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In March 2018, a key agreement was signed in Kigali under the aegis of the African Union's acting President, Paul Kagame, to create the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA).

The deal raises high hopes. First, it is expected to considerably boost intra-African trade, just 19% today compared to about 70% for trade between European Union members. Second, it is expected to foster the rise of local economies creating local added value, especially local jobs. Employment is surely Africa's biggest challenge. Today 60% of its population is under 25. In the next 10 years, 750 million more jobseekers will arrive on the labour market. But the 2018 Ibrahim Index shows that although Africa's total GDP rose by nearly 50% in the past decade, almost no progress has been made in providing economic opportunities for its citizens. The ability to offer job prospects to young people arriving on the labour market in massive numbers is a major challenge for Africa and its immediate vicinity. This key agreement attests to the continent's real collective political commitment. But much, if not all, remains to be done for its effective implementation.

To date, 49 countries have signed the agreement but only 10 have ratified it—12 short of the 22 required for the deal to become operational. Africa's heavyweights, South Africa and Nigeria, still seem reluctant to say the least, putting their interests first, as many countries do today. How can that temptation be avoided? What can be learned from European construction, now weakened by Brexit? How can foot-dragging countries be convinced? How can local public opinion, especially youth, be assured? How can the deal's benefits be demonstrated? What obstacles should be lifted, and in what order? Should adjustment and solidarity mechanisms be implemented, and to whose benefit? What is the risk for the countries concerned, often heavily dependent on their customs revenues, to lose tax resources? To what extent should CFTA's implementation be linked to renegotiating the Cotonou Agreement? How can CFTA dovetail with already existing regional accords? Our highly experienced panel will answer those key questions.