What effect is the Covid-19 pandemic having on progress towards African integration and how will the AfCFTA benefit the process? Dounia Ben Mohamed poses questions to Paulo Gomes, Co-President of the AfroChampions Initiative, which brings together pan-African institutions and private groups driven by the desire to accelerate the economic integration of the continent.

Interview Paulo Gomes, Co-President, AfroChampions Initiative

What’s your analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on Africa?
I think that Africa has never been di-
agnosed quite so much in such a short
period as during this current lockdown
and the coronavirus crisis. However, a
lot of these diagnoses have been based
on parameters that pre-date Covid-19.
I was expecting a more regional ap-
proach. That’s what the AfroChampions
Initiative intends to propose to the West
African Economic and Monetary Union.
We have been included on the health
front as co-sponsor in order to mobilise
the private sector for the Covid-19 Re-
sponse Fund. At the African level, we will
see what happens. But there is a de-facto
lack of coordination, especially financial,
as there is nobody running the show.

At the international level, we also risk
wasting time on the issue of debt. As a
former Executive Director of the World
Bank for Africa, I believe that this should
not be the starting point for organising
the fight against this pandemic.

Firstly, the amounts we are talking
about are not enough for the lower in-
come countries and would not resolve
the issue of liquidity. Above all, it would
not settle the problem of failed businesses
and SMEs that the crisis will bring about.

They say the biggest risk when flying is
at take-off – once the plane has reached
cruising speed, the risk is over. In Africa,
we were all in take-off phase and this
crisis is going to knock the plane out of
the sky, with a recession and a pos-
sible depression towards the end of the
year. So, it is a worrying situation. But
there are two sides to every crisis –
the concerns and the opportunities.

What do you think of the measures taken
by the pan-African institutions and indi-
vidual governments to limit the damage?
I am worried, because a crisis of this
temperature cannot be tackled by one
country with quickfire measures. Even
if we have to try to control the spread
of a virus that we don’t know much
about, we can only properly address it
from a regional point of view. All these
announcements by individual countries
will be enough given the huge stakes.
We have been badly hit by the cri-
sis, which has revealed our inability to
meet even the most basic needs, such as
protective masks. It’s an opportunity for
Africa to resume its industrialisation and
also to think about how to feed itself,
by developing its agribusiness sector.

Even if today’s crisis is a health crisis,
who knows, with climate change, what
scourge we will have to face tomorrow, if
we cannot guarantee our own food sup-
ply. And if this crisis continues, in view
of the problems with logistics, Africa could
run out of rice, for example.

This is an opportunity to reduce this
industrial dependence. The AfCFTA
is even more important today and the
momentum is there, we just have to get
organised, as it is more a question of
organisation than political will.

To what extent will the AfCFTA encour-
age regional integration?
It encourages regional integration be-
cause the drivers of these exchanges will
be part of a regional approach. At region-
al group level, we will see the creation
of value chains for different industrial
products because the movement of goods
and people will be mainly within the re-
gions, mostly by road. So, this regional
integration will require infrastructure,