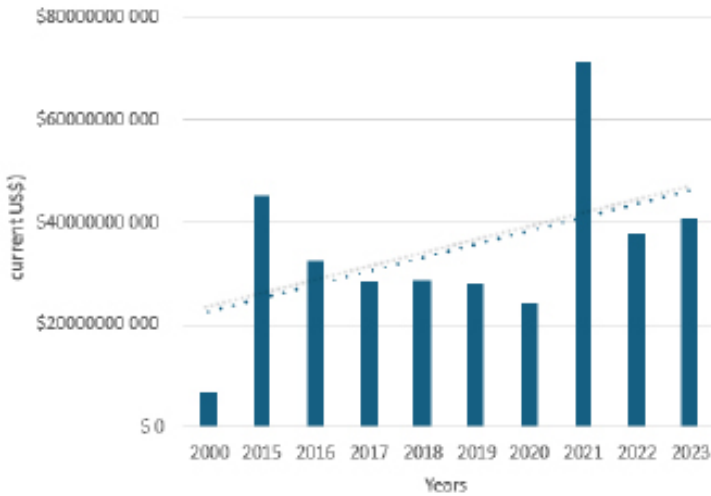


Figure 3: Foreign direct investment, net inflows (current US\$) Sub-Saharan Africa. Source: World Bank, 2025

The FDI into Sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades, between 2000 and 2023, is depicted in Figure 3, with the inflows of just over 40 billion US dollars in 2023. However, this is not only shared unevenly across the economic sectors, but also across countries and regions, as over 80% of it is accounted for by just 15 countries, with the big economies like Egypt, South Africa and Nigeria leading the charge (Trends Research and Advisory, 2024). Figure 4 depicts the FDI as a share of the economic output in the continent, which is one of the most important indicators to measure its impact.

The largest area that requires investment in Africa is infrastructure for developing manufacturing industries and cross-border trade. China, the biggest economy in the Global South and the second biggest in the world, and a member of the G20, has made substantial investments in Africa over the past 15 years, especially in infrastructure development. These initiatives seek to develop and modernise African infrastructure, particularly for cross-border trade. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) lead the largest urbanisation and infrastructure development scheme (Monyae & Nganje, 2019). This project

includes new roads, shipping lanes, and building projects stretching over sixty-five countries. For instance, over 50 African countries participate in the BRI, and in 2023, African economies received 23 billion dollars from this initiative for projects in ports and railways (De Kluiver, 2024). Despite this investment, the annual infrastructure investment gap in Africa remains high. More urgently, it is important to attract enough investment and boost infrastructure, as inadequate (trade) infrastructure has been cited as one of the main reasons for minimal intra-continental trade flows.

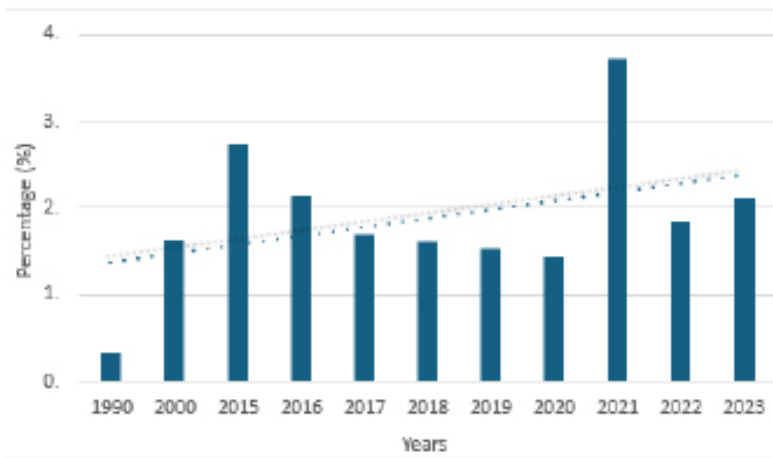


Figure 4: Foreign direct investment, net inflows (% of GDP) Sub-Saharan Africa. Source: World Bank, 2025

5. The G20's Engagement with Africa in Pursuit of Sustainable Development: Enhancing Trade and Investment Flows

The G20 has had some significant engagements with Africa prior to inviting the African Union (AU) to join the grouping. While the nature of this engagement largely depends on the country serving as the president and its priorities during the tenure, it still has to be endorsed by the other parties. The G20 Compact with Africa (CwA), a crucial initiative launched during the German presidency in 2018, is one of these engagements,

seeking to promote investment on the continent, working closely with the private sector, especially in infrastructure (World Bank Group, 2024). The CwA could prove to be more important in the coming years as official development assistance (ODA) has been steadily declining, necessitating alternative means for financing development for countries in need.

The G20 Development Working Group has also had some engagements with Africa over the years, especially under the grouping's four consecutive Global South presidencies, culminating with South Africa. The G20 has, especially under the presidency of Brazil in 2024 and South Africa in 2025, recognised the importance of trade and investment as the key drivers of growth in the countries of the Global South. More importantly, they need a supportive environment, as there are substantial disparities between the northern and southern countries (G20 Brasil, 2024; G20 SA, 2025). These disparities are more pronounced in economic growth, with the economies of the north bolstering slow but steady and reliable sources and access to capital, in contrast to the southern countries with sluggish growth and limited access to capital. G20 South Africa has proposed four priority areas in the Trade and Investment Working Group (G20 SA, 2025):

1. **Trade and Inclusive Growth:** Building on Brazil's Trade for Growth and Prosperity agenda, this priority area seeks to further emphasise the importance of inclusive growth and sustainable development to G20 members. Through this, South Africa aims to develop the G20 African Cooperation Agenda.
2. **Responsive trade and investment agenda to address the challenge of the global commons:** This area covers, among other issues, food security and the diversification of global value chains to promote sustainable development.
3. **G20 framework on green industrialisation and investment:** To promote the discussion and bargaining on the issue of critical minerals beneficiation in the African continent and explore matters of developing low-carbon manufacturing.

4. **World Trade Organisation (WTO) Reform:** To discuss reforms that would engender growth and development-oriented trade in developing countries.

These priority areas are reflective of the persistent development challenges in developing countries. The urgent need for growth-oriented investments is taking precedence. The G20 framework on green industrialisation and investment has the potential to enable and promote value addition to the raw materials on the African continent, as opposed to having them extracted and exported raw for external processing. There is a stronger argument for mineral beneficiation closer to the source. This would further ensure that the nature of the African economies' integration into the global economy is not exploitative.

Suffice it to say that several issues that have been frontloaded on the G20 agenda over the past three presidencies are issues that have been on top of Africa's sustainable development agenda for decades. For instance, the reform and inclusivity in the international financial institutions and that of the WTO highlighted in South Africa's development working group priorities are issues the African continent has been trying to champion as far back as the 1980s. The Lagos Plan of Action called for a new global economic governance. It noted that "the unfulfilled promises of global development strategies have been more sharply felt in Africa than in other continents" (OAU, 1980, p.4). This was in recognition that over two decades since the attainment of political independence in some parts of the continent, the economies had not seen any structural reforms or upliftment of the standard of living of their citizenry. It questioned the advanced countries' commitment to the global development agenda, which was unfulfilled.

It is a conversation brushed aside then, mainly because the African continent did not have a platform and instruments influential enough to exercise its agency in international relations. That was in the second half of the 20th century, at the height of the Cold War. There is a growing realisation that the current economic order is not in sync with the changing times and challenges of the 21st century. The difference between

then and now is that the African continent has unprecedented access to the instruments to exercise its agency in international relations, not just as followers but as the leaders and agenda-setters of some of these influential multilateral organisations and institutions.

G20 offers Africa and the entire Global South a great platform to frontload these issues, with recent successive Global South presidencies of the G20, Indonesia, India, and Brazil calling for some significant reforms in the multilateral order, most notably, India vouching for the AU inclusion into the G20. It does not go unnoticed that there have been many continuities in priorities by countries of the Global South in their G20 presidencies, from Indonesia to South Africa, in the quest to boost trade and attract investment to promote sustainable development.

The “Multilateralism We Want” is inclusive and in synch with the challenges of the 21st century; this is made clearer in the AU’s Agenda 2063. The international system operating on the order created in the first half of the 20th century is untenable. The instruments that exist for the African continent and the entire Global South to call for reforms would be handy in driving this agency. The importance of inclusion and participation of the AU in the G20 can never be overestimated. While South Africa had been, for some time, the main actor for the African continent in platforms like the G20, it was not without criticism, as some would argue that South Africa only represents its interests, with no legitimacy to speak for the entire continent. Now, the interest and voice of Africa are represented by a fully recognised continental body in this important multilateral forum.

The AU becoming a member of the G20 is not only historic, but it also gives the African continent an unprecedented opportunity to exercise its agency to defend its economic interests in the world’s premier forum for economic cooperation. The world’s biggest economies, traders, and investors with Africa are in the G20. As unrepresentative and elitist as it may be believed to be at times, this grouping wields

so much power and influence that it cannot just be dismissed. That is to say, the conversation on the nature of trade and investment undertaken with and in the continent begins on such a platform. The effectiveness of initiatives such as the CwA is highlighted in several monitoring reports, noting the positive economic performances of the CwA countries relative to non-CwA countries. However, this begins with deliberate reform policies undertaken at the national level, meaning the African countries' agency should be clear. That is how the integration of the African economies into the global economy and production structure would be redefined.

6. Conclusion

Underscoring trade and investment as the most important tenets of growth and development is not an overstatement. The history of economic growth and development, especially after the first industrial revolution, shows that the production and trade patterns determine the economy's well-being, and (sustainable) investments dictate the sustainable nature of that well-being. That is what Africa needs: sustainable investment. This is the type of investment that the chapter argues is diversified across sectors, and not heavily in one, particularly raw materials. Additionally, to advance the South African priority of promoting the beneficiation "closer to the source", a regulatory framework and policy initiative are required to ensure that a sizeable portion of investments toward the extractive industry facilitate the processing and beneficiation at the source. Properly directed investments in the continent would see the manufacturing industries flourish, promote intra-continental trade, create employment opportunities and uplift the people's standard of living.

Policy recommendations

- There is a need for a regulatory framework to direct FDI in developing countries so that it is not exploitative but development-oriented. This is more important for the extractive sector, as the FDI in Africa is heavily directed

towards it, but it has minimal development and growth impact on the receiving countries.

- The reform of the WTO should be deliberated to redefine the nature of integrating African economies into the global economy.
- Intensification of the efforts to curb the illicit financial flows is important because these could be redirected to investment in infrastructural development in Africa. For instance, the continent loses over 70 billion US dollars annually to the IFFs, which could go a long way in closing the infrastructural development financing gap.

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