

EXAMINATION OF AFRICA CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREAS (AFCFTA) ROLE IN PROMOTING CROSS BORDER TOURISM: A REGIONAL TOURISM INTEGRATION IN AFRICA

Falabi, M.O., Akerele, E. E., Bashiru, A. A., Folorunso, O. S., & H.M. Adebayo,

*Department of Tourism and Hospitality Management,
Kwara State University, Malete, Nigeria Correspondence:
edward.akerele@kwasu.edu.ng*

Abstract

This study examines the role of African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) role in promoting cross-border tourism across African countries. Through a desk research design, the study reviews existing literature, policy frameworks, and secondary data to assess the current state of regional tourism flows, analyze relevant AfCFTA provisions, and evaluate the potential of AfCFTA to address key barriers such as policy fragmentation, infrastructural deficits, and administrative challenges. The findings reveal that while AfCFTA offers promising frameworks for liberalizing tourism-related services and improving regional connectivity, significant gaps remain in harmonizing policies and developing infrastructure to fully realize its potential. The study recommends coordinated policy reforms, infrastructure investments, institutional collaboration, and unified regional marketing strategies to strengthen tourism integration under AfCFTA. These efforts can contribute to economic growth, cultural exchange, and greater regional unity across the continent.

Keywords: African Continental Free Trade Area, regional tourism integration, cross-border tourism, policy harmonization, infrastructure development

Introduction

Africa's regional integration agenda has gained renewed momentum with the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), designed to create a single market for goods and services across fifty-four African countries (Ajewumi, Afolabi, & Joe-Akunne, 2024). While significant attention has focused on trade in goods, the tourism sector—an essential driver of economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional cohesion—remains underexplored within this framework (Maneli, 2024; Wapmuk & Ali, 2022). Cross-border tourism in Africa continues to face persistent challenges, including policy fragmentation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited collaboration among regional tourism stakeholders (Döring & Engel, 2021), which constrain its potential to contribute effectively to

socio-economic transformation, inclusive growth, and regional identity. Although AfCFTA provisions facilitate the free movement of people and services, the tourism industry has yet to fully benefit from these mechanisms due to restrictive visa policies, deficient transport networks, and the absence of coherent regional tourism strategies (Calero& Turner, 2020; Maneli, 2024; Wapmuk& Ali, 2022). This underdevelopment limits the economic and socio-cultural potential of tourism in a continent endowed with rich and diverse heritage (Khan, Hassan, Fahad, & Naushad, 2020).

In light of these challenges, this study is premised on the problem that, despite the transformative potential of AfCFTA to harmonize African markets, cross -border tourism remains underdeveloped. Policy fragmentation, infrastructural deficiencies, restrictive visa regimes, and lack of coordinated regional strategies continue to undermine the socio-economic and cultural benefits that tourism could provide (Motsa et al., 2021; Badulescu, Badulescu, Simut, &Dzitac, 2020). To address this gap, the study aims to examine the role of the African Continental Free Trade Area in promoting regional tourism integration and enhancing cross-border tourism across African countries. The objectives guiding the study are to assess the current state of regional tourism flows in Africa; to analyze the provisions of the AfCFTA relevant to tourism development; to evaluate the extent to which AfCFTA can mitigate key barriers to cross-border tourism; and to identify strategic opportunities for aligning tourism policies across African countries with the objectives of the AfCFTA. In alignment with these objectives, the research is guided by the following questions: What is the current state of regional tourism flows in Africa? Which provisions of the AfCFTA is relevant to tourism development? to which extent can AfCFTA mitigate key barriers to cross -border tourism? What are the strategic opportunities for aligning tourism policies across African countries with the objectives of the AfCFTA?

The study focuses on Africa, with particular emphasis on cross-border tourism interactions among AfCFTA member states. It examines i nstitutional frameworks, policy instruments, infrastructure, and regional cooperation mechanisms that influence tourism integration, including key regional economic communities, to explore how AfCFTA can support tourism within and across these regions. By addressing these issues, the research contributes to scholarly and policy debates on regionalism and sustainable tourism, offering practical guidance for policymakers, tourism boards, and development practitioners seeking to enhance intra-African tourism. Understanding how regional integration mechanisms can stimulate tourism growth is crucial for economic diversification, employment generation, and cultural preservation (Motsa et al., 2021; Calero& Turner, 2020). Moreover, the study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly

Goal 8 and Goal 9, where Target 8.9 emphasizes policies that promote sustainable tourism, employment, and local cultural preservation, and Target 9.1 focuses on developing quality, sustainable, and resilient infrastructure to support economic development. By investigating the intersection of AfCFTA and tourism integration, this study advances these objectives, emphasizing inclusive economic growth, regional connectivity, and coherent policy frameworks across Africa.

Literature Review

The African Continental Free Trade Area

The African Continental Free Trade Area, formally launched in 2021, represents one of Africa's most significant steps toward economic integration. While much scholarly attention has focused on trade in goods, infrastructure, and manufacturing, relatively little has examined its implications for tourism development across the continent. Tourism is often subsumed under the broader category of services, and its unique potential and challenges within AfCFTA remain underexplored. Wapmuk and Ali (2022) considered AfCFTA's broader impact on regional economic integration, emphasizing trade facilitation and tariff reduction. Although services were acknowledged, tourism received minimal attention. The study did not examine how liberalising tourism services could encourage movement of people, foster shared promotional strategies, or establish more consistent visa and travel policies, leaving an important gap regarding tourism-focused cooperative agreements and supportive legal frameworks.

Ajewumi et al. (2024) analyzed regional trade agreements, including AfCFTA, highlighting the significance of services, investment, and infrastructure. Yet, tourism as a driver of regional development was not their focus, and the study did not assess how AfCFTA could stimulate travel between African countries, attract hospitality investment, or strengthen cooperation in marketing and heritage preservation. Maneli (2024) examined transport corridors, such as the North–South and Central Corridors, highlighting their potential to reduce trade costs and enhance connectivity. While relevant for tourism, the study did not link infrastructure directly to tourism development or consider how corridors might function as tourism routes to generate shared economic benefits.

Ouma (2021) examined Kenya's role in AfCFTA in relation to trade, infrastructure, and security, noting that political stability and safety influence regional integration. While infrastructure and peaceful conditions were acknowledged as important, the study did not consider their implications for tourism, including traveler confidence or cross-border tourism experiences. Similarly, Africa (2025) reviewed five years of AfCFTA implementation, identifying gaps in execution and the need for stronger stakeholder engagement and monitoring. Tourism was not central to this analysis,

missing opportunities to explore service regulations that could support tourism, such as mutual recognition of hospitality skills, easing restrictions on foreign investment, or enabling cross-border business partnerships.

Collectively, these studies reveal that tourism has received insufficient attention within AfCFTA scholarship. Despite its clear potential to drive regional development, employment, and cultural exchange, tourism remains marginal in policy and research debates. There is limited exploration of visa harmonization to facilitate intra-African travel, shared tourism marketing initiatives such as joint heritage routes or regional events, and investment in tourism infrastructure. Crucially, little evidence exists on how AfCFTA might enhance tourism-related employment, foreign exchange earnings, or community development. To fully realize AfCFTA's objectives, tourism must be treated not merely as a service category but as a strategic sector capable of fostering unity, cultural understanding, and sustainable prosperity across the continent.

Regional Tourism Integration

Regional tourism integration is increasingly recognized as a vital strategy for fostering sustainable economic growth, cultural exchange, and infrastructural development. Although other regions demonstrate that coordinated tourism strategies enhance competitiveness, Africa has yet to fully leverage the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for similar gains. Amin (2021) highlights the South Asian experience, showing that coordinated infrastructure development, visa liberalization, and joint destination marketing significantly improved tourism flows. This offers lessons for Africa, where disjointed infrastructure, policy inconsistencies, and weak institutional collaboration constrain cross-border tourism. Unlike South Asia, African states have not integrated tourism into AfCFTA implementation strategies.

Xu et al. (2006) demonstrate that synchronized infrastructure planning, tourism policies, and promotion strategies in the Greater Mekong Sub region enhance tourist mobility and service delivery. In Africa, tourism remains largely addressed within national frameworks rather than as a collective regional industry under AfCFTA. Similarly, Hou et al. (2021) show that incorporating tourism into regional development agendas in China's Poyang Lake region contributes to local economic growth and regional cohesion, underscoring the benefits of linking tourism with broader trade and infrastructure frameworks. However, AfCFTA has not yet positioned tourism as a priority industry within Africa's regional development discourse.

Calero and Turner (2020) note that tourism can transform regional economies when supported by robust data and institutional frameworks, yet many developing regions, including Africa, lack the empirical evidence and policy support to make tourism central to integration. Kayizzi-Mugerwa et al. (2014) argue that despite progress in trade and transport cooperation, tourism has received inadequate policy attention in Africa, highlighting the need for an inclusive integration model encompassing culture, tourism, and people-to-people connectivity. Major gaps include limited evidence on AfCFTA's impact on cross-border tourism, weak institutional mechanisms for regional tourism cooperation, and a shortage of reliable data systems for planning, monitoring, and policymaking. These challenges hinder Africa's capacity to build a robust, integrated tourism industry.

Nevertheless, the business case for regional tourism integration in Africa is strong. Multi-country tourism circuits, simplified travel procedures, and pooled resources for promotion and infrastructure can enhance intra-African travel, diversify tourist sources, stimulate investment, and create employment across hospitality, transport, and cultural sectors. Realizing these benefits requires placing tourism at the center of AfCFTA implementation through visa harmonization, cross-border tourism products, shared infrastructure, and strengthened institutional cooperation. Complementary actions include targeted research, innovation, and inclusive policymaking involving public and private stakeholders. If implemented, tourism can become a key pillar of Africa's regional integration agenda, driving inclusive, sustainable growth.

Methodology

This study employs a desk research design to systematically review and analyze secondary data on regional tourism integration and AfCFTA implementation. The unit of analysis comprises African countries participating in AfCFTA, focusing on cross-border tourism interactions, institutional frameworks, and regional economic communities. A purposive sample of 15 countries was selected across ECOWAS, EAC, and SADC, based on AfCFTA participation, availability of documented tourism policies, and geographic and economic diversity. Analytical sub-units include national tourism policies, trade agreements, visa regulations, and infrastructure initiatives, enabling both macro-level assessment of continental integration and meso-level evaluation of institutional and policy mechanisms.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to scholarly articles, policy briefs, books, working papers, and reports from international and regional organizations, including the African Union, UNECA, AfDB, and the African Tourism Board. Comparative insights from South and Southeast Asia were included to benchmark Africa's experiences. Key themes examined include policy alignment, visa

harmonization, infrastructure development, cross-border collaboration, tourism investment flows, and institutional effectiveness. Sources were selected based on credibility, relevance, and recency. Ethical standards were observed through full acknowledgement of all sources and exclusion of proprietary information. This methodology allows for a systematic, evidence-based assessment of AfCFTA's potential to enhance regional tourism and inform policy, strategic planning, and sustainable development initiatives.

Table 1: Sampled Countries, Analytical Sub-Units, Themes, and Expected Outcomes

<i>Country</i>	<i>Regional Community</i>	<i>Analytical Sub-Units</i>	<i>Themes Examined</i>	<i>Expected Outcomes</i>
<i>Nigeria</i>	ECOWAS	Policy, infrastructure, cross-border tourism	Policy alignment, infrastructure	Improved regional connectivity and tourism flow
<i>Ghana</i>	ECOWAS	Policy, investment, visa harmonization	Visa liberalization, investment	Streamlined cross-border travel, increased FDI
<i>Senegal</i>	ECOWAS	Tourism promotion, regional collaboration	Marketing, cooperation	Joint heritage routes, enhanced promotion
<i>Kenya</i>	EAC	Policy, infrastructure, visa regulation	Infrastructure, policy coherence	Strengthened cross-border tourism networks
<i>Tanzania</i>	EAC	Cross-border tourism, investment flows	Investment, collaboration	Increased tourism circuits and economic benefits
<i>Uganda</i>	EAC	Policy alignment, infrastructure	Policy harmonisation	Cohesive regional tourism policies
<i>Rwanda</i>	EAC	Tourism circuits, promotion strategies	Marketing, collaboration	Integrated regional tourism packages
<i>South Africa</i>	SADC	Policy, infrastructure, investment	Policy, infrastructure, investment	Diversified regional tourism and FDI
<i>Botswana</i>	SADC	Cross-border collaboration, tourism investment	Collaboration, investment	Joint projects, increased regional visitor numbers
<i>Zambia</i>	SADC	Infrastructure, visa harmonization	Infrastructure, visa policy	Improved access and mobility
<i>Zimbabwe</i>	SADC	Regional tourism planning, policy	Policy alignment, promotion	Coordinated regional tourism initiatives
<i>Namibia</i>	SADC	Policy, infrastructure	Policy, infrastructure	Enhanced regional infrastructure and planning

<i>Malawi</i>	SADC	Tourism circuits, cross-border promotion	Marketing, collaboration	Increased intra-regional tourism flows
<i>Mozambique</i>	SADC	Infrastructure, policy alignment	Infrastructure, policy	Improved connectivity and policy coherence
<i>Mauritius</i>	SADC	Tourism investment, promotion	Investment, marketing	Boosted tourism investment and promotion

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025

Results

Cross-border tourism in Africa remains uneven, with some progress in specific regional blocs but persistent challenges in policy, infrastructure, and collaboration. While the East African Community has facilitated mobility through the East Africa Tourist Visa, other regions face fragmented policies, weak institutional coordination, and high travel costs, limiting intra-African tourism flows (Kayizzi-Mugerwa et al., 2014).

Table 2: Status of Cross-Border Tourism and AfCFTA Provisions

<i>Region / Countries</i>	<i>Current Initiatives</i>	<i>Key Challenges</i>	<i>Relevant AfCFTA Provisions</i>	<i>Expected Outcomes</i>
<i>East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda)</i>	East Africa Tourist Visa	Infrastructure gaps, policy inconsistency	Free movement of people and professionals	Easier intra-African travel, integrated tourism circuits
<i>West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal)</i>	Regional tourism marketing	Poor transport links, visa barriers	Liberalization of trade in services	Increased tourism services and investment
<i>Southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Mauritius)</i>	Cross-border promotion projects	High travel costs, weak coordination	Removal of tariffs and non-tariff barriers	Lower costs, improved regional connectivity
<i>All regions</i>	Cross-regional tourism planning	Fragmented policies, institutional silos	Protocol on Trade in Services, infrastructure and trade corridors	Harmonized standards, joint marketing, integrated tourism routes

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025

AfCFTA provides a framework to overcome barriers through liberalization, harmonized standards, and infrastructure development (Maneli, 2024; Ouma,

2021). The Protocol on Trade in Services prioritizes tourism, offering mechanisms for cross-border collaboration, regional marketing, and investment facilitation. Lessons from Asia and Latin America highlight the critical role of policy alignment and infrastructure coordination in achieving successful tourism integration (Xu et al., 2006; Calero & Turner, 2020). To harness AfCFTA's potential, countries must align national tourism strategies with continental objectives, develop multi-country tourism circuits, invest in hospitality skills, and implement coordinated branding campaigns (Ajewumi et al., 2024). Institutional cooperation, sustained infrastructure investment, and policy harmonization can transform cross-border tourism into a key driver of inclusive economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional cohesion.

Findings and Discussion

The study reveals that cross-border tourism in Africa remains limited, despite the potential offered by regional initiatives and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). While the East African Community (EAC) has facilitated some progress through the East Africa Tourist Visa, most regions continue to face fragmented policies, weak institutional coordination, and insufficient infrastructure. Governments remain largely focused on attracting long-haul international tourists, resulting in missed opportunities for intra-African travel and regional economic growth (Kayizzi-Mugerwa et al., 2014). Table 1 summarizes the current status of cross-border tourism in selected regions.

Table 3: Status of Cross-Border Tourism in African Regions

<i>Region / Countries</i>	<i>Key Initiatives</i>	<i>Key Challenges</i>
<i>East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda)</i>	East Africa Tourist Visa	Infrastructure gaps, inconsistent policies
<i>West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal)</i>	Regional tourism marketing	Poor transport links, visa barriers
<i>Southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Mauritius)</i>	Cross-border promotion projects	High travel costs, weak institutional coordination

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025

AfCFTA provisions could significantly enhance regional tourism through liberalization of trade in services, removal of tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and facilitation of free movement of people and professionals (Maneli, 2024). The Protocol on Trade in Services prioritizes tourism, offering mechanisms for harmonized standards, investment facilitation, and joint marketing. Table 2 illustrates the alignment between AfCFTA provisions and expected tourism outcomes.

Table 4: AfCFTA Provisions and Expected Impact on Tourism

<i>AfCFTA Provision</i>	<i>Expected Tourism Outcome</i>
<i>Liberalization of trade in services</i>	Increased cross-border tourism services and investment
<i>Free movement of people and professionals</i>	Easier intra-African travel and regional mobility
<i>Removal of tariffs and non-tariff barriers</i>	Lower costs for tourism-related goods and services
<i>Protocol on Trade in Services prioritizing tourism</i>	Harmonized standards, regional cooperation, joint marketing
<i>Infrastructure and trade corridor focus</i>	Improved connectivity, integrated tourism circuits

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025

Despite these provisions, significant barriers remain. Visa restrictions, divergent taxation policies, inconsistent transport regulations, and inadequate road and air networks limit mobility (Xu et al., 2006; Calero & Turner, 2020). Administrative inefficiencies at border crossings further impede cross-border tourism (Ouma, 2021). Aligning national tourism strategies with AfCFTA objectives requires political commitment, inter-ministerial coordination, investment in skills development, and multi-country tourism circuits (Ajewumi et al., 2024). Coordinated branding and marketing campaigns can enhance Africa's competitiveness and promote cultural exchange. In conclusion, AfCFTA presents a transformative opportunity to integrate Africa's tourism industry and stimulate inclusive economic growth. Realizing this potential depends on harmonized policies, sustained infrastructure investment, and institutional cooperation.

Recommendations

In line with the study's objectives, several strategic recommendations emerge to strengthen regional tourism integration under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). To assess the current state of regional tourism flows, African countries should prioritize policy harmonization. Fragmented visa regimes and inconsistent travel documentation remain major barriers to intra-African tourism. Expanding initiatives such as the East Africa Tourist Visa or developing a continent-wide African tourist visa would facilitate smoother mobility and enhance regional travel.

To analyse AfCFTA provisions relevant to tourism, countries must explicitly incorporate tourism-related services, accommodation, transport, food and beverage, and travel agencies—into national schedules of commitments. Liberalizing these services will unlock investment, raise service quality, and create cross-border business opportunities.

To evaluate the extent to which AfCFTA can reduce barriers, member states should coordinate on cross-border infrastructure projects, integrating tourism considerations into transport corridors, road networks, railways, and air connectivity. Digital technologies, such as interoperable visa platforms, immigration systems, and integrated travel information, can streamline border processes, improve security, and support cross-border marketing.

To identify strategic opportunities for policy alignment, governments should strengthen institutional collaboration through regional tourism task forces, joint technical working groups, and harmonized training and certification programs for tourism professionals. Coordinated branding and Pan-African marketing campaigns can present Africa as a unified, culturally rich destination, enhancing competitiveness and intra-African travel.

Table 4: Recommendations Mapped to Study Objectives

<i>Objective</i>	<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Expected Outcome</i>
<i>Assess current state of regional tourism flows</i>	Harmonize visa policies; expand regional tourist visas	Increased mobility and intra-African travel
<i>Analyze AfCFTA provisions relevant to tourism</i>	Explicitly include tourism services in national commitments	Enhanced investment, service quality, and cross-border business
<i>Evaluate AfCFTA's potential to mitigate barriers</i>	Develop cross-border infrastructure; implement digital border systems	Reduced travel costs, smoother mobility, improved connectivity
<i>Identify strategic opportunities for policy alignment</i>	Establish regional task forces; standardize training; coordinate branding	Harmonized policies, skilled workforce, unified African tourism identity

Source: Authors' compilation, 2025

These recommendations emphasize practical, collaborative, and coordinated actions, ensuring AfCFTA supports inclusive, sustainable tourism growth while fostering cultural exchange and regional cohesion across Africa.

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