An interesting article published on the Maritime Executive notes that the growth of intra-Africa trade under the AfCFTA will depend more and more in future on the African States' ability to increase the efficiency, capacity and safety of their maritime transport systems.

Not surprisingly, the first goods traded under the AfCFTA regime (a shipment of cosmetics from Ghana to Guinea dated 4 January) were carried via maritime transport.

Currently, most inter-African trade occurs at intra-RECs level, while inter-RECs trade (between countries that are members of different RECs) is much less. One of the reasons for that is that railway, inland waterways and highway systems on the Continent are generally underdeveloped and this makes these modes of transport, especially on long distances, more expensive and less efficient and reliable than maritime transport.

The article also notes the Africa's low participation in the shipping industry because of the continent's low fleet ownership, observing that Africa still relies on foreign-owned vessels for its trade as African-built, -crewed and -owned vessels carrying African-made products all over the continent and the world are still lacking.

Currently, the port infrastructure in most African countries lags behind the rest of the world. The 2020 edition of Lloyd's List One Hundred Ports indicates only three African ports in the list of the top 100 global container ports. These ports are Tanger-Med (Morocco), Port Said (Egypt) and Durban (South Africa), that together handle 51 percent of all maritime cargo transport in Africa.

Africa relies heavily on ships and ports for its trade with other continents (as documented in this recent UNCTAD press release), while the precise percentage of intra-African maritime transport is largely unknown. This volume, compared to other Continents, is known to be tiny because hampered by high freight rates, poor turnaround time in cargo clearance, and inadequate storage capacities. Solving these operational inefficiencies is therefore essential for African nations if they want to expand their maritime transport opportunities and participate more effectively in regional and continental production processes.

The African Union 2050 Africa's Integrated Maritime Strategy confirms that in future increasing volumes of inter-African trade will be channeled through coast-to-coast trading routes, noting that as such maritime trade in some cases passes near hotspots where coastal instability poses costly risks, African countries will need to ensure the security of their maritime domains in order to promote its growth. For the same purpose, the Integrated Maritime Strategy recommends the establishment of a Combined Exclusive Maritime Zone of Africa (CEMZA), i.e. a common African maritime space without barriers aimed at increasing shipping levels by eliminating or simplifying administrative procedures in intra-african maritime transport.

In this regard, another key strategy document approved by the African Union, the Revised African Maritime Transport Charter, points out the importance for African countries to achieve higher levels of coordination and harmonisation of their respective maritime, port and inland waterways policies, regulations and procedures, as well as to develop African merchant fleets to ensure development of maritime transport in the Continent. An example of this coordinated approach to port (and more generally, logistics) operations, is the Inter Governmental Standing Committee on Shipping (ISCOS), a regional Organisation formed in 1967 by Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia to joint develop their common Shipping, Maritime and Logistics sectors and interests.