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How the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor can move beyond transport: A policy coherence perspective

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Summary

The Abidjan–Lagos Corridor (ALC) is one of Africa's ambitious regional integration projects, linking five economies that together account for a large share of West Africa's trade and growth. While investment is being mobilised for transport infrastructure, the corridor risks underperforming as an economic system.

One of the main constraints is policy incoherence and weak implementation across trade, agriculture and climate agendas. Regional ambitions for integrated markets under ECOWAS and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) remain undermined by persistent non-tariff barriers, protectionist national policies and fragmented institutional arrangements. As a result, the corridor functions less as a regional market and more as a series of disconnected national economies.

Without addressing these structural constraints, the ALC risks becoming a high-cost transport asset with limited impact on trade, industrialisation and resilience. To unlock its potential, the corridor must move beyond a narrow infrastructure focus towards a coherent economic and policy framework, aligned with industrial, food system and climate objectives. This requires:

(i) strengthening trade facilitation and enforcement of regional frameworks;
(ii) aligning national agricultural and industrial strategies with regional market integration; and
(iii) embedding climate resilience into corridor planning and investment.

Introduction

The Abidjan–Lagos Corridor (ALC) sits at the intersection of multiple regional ambitions: infrastructure development under the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA), trade integration through ECOWAS and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and broader objectives around industrialisation, food security and climate resilience. In policy terms, it represents a test case for whether these agendas can be translated into a functioning economic system. This matters given the corridor's economic weight: it underpins a region accounting for approximately 75% of West Africa's trade and is projected to become one of the world's fastest-growing urban and commercial zones.

Yet in practice, the corridor remains characterised by fragmentation rather than integration. Despite strong political commitment and significant investment in infrastructure, cross-border trade remains constrained, value chains are weakly connected, and private investment is limited.

This disconnect reflects a deeper structural issue: the absence of effective alignment across policy domains. Trade, agricultural, industrial and climate policies are often designed and implemented in silos, with limited coordination across sectors and countries. Regional frameworks exist, but enforcement remains inconsistent, while national priorities – particularly around food sovereignty and industrial protection – frequently override regional commitments.

As a result, the ALC risks reproducing a well-known pattern: well-funded infrastructure that fails to generate expected economic transformation.

This briefing note adopts a policy nexus perspective to analyse how these misalignments shape corridor outcomes. It identifies key gaps between regional ambition and national implementation and highlights priority areas where stronger policy coherence and coordination are needed to unlock the corridor's economic and resilience potential.

1. A complex but fragmented regional architecture

The ALC Highway Development Project involves the construction of a 1,000 km, six-lane highway linking the economic capitals of Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Accra (Ghana), Lomé (Togo), Cotonou (Benin) and Lagos (Nigeria) to reduce transport costs and transit times. Yet the ALC is more than a transport project: it is underpinned by a dense regional architecture combining infrastructure development, trade integration and industrial policy ambitions. As a flagship project under PIDA, the corridor benefits from strong political backing and significant financial commitments, notably from the African Development Bank (AfDB) and international partners, including the EU and GIZ.

Beyond transport infrastructure, the corridor is embedded in a broader set of regional strategies, including ECOWAS trade frameworks and agricultural policies such as West Africa's Agricultural Policy (ECOWAP), the AfCFTA, and the AfDB's Spatial Development Initiative, which aims to link infrastructure investment with industrial and agricultural development. This broader policy landscape also includes initiatives such as the West African Common Industrial Policy and the Africa Green Industrialisation Initiative.

However, this architecture is characterised less by coherence than by institutional complexity and fragmentation. Multiple actors – ECOWAS, AfDB, AU/NEPAD, national governments and emerging bodies such as the Abidjan–Lagos Corridor Management Authority (ALCoMA) – operate with overlapping mandates and limited coordination. While ALCoMA, headquartered in Côte d'Ivoire, is expected to play a central role, its recent operationalisation (February 2026) remains a critical test for effective corridor governance.

1.1 From transport corridor to economic system: an unfinished transition

A key shift in the ALC's vision has been its evolution from a transport project to an integrated economic corridor. This shift is reflected in initiatives such as the AfDB's Spatial Development Initiative, which identifies industrial clusters and investment opportunities along the corridor to anchor economic activity and functions as a strategic economic artery for cross-border trade, investment and regional value chains, particularly in agro-food systems.

Yet, this transition remains incomplete. While infrastructure planning is relatively advanced, the integration of economic, agricultural and trade dimensions is less developed. The risk is that industrial zones and investment projects remain weakly connected to both the transport backbone and to each other, limiting their ability to generate corridor-wide value chains.

1.2 The soft infrastructure gap

The most critical constraint lies in the gap between physical infrastructure and trade facilitation. Regional frameworks such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme and planned one-stop border posts provide a basis for integration, but their implementation remains uneven and politically sensitive.

As a result, the corridor reflects a duality: strong momentum behind visible infrastructure investments, and slower progress on the 'soft' reforms, notably customs procedures, regulatory harmonisation and enforcement, that determine whether the corridor can function as a single market. These reforms require complex coordination across multiple regional and national institutions **(see Annex 1 for an overview of the key institutions and their roles in the ALC)**, as well as politically sensitive adjustments at the national level, which have progressed slowly.

Key 'soft infrastructure' instruments include:

- **One-stop border posts (OSBPs):** designed to streamline joint border controls and reduce crossing times, but unevenly implemented;
- **ECOWAS trade frameworks (ETLS, CET):** provide the legal basis for regional trade, yet face persistent enforcement challenges;
- **ECOWAS Brown Card:** facilitates cross-border transport through a third-party insurance system, though uptake and operationalisation remain limited;
- **AfCFTA alignment:** positions the corridor as a backbone for continental trade, but national strategies remain only partially aligned.

Without addressing this imbalance, the ALC risks becoming a well-connected but poorly integrated corridor, where infrastructure outpaces the policy environment needed to support trade, investment and resilience.

2. Policy incoherence as a systemic constraint

The effectiveness of the ALC ultimately depends on how regional ambitions are translated into national policies and implemented in practice. While all five corridor countries have developed strategies across infrastructure, agriculture, trade and climate, **a comparative overview of national policy frameworks shows that these remain only partially aligned, both across sectors and across borders (see Annex 2).**

At a conceptual level, there are clear synergies. Infrastructure investments are intended to reduce transport costs and support trade, while initiatives such as the AfDB's Spatial Development Initiative aim to link transport corridors to agro-industrial development. These objectives are broadly reflected in national policies promoting agricultural transformation, industrialisation and export growth. However, in practice, these synergies are undermined by persistent policy misalignments and implementation gaps.

2.1 Trade integration versus national policy priorities

The most significant tension lies between regional trade integration and national economic strategies. While ECOWAS and AfCFTA frameworks promote open regional markets, national policies – particularly in agriculture – often prioritise food sovereignty and domestic industrial development. Nigeria, the region's largest economy, exemplifies this tension: import bans on key commodities such as rice, aimed at boosting domestic production, directly undermine the export strategies of neighbouring countries such as Benin and Togo, which rely on access to the Nigerian market.

More broadly, trade restrictions, import bans and informal barriers continue to undermine predictable cross-border trade. This creates an uncertain operating environment for firms, discouraging investment in regional value chains and reinforcing market fragmentation (interviews, 2025–2026).

2.2 Implementation gaps and the persistence of informality

A second constraint is the gap between policy commitments and implementation. Regional frameworks such as the ECOWAS Trade Liberalisation Scheme provide a foundation for integration, but enforcement remains inconsistent.

In practice, non-tariff barriers, including border delays, informal payments and administrative hurdles, continue to shape trade dynamics. Informal trade has become a structural feature of the corridor, reflecting both the adaptability of traders and the failure of formal systems to deliver predictable and efficient cross-border exchange.

2.3 Weak integration of climate and infrastructure agendas

Climate objectives are increasingly reflected in national and regional strategies, yet their integration into corridor development remains limited. While climate risks, such as sea-level rise along the coastal route, are well recognised, they are not systematically embedded in infrastructure planning, trade systems or investment decisions. It remains unclear whether climate vulnerability assessments are genuinely influencing the final engineering design and alignment of the highway or are treated as secondary compliance exercises.

This creates a risk of lock-in to infrastructure and production systems that are not resilient to future climate shocks, undermining both sustainability and long-term economic viability.

Conclusion

The ALC illustrates a broader challenge in regional integration: strong political ambition and investment in infrastructure are not sufficient to deliver economic transformation. Without greater policy coherence and effective implementation, the corridor risks remaining a well-connected but fragmented economic space.

Three priorities stand out:

- Strengthening corridor governance is critical. The effective operationalisation of ALCoMA, with a clear cross-sectoral mandate, will be essential to coordinate trade, agricultural, industrial and climate agendas across countries.
- There is a need to align investment frameworks with economic realities. Initiatives such as the AfDB's Spatial Development Initiative should be more systematically linked to national agricultural strategies and climate commitments, ensuring that infrastructure investments are anchored in viable value chains and market demand.
- Reducing non-tariff barriers and policy contradictions must become a political priority. This requires coordinated, high-level action to improve the implementation of regional trade frameworks and reconcile tensions between regional integration objectives and national economic strategies.

Addressing these priorities is essential to move the ALC from a transport corridor to a functioning economic system. The next step is to translate these policy priorities into concrete, bankable investment pathways. This will be further developed in the next briefing note in this series, which builds on this analysis to identify practical investment opportunities and financing approaches, with a focus on agrologistics and cassava value chains.

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institution. Any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the author. For comments and feedback, please contact hk@ecdpm.org.

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Annexes

ANNEX 1

Table 1: Key institutions and roles in the Abidjan-Lagos Corridor development

Institution/Body	Primary Mandate/Role	Key Activities/Responsibilities
ECOWAS Commission	Executing Agency; Regional Coordinator	Manages the Project Implementation Unit (PIU); coordinates technical studies; leads trade and transport facilitation agenda; mobilises member state contributions.
African Development Bank (AfDB)	Lead Financier; Strategic Driver	Provides major funding for studies and construction; leads the Spatial Development Initiative (SDI); oversees institutional arrangements for ALCoMA.
African Union (AU) / NEPAD	Continental Policy Framework	Provides the high-level policy framework through the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa (PIDA).
Abidjan-Lagos Corridor Management Authority (ALCoMA)	Supranational Management Body (Planned)	Mandated to construct, manage, and operate the highway and its economic zones, will replace the interim Steering Committee.
Ministerial Steering Committee	Interim Political Oversight	Composed of Ministers of Works/Roads from the 5 corridor member countries (CMCs); provides high-level political guidance and approves technical and legal frameworks.
Corridor Member Country (CMC) Governments	National Implementation	Ratify treaties and financing agreements; provide right-of-way; implement national-level policy reforms (customs, trade, etc.); contribute financially.
Africa Investment Forum (AIF)	Investment Mobilisation	Serves as a platform to attract and secure investment pledges from private and institutional investors for the project.
European Union (EU) and GIZ	Key Funding Partners	Provide grant and debt-blend financing for the preparatory and technical study phases of the project.

ANNEX 2

Table 2: Comparative matrix of national policies along the ALC

Policy Domain	Côte d'Ivoire	Ghana	Togo	Benin	Nigeria
Infrastructure Master Plan	Abidjan Urban Transport Project (PTUA); Urban Master Plan	Ghana Infrastructure Plan (GIP) 2018-2047	National Development Plan (PND); 2025-2029 Strategic Plan ($9.7B)	MCC-Benin Compact; Grand-Nokoué Mobility Project	National Integrated Infrastructure Master Plan (NIIMP) 2020-2043
Core Objective	Modernise Abidjan's mobility, promote PPPs	Expand road network to 253,000km, develop rail/ports	Become a regional logistics hub, build Lomé-Cinkassé rail	Rehabilitate the corridor section, create multimodal urban transport	Raise infrastructure stock to 70% of GDP, use PPPs
Implementing Institution	Min. of Construction Housing, Sanitation and Urban Development	National Development Planning Commission (NDPC)	Min. of Public Works; Togo Invest	Min. of Infrastructure; MCA-Benin II	Federal Min. of Finance, Budget and National Planning
Agricultural and Food Security Plan	National Agricultural Investment Programme II (PNIA II)	Investing for Food and Jobs (IFJ); GASIP	Agricultural Modernisation Program (ProMAT) 2025-2034	Agricultural Competitiveness and Export Diversification Project	National Agricultural Technology and Innovation Policy (NATIP) 2022-2027
Core Objective	Establish 9 "agropoles", process 50% of produce locally	6% annual growth, flagship programs (Planting for Food and Jobs)	Increase production, climate resilience, market access	Boost food security (rice) and export value chains (pineapple, cashew)	Modernise the sector with technology, innovation, and biofortification
Implementing Institution	Min. of Agriculture and Rural Development	Min. of Food and Agriculture (MoFA)	Min. of Agriculture, Livestock and Rural	Min. of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries (MAEP)	Federal Min. of Agriculture and Rural Development

			Development		(FMARD)
Climate Change NDC/Policy	Revised NDC (2022); National Development Plan (PND)	Updated NDC (2021); National Climate Change Policy (2013)	Updated NDC (2021); Climate Change Law (2025)	Updated NDC (2021); Climate Action Framework (2024)	Updated NDC (2021); Climate Change Act (2021); Net-Zero by 2060
Core Objective	Unconditional 30.41% GHG cut; Adaptation in agric/coastal zones	Reduce GHG by 64 MtCO2e; Adaptation in agric/ disaster response	Unconditional 20.51% GHG cut; Adaptation in coastal/agric sectors	Unconditional 20.15% GHG cut; Mobilise $11.5B for implementation	Unconditional 20% GHG cut; Conditional 47% cut; Net-Zero by 2060
Implementing Institution	Min. of Environment, Sustainable Development, and Ecological Transition	Min. of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI)	Min. of Environment and Forest Resources	Min. of Environment and Sustainability	National Council on Climate Change; Federal Min. of Environment
National Trade/AfCFTA Strategy	National Trade Policy; National AGOA Strategy	Ten Point Industrial Transformation Agenda; AfCFTA Host	National Trade Development Policy; Togo Trade Portal	National Trade Facilitation Strategy (in dev.); GDIZ	Trade Policy of Nigeria (TPN) 2023-2027
Core Objective	Increase processed exports; leverage AfCFTA for 13.5% income growth	Become a manufacturing hub; 'One District One Factory'	Mainstream trade into agric/industry; simplify procedures	Strengthen border management, develop GDIZ as export hub	Diversify from oil, promote value-added exports; use protectionism
Implementing Institution	Min. of Commerce and Industry	Min. of Trade and Industry	Min. of Trade, Crafts and Local Consumption	Min. of Industry and Trade	Federal Min. of Industry, Trade and Investment

About ECDPM and AUDA-NEPAD's partnership on African food systems

This brief is part of a project led by the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), with ECDPM, to boost investments in food security and climate resilience along key infrastructure corridors in Africa.

The project targets three specific pillars of action: **policy reforms, innovative finance mechanisms, and multi-stakeholder dialogue**.

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