

## **A UK-Africa trade deal could be fair wind for African economic unity**

***By Yoweri K. Museveni***

In Uganda, schools recently reopened to face-to-face teaching for the first time in 24 months. Buying time through various forms of lockdown, the vaccines we need to safely reopen have begun to arrive in recent months and we are on our back to the mend and to the growth that has been constricted by the pandemic.

Amongst others, credit is due to the African Union (AU) securing the doses for equitable distribution across the continent. It means today [twenty percent](#) of Uganda's 46 million population – the majority of adults – have at least one dose. Though the battle before us remains uphill, these achievements reveal both how Africa can succeed through collective effort, and how prospects for our 1.3 billion citizens and our continent's place in the world are entwined.

As we meet virtually for the UK-Africa summit, the United Kingdom too is alive to the promise of African unity. Since the inaugural event two years ago, the UK has become the [first non-African nation to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the African Continental Free Trade Area](#) (AfCFTA). For the AU, it offers our continent – a \$3 trillion market – more bargaining power with a developed country in the global economy such as Britain, which post-EU departure has revealed new-found determination to build positive trade relations back in Africa.

The inheritance of colonialism has meant our countries do not trade as they should. In the past, it has caused us to look outwards alone. Our infrastructure is geared toward extraction of commodities and export, whilst our intra-continental trade is the least developed in the world.

Moreover, given the position of each country or even regional bloc, the power differentials made any decent trade terms impossible. Taken together, they are a failure of our potential; shackling our common prosperity across the continent – a rising tide that could lift all nations more than any single one could through their own bilateral. In hindsight, former deals may look short-sighted. But when unfavourable terms are the only terms on offer, there is little other choice.

Now there is another way: an economic new deal for Africa founded on unity vested in AfCFTA. Countries will still try to pick off trading partners to gain favourable agreements. Preferential access for a few agricultural goods to the markets of rich economies may be threatened. In response, Africa nations must reject the short-term incentives and speak in one collective voice. Only then can it avoid the iniquitous terms that have stifled the continent's development and industrialisation.

A UK-Africa Free Trade Deal could light the path for others to follow. And once there is this first precedent, reversion to the old will become increasingly difficult. Already, the current United States administration has now shown interest in negotiation with Africa as one – a stark change in direction from its predecessor.

But we should not simply wait for global powers or blocs to come with their own agendas; Africa must proactively set out its “red lines” for negotiations.

The first must be reciprocity. Attempts to cajole African nations into lopsided bilateral trading terms must be rejected, like the [EU’s economic partnership agreements](#) that required African countries to open to Europe, but not the other way around. These are not partnerships, [but supply contracts: Africa as a raw commodities producer, a role she has sadly played since 1885, without the market access required to provide incentive to develop beyond.](#)

Second must be job creation. Boosting employment across the continent requires not only the lowering of tariffs on African raw commodities for export, but also for processing and manufacturing. From animal feeds to cement and steel, from [mobile phones](#) to [mRNA vaccine development](#) and [electric vehicle production](#), Africa is proving itself the final frontier for industrialisation. Any trade negotiations must consider how FDI into Africa will create additional jobs.

Third, collective pressure should be brought to bear on western countries to reconsider their blanket [ban on fossil fuel investment](#) in Africa. Ruling out funds for gas and carbon capture while encouraging it in Europe smacks of double-standards. It [forces poverty on Africans](#) whilst doing nothing to increase access to power, reduce electricity costs, or wean dependence from heavy fuels such as diesel.

Fourth, restrictions on visas for Africans studying and seeking to do business in the West must be on the table. When citizens – particularly from Europe – are effectively free to roam and trade as they please in Africa, it is unacceptable that African nations accept the highest hurdles of entry into other countries both for goods and people. Europe increasingly negotiates for entry rights to non-EU countries for their citizens collectively. So should Africa for their own.

Protecting Africa’s citizens against Covid without easy access to vaccines and medical supplies has come at enormous social and economic cost. While the beginnings of African unity predate the pandemic by decades, its potential power has only been forged in this crisis. A UK-Africa trade deal would speed our recovery, chart the course for others to follow, and be fair wind for consolidating African economic unity.

**[Yoweri K. Museveni](#) is president of Uganda.**