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Strategic Autonomy and Local Development in Africa: A Bidirectional Framework from Global South Development Experiences

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical fragmentation and the emergence of a more multipolar international order have renewed debates on development strategies, resilience and policy space across the Global South. Despite the ambitions of Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals, many African economies continue to face challenges related to industrialisation, commodity dependence, limited innovation capacity and uneven local development. This article examines how strategic autonomy can contribute to strengthening local development in Africa and what lessons can be drawn from Global South experiences. The study adopts a post-positivist explanatory perspective and combines an integrative literature review with comparative benchmarking across Africa, East Asia and Latin America. A Strategic Autonomy Index is used as an illustrative framework based on four dimensions: industrial capacity, export diversification, regional integration and innovation capacity. The findings suggest that strategic autonomy becomes development-oriented when it expands policy space, supports productive diversification, deepens regional markets and strengthens local productive capabilities. East Asian and Latin American experiences are used as comparative references rather than models for replication. The article contributes by proposing a bidirectional framework in which strategic autonomy supports local transformation, while stronger local productive capabilities reinforce resilience and strategic autonomy.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy; Local Development; Africa; Global South; Policy Space; Structural Transformation; AfCFTA

1. Introduction

1.1. Development Challenges and the Search for Strategic Autonomy

Amartya Sen's understanding of development as the expansion of real freedoms provides an analytical starting point for examining Africa's contemporary development challenges [1]. Development cannot be reduced to output growth, external financing or the implementation of projects. It becomes meaningful when individuals, firms and territories acquire greater capabilities to participate in economic life, benefit from public action and shape their own development pathways.

This perspective is particularly relevant for Africa. The African Union's Agenda 2063 presents the ambition of an integrated, prosperous and self-reliant continent, while the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reaffirm the global commitment to inclusion and to leaving no one behind [2,3]. These two frameworks make local development central to Africa's long-term transformation. Their promise is not only to increase national growth rates, but also to create productive employment, strengthen territorial infrastructure, support local enterprise and improve living conditions.

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The urgency of this challenge is reinforced by structural pressures. United Nations projections indicate that Africa will remain the fastest-growing major region of the world by mid-century, while infrastructure needs remain substantial and difficult to finance [4,5]. At the same time, commodity dependence continues to constrain productive transformation. According to the United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD), many African economies remain dependent on a limited range of primary commodities [6]. These constraints suggest that the central development challenge is not merely the quantity of growth but the quality of structural transformation.

The international environment has also evolved significantly. South-South trade has expanded and emerging economies have become increasingly visible in development finance, technology transfer, trade and diplomatic cooperation [7]. However, these transformations remain uneven. Developing East Asia occupies a stronger position in global production networks and exports than most African economies [8]. The Global South therefore represents a diverse set of development trajectories rather than a homogeneous category.

1.2. Problem Statement

Despite sustained economic growth in several African countries and the growing importance of continental initiatives such as Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), many economies continue to face persistent challenges related to productive transformation, export concentration, technological dependence and uneven local development.

While strategic autonomy has gained increasing visibility in international debates, it remains insufficiently connected to questions of local development and territorial transformation in the African context. The challenge is therefore not only to increase economic growth but also to understand how strategic autonomy may contribute to strengthening productive capabilities, policy space and development opportunities at local and regional levels.

1.3. Research Gap

Existing studies generally analyse strategic autonomy through geopolitical, security or foreign policy perspectives. Other contributions focus on industrial policy, structural transformation or local development without explicitly linking these dimensions to strategic autonomy.

As a result, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how strategic autonomy can function as a development capacity capable of supporting local development while simultaneously being reinforced by local productive capabilities. This gap is particularly important in Africa, where debates on autonomy, development and regional integration increasingly intersect.

1.4. Research Question

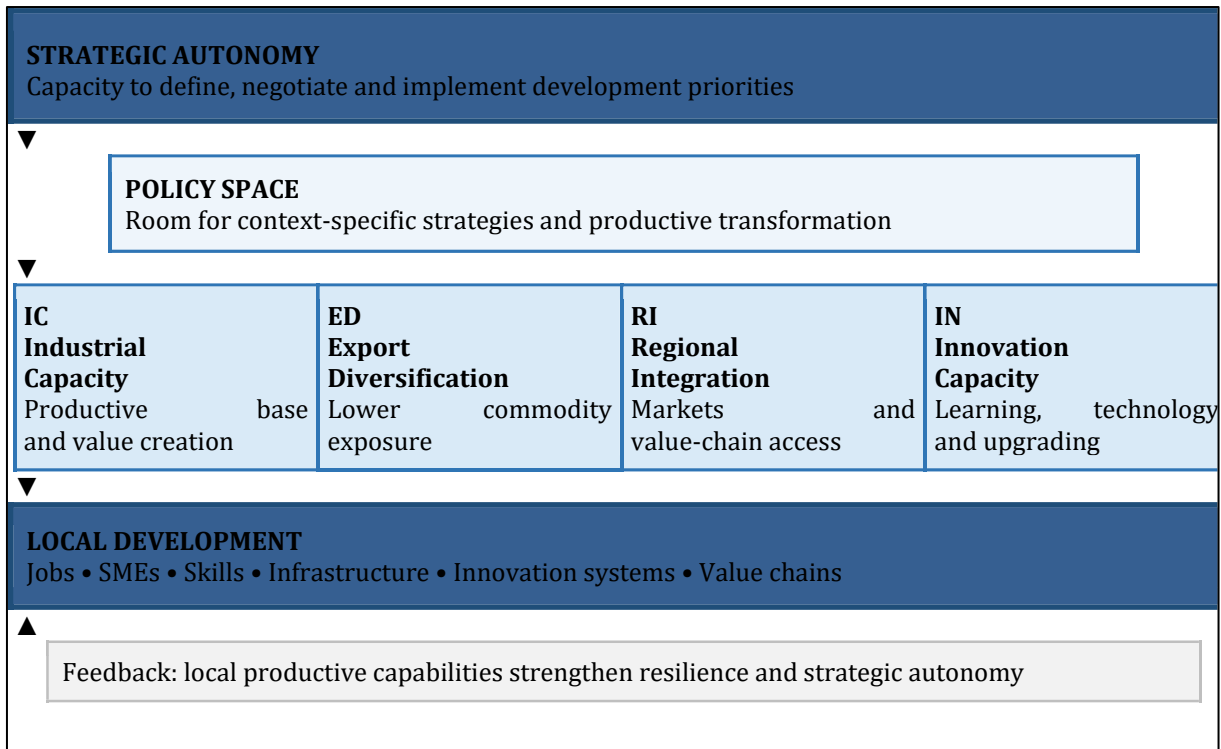
Against this background, the article addresses the following research question:

- To what extent can strategic autonomy contribute to strengthening local development in Africa, and what lessons can be drawn from Global South development experiences?

1.5. Analytical Framework

The article adopts a bidirectional analytical framework linking strategic autonomy and local development. Strategic autonomy is examined through four interrelated dimensions: industrial capacity, export diversification, regional integration and innovation capacity. These dimensions are analysed as mechanisms through which development strategies can influence local productive transformation while also being reinforced by capabilities generated at territorial level.

Figure 1 illustrates the bidirectional relationship between strategic autonomy and local development, highlighting how autonomy can support local transformation, while local capabilities reinforce resilience and bargaining capacity.



Source: Author’s conceptualisation.; **Note:** IC = industrial capacity; ED = export diversification; RI = regional integration; IN = innovation capacity; SMEs = small and medium-sized enterprises.

Figure 1 Bidirectional Framework of Strategic Autonomy and Local Development in Africa

Table 1 summarises the main components of the bidirectional relationship presented in Figure 1.

Table 1 Bidirectional Analytical Logic

| Direction | Starting Capacity | Main Mechanism | Development Result |
|--|--|---|---------------------------------|
| Strategic autonomy → local development | Policy space | Diversification, integration and innovation | Local productive transformation |
| Local development → strategic autonomy | Firms, skills and territorial capabilities | Capability accumulation | Greater resilience and autonomy |

Source: Author’s elaboration.

1.6. Central Argument

The central argument of this article is that strategic autonomy should not be understood as isolation from global markets or as a purely geopolitical slogan.

Rather, it should be analysed as the capacity of states, regional institutions and local actors to define priorities, mobilise resources, diversify partnerships and transform external engagement into local productive capabilities. Strategic autonomy can therefore support local development, while stronger local productive capabilities can simultaneously reinforce strategic autonomy.

1.7. Contribution of the Study

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it reconceptualises strategic autonomy as a development-oriented concept rather than a purely geopolitical notion. Second, it develops an integrated framework linking strategic autonomy to local development through policy space, productive diversification, regional integration and innovation capacity. Third, it proposes a concise analytical framework that facilitates the interpretation of relationships between strategic choices, productive capabilities and territorial development outcomes.

1.8. Structure of the Article

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and develops the analytical framework. Section 3 presents the methodology, hypotheses and the Strategic Autonomy Index framework. Section 4 discusses the comparative findings and their implications for local development in Africa. Section 5 concludes and outlines avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Development paradigms and the question of policy space

Development theory has long been shaped by debates over the role of markets, states and external integration. Liberal perspectives emphasise trade openness, investment flows, market incentives and participation in global exchanges. These mechanisms may support growth, attract resources and improve efficiency. However, they do not automatically create the productive foundations required for local development, especially when economies remain dependent on primary exports or low value-added activities.

Structuralist and development-oriented perspectives provide a different reading. Prebisch's centre-periphery analysis placed productive structure at the centre of development, while later work on policy space and globalisation showed that countries need room to design strategies adapted to their own conditions [9,10]. Stiglitz's critique of uniform policy prescriptions and Ocampo's work on international monetary arrangements further underline the limits of one-size-fits-all approaches in countries with fragile productive and institutional capabilities [11,12]. Helleiner's analysis of global financial governance also shows that international economic arrangements may preserve stability while still constraining policy choices for developing countries [13].

For Africa, this debate is not abstract. A country may receive investment, increase trade and participate in global markets without building local production systems. The key issue is whether external engagement strengthens territorial capabilities, local firms, value addition and technological learning. In this sense, policy space is a bridge between macro-level development debates and practical local development outcomes.

2.2. Strategic autonomy as reciprocal development capacity

Strategic autonomy is often associated with foreign policy, security or geopolitical positioning. This article uses the concept in a narrower and more developmental sense. Strategic autonomy refers to the capacity to make and implement development choices under conditions of external constraint. It includes the ability to define priorities, negotiate partnerships, mobilise finance, protect policy space and connect national or regional strategies to local development.

Developmental state literature shows that structural transformation usually requires capable institutions, coordination between public and private actors, and sustained investment in industrial upgrading. Evans, Wade and Amsden demonstrate that late industrialisation depends not only on openness, but also on embedded institutions, productive discipline and learning-oriented state action [14–16]. Chang's analysis of development strategy adds that many now-developed economies used policy instruments that are often discouraged for late developers today [17].

The article therefore does not treat strategic autonomy as self-sufficiency. Autonomy is not withdrawal from the global economy. It is selective and purposeful engagement. A country or region may cooperate internationally, receive external finance and participate in global value chains while still preserving the capacity to pursue its own development priorities. This is why the relationship between strategic autonomy and local development is bidirectional: autonomy expands policy options, while stronger local productive systems increase bargaining capacity and reduce vulnerability.

2.3. Global South experiences and African local development

Global South experiences should not be treated as recipes. East Asia, Latin America and Africa differ in history, institutions, geography, regional markets and political economy. However, comparison remains analytically relevant because it highlights how different regions have managed the relationship between external integration and domestic capability-building.

East Asian experiences show that global integration can support development when it is connected to industrial learning, export upgrading and institutional coordination. Latin American experiences offer a more ambivalent lesson: structuralist thinking correctly identified the risks of commodity dependence, but many diversification efforts were weakened by macroeconomic instability, political discontinuity and institutional fragility. Africa's challenge is to

translate continental ambitions into local capabilities. Agenda 2063, AfCFTA and the SDGs will remain incomplete if they do not reach local firms, skills, infrastructure, municipalities and territorial production systems.

This article therefore defines strategic autonomy as a development capacity that operates through four dimensions: industrial capacity, export diversification, regional integration and innovation capacity. These dimensions provide the basis for the illustrative Strategic Autonomy Index used in the analysis.

Table 2 summarises the main theoretical perspectives underpinning the analytical framework adopted in this study.

Table 2 Theoretical anchors and analytical contribution

| Perspective | Core contribution | Main limitation | Use in this article |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Liberal development approaches | Trade, investment and openness may support growth. | They may underestimate structural constraints and unequal insertion. | Clarifies why openness alone is insufficient. |
| Structuralist development | Development requires productive diversification and value addition. | It may remain too macro-level if not linked to local implementation. | Explains the importance of industrial transformation. |
| Developmental state theory | Capable institutions can support learning, upgrading and coordination. | East Asian experiences cannot be copied mechanically. | Highlights state capacity and productive discipline. |
| Policy space | Countries need room to design context-specific strategies. | Policy space does not automatically produce outcomes. | Connects autonomy to practical development choices. |
| Strategic autonomy | Capacity to define and implement priorities under external constraint. | Still underexplored in African local development debates. | Central concept linking Global South experiences to Africa. |

Source: Author's elaboration.

3. Materials and Methods

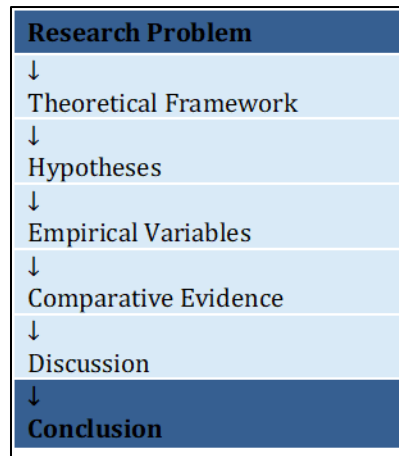
3.1. Research design and epistemological positioning

The study adopts a post-positivist explanatory perspective. It assumes that development processes can be examined through observable evidence, while recognising that interpretation is necessary when analysing institutions, strategies and power relations. This positioning is appropriate for an article that combines conceptual analysis, documentary sources and comparative benchmarking.

The research design combines an integrative literature review and a simple comparative benchmarking framework. The literature review is not used to list authors mechanically. It is used to organise debates, identify a conceptual gap and build an analytical proposition. This choice is consistent with methodological work on integrative literature reviews and with social science approaches that require coherence between the research problem, theoretical framework, sources and analysis [18–21].

The article focuses on three regional references: Africa, East Asia and Latin America. Africa is the central object of analysis. East Asia and Latin America are used as comparative references because they illustrate different relationships between policy space, productive transformation and external integration. The comparison does not aim to rank regions in a definitive way. Its purpose is to make the strategic autonomy problem analytically traceable.

Figure 2 illustrates the research process, showing how the study moves from problem formulation to analytical interpretation.



Source: Author’s conceptualisation.

Figure 2 Research Design and Analytical Pathway

3.2. Hypothetico-deductive reasoning, variables and hypotheses

The methodological reasoning follows a hypothetico-deductive logic in a modest and transparent sense. The article derives hypotheses from established debates on policy space, structural transformation and development-oriented state capacity, then confronts them with comparative documentary evidence across Africa, East Asia and Latin America. The objective is not to provide statistical proof of causality, but to assess the plausibility of a coherent analytical relationship between strategic autonomy, productive capabilities and local development [18–21].

Table 3 Hypotheses, Empirical variables and theoretical correspondence

| Hypothesis proposition / | Empirical variable | Theoretical correspondence | Expected relationship |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| H1 | Strategic autonomy | Policy space and development-oriented state capacity | Higher autonomy is associated with stronger local development prospects. |
| H1a | Industrial capacity | Structural transformation | A stronger productive base supports employment and value addition. |
| H1b | Export diversification | Structuralist development theory | Lower concentration reduces vulnerability to external shocks. |
| H1c | Regional integration | Regional markets and value-chain formation | Wider markets improve opportunities for firms, territories and SMEs. |
| H1d | Innovation capacity | Learning, upgrading and capability-building | Innovation strengthens resilience and competitiveness. |
| H2 | Local productive capabilities | Bidirectional development capacity | Stronger local capabilities reinforce bargaining capacity and strategic autonomy. |

Source: Author’s elaboration.

3.3. Operationalisation of the Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is translated into a series of research steps linking theory, evidence and interpretation. This operationalisation ensures consistency between the conceptual framework and the empirical analysis by clarifying how each stage contributes to the overall study. The resulting outputs provide the basis for the comparative assessment of strategic autonomy and local development across the selected regional contexts.

Table 4 summarises the scientific purpose of each step and its contribution to the overall analysis.

Table 4 Analytical Steps, Scientific Functions and Research Outputs

| Research step | Scientific function | Output for the article |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Problem definition | Clarifies the link between strategic autonomy and local development. | Research question and central argument. |
| Theoretical construction | Connects policy space, structural transformation and state capacity. | Analytical framework. |
| Hypothesis formulation | Translates the framework into variables and propositions. | Hypotheses H1–H2. |
| Source selection | Combines scholarly literature with primary documentary evidence. | Documentary corpus. |
| Comparative benchmarking | Compares Africa, East Asia and Latin America. | Strategic Autonomy Index framework. |
| Interpretation | Links evidence to policy and local development implications. | Results and discussion. |

Source: Author’s elaboration.

3.4. Strategic Autonomy Index framework

The Strategic Autonomy Index (SAI) is used as an illustrative benchmarking tool. It is based on four dimensions: industrial capacity, export diversification, regional integration and innovation capacity. These dimensions were selected because they connect autonomy directly to development outcomes. Industrial capacity captures the productive base. Export diversification measures exposure to commodity dependence and external price shocks. Regional integration indicates whether local firms can access wider markets and regional value chains. Innovation capacity reflects technological learning and the ability to upgrade production.

The index can be expressed as follows: $SAI = (IC + ED + RI + IN) / 4$, where IC is industrial capacity, ED is export diversification, RI is regional integration and IN is innovation capacity. Each indicator can be normalised on a 0–1 scale. Export concentration should be reverse-normalised because lower concentration indicates stronger diversification. In this article, the index is used as a conceptual and descriptive framework rather than a definitive statistical ranking.

The Strategic Autonomy Index in Figure 3 is presented as a compact scorecard linking each analytical dimension to its development role and expected effect.

| STRATEGIC AUTONOMY INDEX | | | |
|------------------------------------|--|---|------------------------------------|
| SAI = (IC + ED + RI + IN) / 4 | | | |
| IC | ED | RI | IN |
| Industrial Capacity | Export Diversification | Regional Integration | Innovation Capacity |
| ↓ ↓ ↓ | Development role | | ↓ ↓ ↓ |
| Productive base and value creation | Reduced exposure to commodity dependence | Regional markets and value-chain access | Learning, technology and upgrading |
| ↓ Expected effect | | ↓ | |
| Structural transformation | Vulnerability reduction | Market enlargement | Capability-building |

Source: Author’s conceptualisation.; **Note:** SAI = Strategic Autonomy Index; IC = industrial capacity; ED = export diversification; RI = regional integration; IN = innovation capacity.

Figure 3 Strategic Autonomy Index four-dimensional scorecard

Table 5 presents the main dimensions, indicators and data sources used to operationalise the Strategic Autonomy Index framework.

Table 5 Strategic Autonomy Index framework

| Dimension | Indicator | Development meaning | Main sources |
|------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| Industrial capacity | Manufacturing value added per capita or as share of GDP. | Shows whether the economy has a productive base capable of supporting jobs and value addition. | UNCTAD; UNIDO; World Bank |
| Export diversification | Reverse-normalised export concentration or commodity dependence. | Shows whether the economy is less dependent on a narrow group of primary exports. | UNCTAD |
| Regional integration | Share of intra-regional trade or participation in regional value chains. | Shows whether local production can benefit from wider regional markets. | UNCTAD; AfCFTA; UNECA; World Bank |
| Innovation capacity | R&D expenditure, technological capability or innovation proxies. | Shows whether the economy can upgrade production and absorb knowledge. | UNESCO; WIPO; World Bank |

Source: Author's elaboration.; **Note:** R&D = research and development; AfCFTA = African Continental Free Trade Area.

3.5. Scope, documentary evidence and limitations

The study draws upon both secondary and primary documentary sources. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books and methodological works. Primary documentary sources include institutional reports, statistical databases and policy documents produced by international organisations. This combination is appropriate because the objective is to connect theoretical interpretation with observable development indicators. The scope remains deliberately comparative: Africa is the central object of analysis, while East Asia and Latin America provide reference trajectories. Regional aggregates may hide substantial differences between countries; data availability is uneven across regions and indicators; and strategic autonomy should not be reduced to a single number. For these reasons, the SAI is used as a transparent interpretive tool rather than a causal model. Its value lies in clarifying relationships between autonomy, productive capability and local development.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Comparative benchmarking: what recent evidence suggests

The comparative evidence confirms that Africa's development challenge is strongly linked to productive capacity. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)'s SDG Pulse reports that manufacturing value added per capita remains much lower in Africa than in developing Asia and Latin America, while United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) data indicate that African manufacturing is growing but still below the level required for broad structural transformation [22,23]. This matters because manufacturing value added is not only a statistical measure. It reflects the ability of economies to create jobs, retain value, develop skills and build technological capabilities.

Trade patterns reinforce the same interpretation. South-South trade has expanded, but the benefits are unevenly distributed. East Asia has become a central pole of production and exports, while many African economies remain heavily dependent on primary commodities. In strategic autonomy terms, this means that participation in the Global South does not automatically produce autonomy. Autonomy depends on the capacity to use external exchanges to build domestic and regional capabilities.

Regional integration offers a policy opportunity. The World Bank estimates that full implementation of the AfCFTA could help raise incomes, create jobs and reduce extreme poverty, while the AfCFTA agreement provides a continental legal framework for expanding trade and productive integration [24,25]. However, these gains depend on infrastructure, standards, customs facilitation, industrial policy and the capacity of local firms to participate in regional value chains.

Table 6 Comparative strategic autonomy benchmark

| Dimension | East Asia | Latin America | Africa | Interpretation for Africa |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Industrial capacity | High | Medium | Low | Industrialisation remains the central constraint. |
| Export diversification | High | Medium | Low | Commodity dependence reduces resilience and value addition. |
| Regional integration | High | Low to medium | Low to medium | AfCFTA can transform markets if implementation improves. |
| Innovation capacity | High | Medium | Low | Skills, technology and R&D need stronger policy support. |
| Overall autonomy profile | Relatively strong | Intermediate and uneven | Weak but strategically important | The priority is capability-building, not isolation. |

Source: Author's synthesis based on international development indicators.

4.2. What East Asia and Latin America teach Africa

East Asian experiences show that strategic autonomy can coexist with global integration. The central lesson is not that African countries should reproduce East Asian institutions. The lesson is that external openness becomes developmental when it is embedded in domestic capability-building. Industrial policy, coordination with firms, technological learning and export upgrading were not peripheral elements. They were central to the creation of productive capacity.

Latin America offers a more ambivalent lesson. Structuralist thought correctly identified the dangers of commodity dependence and unequal insertion into the world economy. However, many industrialisation and integration efforts were weakened by fiscal fragility, policy discontinuity and macroeconomic instability. This shows that strategic autonomy is not achieved through declarations alone. It requires institutions that can sustain implementation over time.

For Africa, both experiences clarify the conditions under which policy space becomes developmental. Strategic autonomy should not be measured by the number of partners or by diplomatic language. It should be measured by whether local production systems become stronger, regional value chains deepen and communities gain access to employment, infrastructure and productive opportunities.

4.3. Strategic autonomy and local development in Africa

Strategic autonomy can strengthen local development through four mechanisms. First, it can expand policy space by allowing governments to design industrial, agricultural, digital, energy and territorial policies adapted to local needs. Second, it can support productive transformation by encouraging manufacturing, agro-processing, renewable energy value chains and local enterprise development. Third, it can improve bargaining power by diversifying partnerships and reducing dependence on a narrow set of external actors. Fourth, it can connect continental frameworks to local outcomes.

For example, renewable energy investments, agro-processing initiatives and regional transport corridors illustrate how strategic choices can generate local employment, technological learning and territorial value creation when they are connected to domestic productive capabilities.

The AfCFTA is central to this process because it can transform regional integration from a trade instrument into a local development strategy. Regional integration becomes meaningful when local firms, workers and territories can participate in larger markets. World Bank regional assessments, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA)'s work on African integration, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s analysis of science and development, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)'s innovation indicators and International Monetary Fund (IMF) regional analysis all point to the need for stronger institutional, technological and financial capabilities to convert continental ambitions into practical development results [26–30].

However, strategic autonomy faces several constraints. Infrastructure gaps limit territorial connectivity. Commodity dependence exposes economies to external shocks. Debt pressures reduce fiscal space and may narrow development

choices. Excessive reliance on external borrowing may constrain policy autonomy when debt servicing absorbs resources that could otherwise support productive investment, infrastructure and local development programmes. Strategic autonomy therefore requires not only access to finance but also sustainable debt management and effective allocation of resources. Weak local institutions can prevent national strategies from reaching territories. Strategic autonomy therefore requires more than external diversification. It requires domestic coordination, credible industrial strategies, local skills, productive finance and stronger public implementation capacity.

Table 7 Policy translation matrix: from strategic autonomy to local development

| Strategic autonomy dimension | Local development channel | Practical policy question | Expected local effect |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Policy space | Context-specific strategies | Can governments adapt policy instruments to local production needs? | More relevant territorial and industrial policies. |
| Productive capacity | Local value creation | Do projects create firms, jobs and skills? | Higher employment and value addition. |
| Regional integration | Market enlargement | Can local firms access regional value chains? | More opportunities for SMEs and territories. |
| Innovation capacity | Learning and upgrading | Do institutions support technology adoption and skills? | Greater resilience and competitiveness. |
| Partnership diversification | Bargaining capacity | Do external partnerships transfer knowledge and capabilities? | Reduced dependency and stronger negotiation power. |

Source: Author's elaboration.; Note: SMEs = small and medium-sized enterprises.

Governance quality remains equally important. Even well-designed development strategies may produce limited outcomes when implementation capacity, institutional coordination or accountability mechanisms remain weak. Strategic autonomy therefore depends not only on external relations but also on domestic institutional effectiveness.

4.4. Future strategic perspectives

The post-COVID period has altered the development debate. Before the pandemic, policy discussions often privileged efficiency, openness and global integration. After the pandemic, resilience, supply-chain security, domestic production and strategic stocks became more visible. For African countries, this shift creates an opportunity to rethink development strategies around local production, regional markets and diversified partnerships.

Multipolarity also creates opportunities, but it does not automatically reduce dependence. New partnerships with emerging economies, development banks or South-South cooperation platforms can expand Africa's options. Yet they may also reproduce asymmetries if they remain focused on raw materials, debt-financed infrastructure without local value capture, or imported technology without skills transfer. The decisive criterion is therefore not the origin of the partner, but the developmental effect of the partnership.

A practical strategy should combine four priorities. The first is productive diversification, especially agro-processing, manufacturing, renewable energy value chains and digital services. Renewable energy projects associated with solar, wind and green industrialisation initiatives illustrate how infrastructure investment can simultaneously support energy access, industrial upgrading and local value creation when accompanied by technology transfer and skills development. The second is regional integration through AfCFTA implementation, logistics, standards and support to local firms. The third is innovation capacity through skills, research, technology adoption and entrepreneurship. The fourth is institutional coordination between continental agendas, national strategies and local development actors.

Table 8 Future strategic perspectives for Africa

| Driver | Opportunity | Risk | Strategic condition |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|
| AfCFTA | Larger markets and regional value chains. | Uneven implementation and weak infrastructure. | Customs facilitation, logistics and support to local firms. |
| Renewable energy | Green industrialisation and local energy access. | Technology dependence and limited local value capture. | Local content, skills and industrial linkages. |
| Digitalisation | Innovation ecosystems and youth employment. | Digital divide and territorial exclusion. | Connectivity, skills and inclusive digital policy. |
| South-South cooperation | Diversified partnerships and knowledge exchange. | New dependencies if local capabilities remain weak. | Technology transfer and African priority-setting. |
| Debt management | Better financing of transformation. | Reduced fiscal space and vulnerability. | Transparent borrowing and productive investment. |

Source: Author's elaboration.

5. Conclusion

This article examined strategic autonomy as a development-oriented framework for strengthening local development in Africa. It argued that strategic autonomy should not be reduced to isolation, sovereignty discourse or geopolitical positioning. It is better understood as the capacity to expand policy space, mobilise resources, diversify partnerships and translate external engagement into local productive capabilities.

The article proposed a bidirectional framework. On the one hand, strategic autonomy can support local development by widening policy choices, encouraging productive diversification, deepening regional integration and strengthening innovation capacity. On the other hand, local development reinforces strategic autonomy when territories generate firms, employment, skills, infrastructure and value chains. Autonomy and local development therefore strengthen one another when policy choices are connected to productive capabilities.

The comparative discussion showed that Global South experiences provide comparative references but should not be copied. East Asia illustrates the importance of state capacity, industrial learning and productive upgrading. Latin America illustrates both the relevance of structuralist thinking and the fragility of diversification when implementation capacity is weak. Africa's priority is to translate continental agendas into concrete local outcomes through firms, skills, infrastructure and regional value chains.

The main policy implication is that strategic autonomy must be judged by its development effects. It becomes meaningful only when it improves local production systems, widens employment opportunities, increases territorial resilience and strengthens the ability of African countries to negotiate, cooperate and transform. Future research should test the Strategic Autonomy Index at country level, examine sectoral cases such as agro-processing and renewable energy, and analyse how local governments, firms and communities participate in broader strategies of structural transformation.

Amartya Sen described development as a process of "expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy" [1]. In that spirit, the challenge facing Africa is not simply to achieve higher growth. It is to enlarge the range of strategic choices available for local development and structural transformation. Whether strategic autonomy becomes a catalyst for inclusive development, or remains limited by debt pressures, institutional weaknesses and external dependency, remains a critical horizon for future research and policy debate.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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