



Africa Dream Conference – Geneva

4IP Group Background Note No.15 for Panel Discussion

Panel 1: A New Geography – From Nation-State to City-State

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1. Introduction: Rethinking Africa’s Development Geography

Africa’s development trajectory is increasingly shaped not only by nation-states but by **cities, corridors, and regional systems of production and exchange**. This shift is not theoretical—it reflects structural transformations already underway, which I have observed through my work on **infrastructure finance, regional integration, and impact investing across Africa**. These infrastructural initiatives, currently spanning over 40,000 kilometers of planned and upgraded routes, serve as essential conduits for integrating national populations into broader regional domains ([“Promises of Development, Experiences of Displacement,” 2023](#)). These spatial instruments facilitate economic density by channeling activity into strategic bands, such as the North–South and Maputo corridors, which function as key catalysts for territorial development ([Brand, 2024](#)). However, these corridors are more than mere channels of flow; they are sites of complex spatial reordering where the compatibility of scalar and territorial state governance determines the success of regional integration efforts ([Zajontz, 2022](#)).

Rather than focusing solely on national development strategies, the question is how to **unlock economic activity across functional economic geographies**—urban clusters, cross-border corridors, and regional markets. This requires moving beyond methodological nationalism to critically assess how these transport corridors operate as spatial imaginaries that reconfigure regional economic landscapes ([“Transport Corridors in Africa,” 2022](#); [Tups & Dannenberg, 2021](#)). These initiatives, often manifesting as networks of road, rail, and energy infrastructure, fundamentally bridge national territories to support cross-border economic cohesion ([Drewes & Aswegen, 2024](#); [“Promises of Development, Experiences of Displacement,” 2023](#)). This evolution towards integrated connectivity reflects a broader shift toward "policy first"



partnerships, where strategic infrastructure projects are designed to facilitate digital and energy-related access alongside traditional transit ([Claudia et al., n.d.](#)). Such large-scale infrastructural expansion is profoundly reshaping African geographies, creating long-term path dependencies that will dictate the continent's development trajectories for generations ([Thorn et al., 2022](#)).

2. The Rise of African Megacities: Engines Without Systems?

African cities are among the fastest-growing urban centers in the world and are increasingly becoming the **primary loci of economic activity, innovation, and demographic expansion**. Cities such as Kinshasa, Lagos, Addis Ababa, Cairo, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi are not only expanding in size but also in economic significance, shaping national and regional development trajectories.

However, through my work across **infrastructure finance, impact investing, and investment ecosystem development**, I have consistently observed a structural imbalance:

Urban growth in Africa is outpacing the development of the systems required to sustain it.

In many cases, cities are evolving into **large consumption hubs without the corresponding infrastructure, governance frameworks, and investment coordination mechanisms** needed to support productive, sustainable growth.

Concrete Illustrations from Practice

- **Kinshasa (DRC)**

Through my role coordinating the **NPII-DRC Taskforce**, I have seen firsthand how a city of over 15 million people operates with **significant constraints in energy access, water systems, and urban infrastructure**. Despite strong (survival) entrepreneurial dynamism and a large informal economy, **the lack of structured investment pipelines and coordinated infrastructure** limits the city's ability to transition into a true engine of industrial and service-led growth.

- **Lagos (Nigeria)**

In my work engaging with **investment platforms and impact capital providers**, Lagos stands out as a high-potential megacity with strong private sector activity. However, investors consistently point to **logistics bottlenecks, congestion, and infrastructure gaps** as key constraints. This illustrates how even Africa's most dynamic cities **face systemic barriers** that reduce efficiency and increase the cost of doing business.



- **Nairobi (Kenya)**

Nairobi represents a more advanced ecosystem, particularly in **technology and innovation**. Through interactions with **impact investors and venture ecosystems**, it is clear that while access to capital is improving, scaling businesses remains constrained by **regional market fragmentation and infrastructure limitations beyond the city itself**. This reinforces the importance of **linking cities** to broader regional systems.

Opportunities and Constraints

From an investment perspective, this creates a dual reality:

- **Opportunities:**
 - rapidly expanding consumer markets
 - dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystems
 - growing demand for services across sectors such as housing, energy, mobility, and digital infrastructure
- **Constraints:**
 - persistent infrastructure deficits (energy, transport, water)
 - fragmented and often uncoordinated urban planning
 - governance challenges across municipal and national levels
 - limited access to finance for SMEs and urban entrepreneurs.

From Cities to Systems

A key insight from my work on **impact investment pipelines and infrastructure-related initiatives** is that cities cannot function as true engines of growth unless they are embedded within **coherent and well-functioning economic systems**.

In practical terms, this requires:

- **Reliable and scalable energy systems**, enabling industrial activity and service delivery;
- **Efficient logistics and mobility networks**, connecting urban centers to regional and global markets;
- **Access to finance for SMEs**, which form the backbone of urban economies but remain significantly underserved;



- **Integrated urban planning**, aligning land use, infrastructure development, and economic strategy.

Without these foundational systems, African megacities risk becoming **engines of consumption rather than engines of production and value creation**.

Opportunities and Constraints

The challenge—and opportunity—therefore lies in transitioning from **urban growth as a demographic phenomenon** to **urbanization as an economic strategy**, where cities are deliberately developed as **productive, connected, and investable economic hubs** within broader regional systems.

3. Regional Integration as a Development Accelerator

A central insight from my work—particularly through the analysis of **EU Global Gateway corridors**¹ and African regional infrastructure systems (such as PIDA-PAP²; TTTFP³; the Trans-African Highways Network⁴) —is that:

Africa’s economic transformation will not be achieved at the level of individual countries, but through the integration of regional economic systems.⁵

Most African economies, when considered individually, lack the **scale, market depth, and infrastructure connectivity** required to attract sustained private investment and support industrialization. Regional integration, therefore, is not simply a political aspiration—it is an **economic necessity**.

The **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**⁶ provides the institutional framework for this transformation, but its success depends on three interdependent pillars:

- **Physical connectivity:** integrated transport corridors, energy pools, and digital infrastructure that link production zones to consumption markets;
- **Regulatory alignment:** harmonized trade rules for goods and services, customs procedures, and standards that reduce friction across borders;

¹ [GG Factsheet Africa Strategic Corridors.pdf](#)

² [PIDA Priority Action Plans \(PAP\) - The Virtual PIDA Information Center](#)

³ [Tripartite Transport & Transit Facilitation Programme - TTTFP](#)

⁴ [29736-wd-e - tah annex i tah network.pdf](#)

⁵ [Regional Economic Communities | African Union](#)

⁶ [The African Continental Free Trade Area | African Union](#)



- **Investment coordination:** the ability to structure and finance projects across multiple jurisdictions in a coherent and predictable manner.

Within this context, **development corridors** emerge as the operational backbone of regional integration.

Corridors are not merely infrastructure projects—they are **economic systems** that:

- connect landlocked countries and secondary cities to ports and regional markets;
- enable the emergence of **cross-border value chains** in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and energy;
- significantly reduce logistics and transaction costs;
- create the scale and predictability required to **crowd in private capital**.

From an investment perspective, corridors transform fragmented national markets into **integrated investment geographies**, making projects more bankable and attractive to both institutional and impact investors.

This systems-based perspective is also reflected in my contributions to international work on **PPP frameworks for sustainable infrastructure**, notably through the **UNECE PIERS initiative**,⁷ which emphasizes that infrastructure should be assessed not only on its national benefits but on its ability to generate **regional value, long-term sustainability, and measurable development impact**.

Ultimately, regional integration is not an abstract policy goal—it is the **foundation upon which Africa can build competitive, scalable, and investable economic systems**.

4. From Borders to Systems: Rethinking Governance

One of the most persistent challenges I have encountered in **multi-country (regional operations) initiatives and investment platforms** is a fundamental structural mismatch:

Governance frameworks remain predominantly national, while economic realities are increasingly regional and interconnected.

While the **African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)** provides a historic framework to create a single African market for goods and services,⁸ its implementation is

⁷ [P0011-Contacts and members - PPP Projects - UNECE Wiki](#)

⁸ [Towards One African Market | Union africaine](#)



constrained by the fact that **most decision-making, planning, and accountability mechanisms remain anchored at the national level.**

In practice, **this misalignment** creates several systemic inefficiencies:

- **Fragmented infrastructure planning**, where countries **prioritize** national projects without sufficient coordination with neighbouring systems;
- **Misaligned incentives**, as public institutions are often **evaluated** on domestic outcomes rather than regional value creation, despite AfCFTA objectives;
- **Underinvestment in cross-border projects**, which are inherently more complex to structure, finance, and govern, despite offering higher long-term returns.

This fragmentation is particularly visible in sectors such as **transport corridors, energy pools, and trade facilitation**, where the absence of coordinated governance significantly reduces the effectiveness of otherwise viable investments.

AfCFTA in Practice: The Governance Gap

In practical terms, this governance gap is visible in **the disconnect** between:

- The **AfCFTA Secretariat**, which provides a continental framework for trade integration;
- **AU recognised Regional Economic Communities (RECs)** such as ECOWAS, COMESA, EAC, and SADC, which operate at sub-regional levels;
- **National governments**, which ultimately control infrastructure planning, regulation, and investment approvals.

The absence of **strong coordination mechanisms** across these levels often results in: **well-designed continental ambitions that struggle to translate into bankable, cross-border investment opportunities.**

This gap becomes particularly evident when examining major African development corridors:

- **Abidjan–Lagos Corridor (West Africa)**
This corridor connects five countries—Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria—and represents one of the most economically dynamic regions on the continent. However, despite its enormous potential, progress has been slowed by:
 - inconsistent customs procedures
 - regulatory fragmentation



- coordination challenges across multiple national authorities

As a result, what should function as a **seamless regional economic artery** often operates as a series of disconnected national segments.

Bridging the Governance Gap: Lessons from Practice

Through my work coordinating the **NPII-DRC Taskforce**, I have seen that addressing this challenge requires moving beyond traditional institutional silos and creating **multi-stakeholder platforms** capable of aligning diverse actors around shared objectives.

Such platforms play a critical role in bridging:

- **Government ministries** (Finance, Planning, Trade, Infrastructure, SMEs), which often operate in parallel rather than in coordination, ensuring that national priorities are linked to regional opportunities;
- **Investors and financial institutions**, who require scale, predictability, and cross-border coherence, seeking bankable, scalable opportunities;
- **Development partners**, focused on policy reform and capacity building, supporting policy alignment and risk mitigation;
- **Private sector actors**, who ultimately drive implementation and value creation, who ultimately operationalize value chains across borders.

For example, in sectors such as **agriculture, energy, and manufacturing**, investment opportunities often exist at the level of **regional value chains** but remain underdeveloped due to lack of coordination between countries.

Example – Regional Agricultural Value Chain (Maize / Cassava Corridor in Central Africa)

In **Central Africa**, including the DRC, maize and cassava production is widespread across several countries (DRC, Zambia, and Angola). However, the **full value chain remains fragmented**:

- The **DRC has vast agricultural land and production potential**, but limited processing capacity.
- **Zambia has more developed agro-processing facilities**, but depends partly on imports.
- **Regional demand for food products is high**, particularly in urban centers like Kinshasa and Lubumbashi.

In theory, this creates a strong **regional investment opportunity**:



- production in DRC
- processing in neighboring countries (or vice versa)
- distribution across regional markets

In practice, this opportunity remains **underdeveloped** due to:

- poor cross-border logistics and infrastructure
- lack of harmonized trade regulations (despite both DRC and Zambia being member states of SADC and COMESA).
- absence of coordinated investment planning
- limited intermediaries to structure cross-border deals

These platforms are not merely coordination mechanisms—they are **structural enablers of system-level transformation**.

From Projects to Systems

A key insight from this experience is that sustainable impact cannot be achieved through **isolated national projects** alone.

Instead, there is a need to **transition** toward:

Integrated regional systems that align infrastructure, investment, and policy across borders.

This implies:

- designing infrastructure with **regional functionality in mind**;
 - aligning regulatory frameworks to support **cross-border flows of goods, capital, and services**;
 - creating **investment vehicles and pipelines** that operate at a regional scale;
 - and establishing governance mechanisms that can manage **shared assets and collective outcomes**.
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Strategic Implication

Ultimately, rethinking governance in Africa is not about weakening the role of the state, but about **expanding the scope at which governance operates**.



The challenge is to evolve from:

fragmented national governance (nation-centric governance) → system-oriented governance (coordinated multi-level governance aligned with AfCFTA)

where countries act not only as individual actors, but as **co-creators of regional economic systems**.

where:

- continental frameworks set direction,
- regional institutions coordinate implementation,
- and national actors align execution with regional value creation.

5. Identity and Mindset: The Missing Piece

Perhaps the most critical—and often underestimated—dimension of Africa’s transformation is not infrastructure, finance, or policy, but **mindset**.

Through my experience working with **governments, investors, and ecosystem actors across Africa and internationally**, I have consistently observed that many of the barriers to progress are not primarily technical or financial—they are **conceptual**.

We are often trying to solve 21st-century economic challenges with 20th-century mental models.

Three patterns in particular stand out:

- **Thinking in terms of countries rather than markets**
Economic strategies are frequently designed within national boundaries, even though businesses, supply chains, and capital flows operate across borders.
 - **Prioritizing short-term national gains over long-term regional value**
Policy decisions often favor immediate domestic outcomes, at the expense of building **shared infrastructure and integrated value chains** that would generate greater long-term benefits.
 - **Underestimating the role of private capital**
There remains a persistent perception that development is primarily driven by public funding or aid, rather than by **mobilizing private investment at scale**.
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The Required Mindset Shift

Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental **shift in how development is conceptualized**:

- **From national to continental thinking**
Viewing Africa not as 54 separate economies, but as a **single, evolving economic space**, in line with the vision of the AfCFTA.
- **From project-based to systems thinking**
Recognizing that cities, corridors, infrastructure, and value chains are **interconnected components of larger economic systems**, rather than isolated interventions.
- **From funding to investment thinking**
Moving beyond a dependency on grants and public finance toward **impact-driven investment approaches** that align capital with measurable economic, social, and environmental outcomes.

From Vision to Practice

In my work—whether structuring **impact investment strategies, advising on infrastructure initiatives, or coordinating multi-stakeholder platforms such as the NPII-DRC**—I have seen that when this mindset shift occurs, it fundamentally changes how decisions are made:

- Projects are designed with **scale and regional integration in mind**;
- Stakeholders align around **shared economic outcomes rather than institutional mandates**;
 - Different actors (government, investors, NGOs, private sector) work together toward the same economic goals (e.g. jobs, growth, investment), instead of each focusing only on their own institutional roles or agendas.
- Capital is mobilized more effectively because opportunities become **clearer, larger, and more investable**.

Strategic Implication

Ultimately, Africa's transformation will depend not only on **what is built**, but on **how it is conceived**.



Infrastructure can be financed. Policies can be designed. But without a shift in mindset, systems will remain fragmented and opportunities under-realized.

6. The Role of Capital: Connecting Geography and Investment

A recurring insight from my work — whether through **4IP Group advisory, partnerships outreach on behalf of IIX⁹, or my coordination of national impact investing platforms such as NPII-DRC¹⁰ and NABII-Zambia¹¹** —is the following:

Development geography only becomes real when it is investable.

Concepts such as regional integration, economic corridors, and urban growth remain largely theoretical unless they are translated into **bankable opportunities that can attract capital at scale.**

In practice, one of the core challenges across African markets is not the lack of ambition or vision, but the **disconnect between development priorities and investment-ready pipelines.**

From Vision to Investment Reality

To operationalize this “**new geography**” of cities, corridors, and regional systems, three critical elements are required:

- **Investment-ready pipelines aligned with regional priorities**
Projects must be structured not as isolated national initiatives, but as part of **coherent regional investment narratives**, aligned with AfCFTA objectives and capable of delivering scale.
- **Blended finance structures to de-risk projects**
Many high-impact opportunities—particularly in infrastructure, SMEs, and value chains—remain underfunded due to **perceived risks**.
Blended finance plays a critical role in **crowding in private capital** by combining:
 - public and concessional funding
 - development finance

⁹ [IIX Impact Institute Alumni - IIX - Impact Investment Exchange](#)

¹⁰ [National Advisory Board for Impact Investing in the Democratic Republic of Congo \(NABII-DRC\) - 4IP Group](#)

¹¹ [Creating an Impact Revolution in Southern Africa](#)



- private investment
 - **Robust impact measurement and management (IMM) frameworks**
Investors increasingly require clarity on both **financial returns and development outcomes**.
Structured frameworks—such as those I have worked on through ESG toolkits and SDG-aligned approaches—are essential to:
 - align capital with impact
 - ensure accountability
 - enhance investor confidence
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The Missing Link: Investment Platforms

A key gap I have consistently observed is the absence of **intermediary structures capable of translating policy ambition into investment opportunities**.

This is precisely the role that **national impact investing platforms**—such as the one currently being developed in the DRC and already operational in Zambia—are designed to play.

These platforms serve as:

- **connectors between stakeholders** (government, investors, development partners, private sector);
 - **curators of investment pipelines**, ensuring projects are structured, prioritized, and aligned with national and regional strategies;
 - **facilitators of capital mobilisation**, bridging the gap between supply of capital and demand for investment;
 - and **standard-setters**, promoting the use of impact measurement (IMM) frameworks and best practices.
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Strategic Implication

Ultimately, capital is not just a financing tool—it is a **system-shaping force**.

Where capital flows determine which cities grow, which corridors develop, and which value chains emerge.



If Africa is to realize its vision of integrated regional economies,¹² it must ensure that its development priorities are translated into **investment opportunities that are scalable, structured, and credible in the eyes of global and domestic investors.**

7. Conclusion: Toward a New African Geography

Africa's future will not be defined by the traditional map of nation-states alone, but by the emergence of a **new economic geography** structured around:

- **Cities as dynamic nodes of production, innovation, and consumption**
- **Corridors as critical connectors of infrastructure, trade, and value chains**
- **Regional markets as the true drivers of scale, competitiveness, and investment attractiveness**

Together, these elements form the foundation of a **continental economic system** capable of unlocking Africa's full development potential.

However, this transformation will not happen automatically.

Unlocking this new geography requires a **deliberate and coordinated shift across four critical dimensions:**

- **Rethinking governance beyond borders**
Moving from fragmented national approaches toward **coordinated, multi-level governance systems** aligned with the realities of AfCFTA and regional integration.
- **Aligning infrastructure with economic systems**
Designing infrastructure not as isolated projects, but as part of **integrated regional value chains and development corridors.**
- **Mobilizing private capital at scale**
Transforming development priorities into **investment-ready opportunities**, supported by blended finance and robust impact frameworks.
- **Adopting a fundamentally new mindset**
Embracing **continental thinking, systems thinking, and investment-oriented approaches** that reflect the scale and interconnected nature of Africa's opportunity.

¹² [Welcome - AU Agenda 2063](#)



Final Reflection

Ultimately, the question is not whether Africa has the potential to transform—it clearly does.

The real question is whether we can align geography, governance, and capital fast enough to realize that potential.

Key Message for the Panel

Africa does not need to choose between nation-states and city-states.

It needs to build **integrated economic systems that connect cities, regions, and markets into a coherent continental geography.**

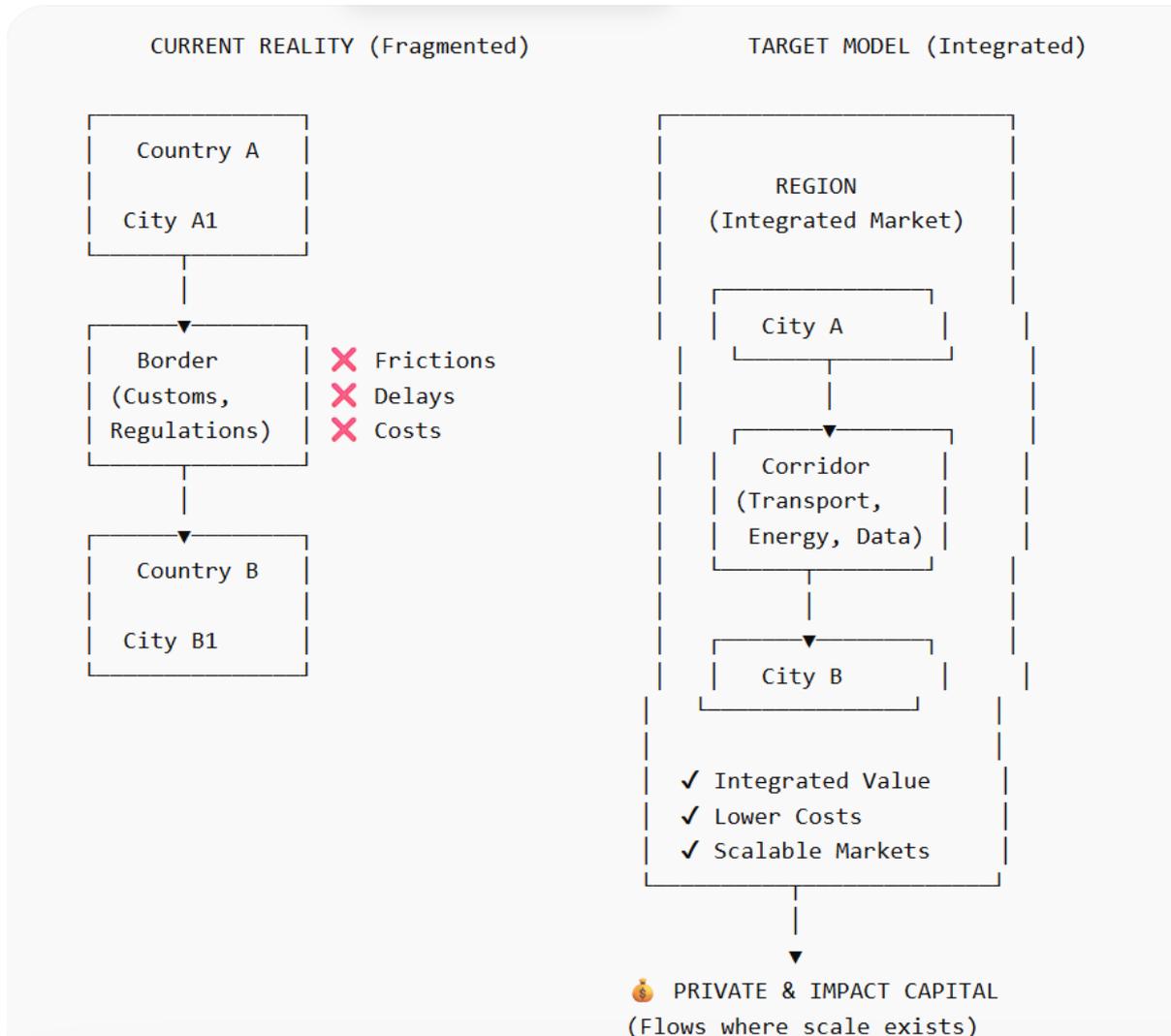
In other words, the question **is not** sovereignty versus integration. The question is: how do countries **use integration to strengthen the economic power** of their cities?

Because a city like Kinshasa, Lagos, or Nairobi **cannot reach its full potential if it is constrained by** fragmented infrastructure, small national markets, or disconnected systems.

Regional integration creates the scale that attracts investment—and that investment is what ultimately strengthens sovereignty.

So in reality, integration is not a constraint on sovereignty—it's **a strategy** to make it economically meaningful.

Annex 1: A visual diagram (very powerful for your panel) showing



Point left:

“Today, we still operate with fragmented national systems—borders create friction, costs, and inefficiencies.”

Move right:

“But the future is about connecting cities through corridors into regional markets.”

Finish at bottom:

“And once you create that scale—capital flows.”