INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN SOCIAL SCIENCE (IJRISS)
ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

Reviewing the Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement: Progress, Challenges, and Opportunities for Nigeria and Africa

[1]Egbuna, Ngozi Eunice, [2]Kalu, Chris Olua, [3]Ekwugha, Uchenna Patricia, [4]Chukwuyem, Obi Paul

[1]International Centre for Regional Integration and Trade Research (ICRITR) Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

[2]Economics Department Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

[3]International Centre for Regional Integration and Trade Research (ICRITR) Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

[4]Centre for the Studies of the Economies of Africa Abuja, Nigeria

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100300604

Received: 27 March 2026; Accepted: 01 April 2026; Published: 21 April 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Lagos Plan of Action and Abuja Treaty serve as foundations for the AfCFTA, which is based on Africa's economic unification goal. Its five-year implementation is evaluated in this research, which also highlights opportunities, advancements, and problems for Nigeria and Africa. The AfCFTA, rooted in Africa's economic integration agenda, builds on the Lagos Plan of Action and Abuja Treaty. This study assesses its five-year implementation, highlighting challenges, progress, and opportunities for Nigeria and Africa. Drawing lessons from other Regional Trade Agreements, such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Agreement (FTA) called AFTA, it explains the difference between AFTA and AFCFTA and why AFTA is making progress.

The article adopts a descriptive research design combined with a mixed-methods and the positive deviance (PD) approach. The PD approach attempts to explain why setting individuals or organisations are making obvous progress while the others are not, despite having the same or related conditions or constraints. The PD approach has never been implemented in the area of international trade to the best of the researchers knowledge.

The study finds that progress has been made at the policy angle, but not in the actual trade. Several challenges remain, such as issues bordering on trade facilitation. The biggest challenges facing the Nigerian business are poor infrastructure and logistics, representing 37.2% of all challenges, limited business finance follows at 26.5%, and regulatory compliance issues (17.7%). It further finds that, apart from the larger market benefit, growth in manufacturing, as well as job creation and employment growth, are opportunities the AfCFTA will bring to Nigeria, including increased foreign direct investment. Using the PD approach, the study finds several success factors explaining why ASEAN FTA is doing well, which include effective implementation of harmonized standards and regulations, proactive engagement with the private sector, transparent dispute resolution mechanisms, and strong institutional frameworks supporting agreements. Key recommendations for improving the country's participation in the AfCFTA include

- In the short term, the government should fully implement the National Single Window System (NSW) and address non-tariff barriers.
- In the medium term, the government should Strengthen Trade Infrastructure and Logistics, harmonize its trade, investment, and industrial policies, and

- In the long term, implement Fiscal and Financial Incentives and develop a trade defense mechanism.

From the PD approach, for Africa, especially the AU, the following recommendations were cited:

- Strengthen Institutional Capacity with Regional Decentralization
- Implement Clear and Realistic Phased Timelines
- Enhance Harmonization of Technical Standards and Mutual Recognition

INTRODUCTION

The AfCFTA is a rapidly emerging policy framework for Africa's economic integration meant to promote free trade in the region. Its foundation was first laid out several years ago when African leaders agreed to integrate among themselves, initially conceptualized under the framework of the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA), or arrangements that pre-existed it. The LPA, followed by the Final Act of Lagos, was borne out of the necessity for continental and national self-sufficiency and the creation of a self-reliant continental economy (Benachenhou, 1983; ECA, n.d.). The 1980 LPA gave birth to the Africa Economic Community (AEC) – a community comprising of existing Regional Economic Communities (REC) - in June 1991, when the formal Organization of African Unity (OAU) Heads of State and Government signed the Treaty Establishing the AEC (that is the Abuja Treaty) (Magu, 2023).

The Treaty, called the Abuja Treaty, establishing the AEC, laid the foundation for further economic integration by noting that the REC remains the building block of the continental integration(Magu, 2023). It identified six sequential stages for the establishment of the AEC within forty years of its entry into force. The idea was to have a full integration of the region following the lines of free trade, customs union, common market, and economic union principles (Willie, 2023). RECs were advised to develop along these lines, which will eventually coalesce into a single African integration. Thus, one of the specific objectives of the AEC – and indeed the first step to economic integration in the region- is to establish a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and to liberalize trade on the continent following the establishment of FTAs by the RECs.

As part of the AEC agenda and following the establishment of FTAs by RECs, the AfCFTA was born. In 2020, the Head of State of the African Union agreed to launch the earlier free trade agreement following the signing of the Agreement. As of today, about 54 African countries have ratified the Treaty, while implementation of the agenda has begun, especially through the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI). To show the seriousness of the progenitors of the Agreement, the GTI was approved as a pseudo-approach to trading under the AfCFTA platform. Under the first phase of GTI implementation,12 countries participated by sending goods to different destination countries in the region. In the second phase, 10 more countries participated, which included Nigeria.

Nigeria signed The AfCFTA Agreement On 7 July 2019, ratified it on 11 November 2020, and formally deposited the ratification instrument to the AU Commission on 5 December, 2020. The benefit of the AfCFTA for Africa and indeed for Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The benefits include its contribution to trade facilitation, industrialization, investment, and the overall economic goals of the country. This single market serves as an open door for Nigeria to trade its abundant goods and services in the region. According to the Nigeria-AfCFTA Readiness Assessment Report, Nigeria's participation in the AfCFTA allows the country to be part of a regional market and saves the time of trying to sign bilateral agreements with several African countries (Nigeria AfCFTA Readiness Report, 2019).

The Nigeria AfCFTA Readiness report noted that the AfCFTA will make prices competitive and result in an increase in Nigeria's trade within Africa. The trade expansion benefits that the AfCFTA Agreement will create include the import surge (of intermediate goods) across most segments of the industrial sector, especially for products coming from outside the ECOWAS region, charged at different tariff rates. This trade will be facilitated by the new Pan Africa Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS). The PAPSS remains a seamless and single platform to facilitate transactions across national borders of AfCFTA Member States using the prevailing currency in each State. Therefore, b**ecause of its advantages, the AfCFTA provides Nigeria with unlimited market access for its goods and services, laying the groundwork for the country to achieve its industrialization objectives**. Additionally, it makes it easier to link to regional value chains, which promotes industrial expansion.

Five years have passed since the AfCFTA went into effect on May 30, 2019. Determining if the agreement's original goals are being achieved is essential to evaluating its efficacy. It is important to determine the progress made so far, as many African nations have fully embraced this trade integration, which is a fundamental component of the Continental Agenda 2063 and a vision that the AEC's founding fathers worked hard to establish.

Identifying the issues

As noted in the preceding paragraph, the AfCFTA was established to promote intra-African trade, industrialization, and overall economic integration. For Nigeria, formally Africa's largest economy with a GDP of $477 billion in 2022 (World Bank, 2023) but now lags behind South Africa, Egypt and Algeria as the fourth Africa economy, the AfCFTA presents an opportunity to enhance industrialization and expand market access. However, five years after its implementation, questions remain regarding its impact on Nigeria's industrial growth and trade performance.

Despite the increase in total trade between 2023 and 2024, Nigeria's trade under the AfCFTA remains limited, more than two years after the Agreement's full implementation. As of Q1 2024, Nigeria's imports from African partners accounted for only 3.18% of total imports, compared to Asia (47.12%), Europe (36.94%), and America (12.30%). Exports to Africa stood at 11.67%, significantly lower than exports to Asia (27.02%), Europe (43.43%), and North America (17.79%). By Q3 2024, Nigeria's imports from African partners increased slightly to 3.49% of total imports, still trailing behind imports from Asia (49.69%), Europe (36.5%), and America (9.8%). Nigeria's exports to Africa also rose marginally to 12.13%, remaining lower than exports to Europe (45.07%), Asia (25.31%), and America (16.49%) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). In the first half of 2025, Nigeria's total intra-African trade reached ₦4.82 trillion (approximately $3.13 billion), marking a 14.5% increase from ₦4.21 trillion ($2.89 billion) in H1 2024, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Exports to Africa surged to ₦4.82 trillion from ₦4.21 trillion year-on-year, driven by a strong Q2 performance of ₦2.97 trillion (up from ₦1.97 trillion), primarily to West African neighbors. Top export destinations included Togo (₦946.7 billion), Côte d'Ivoire (₦837 billion), Ghana (₦429 billion), Senegal (₦568 billion), and Benin (₦70.2 billion), with West Africa absorbing over 62% of continental export.

Imports from Africa grew more modestly to ₦1.82 trillion from ₦1.13 trillion, with Q1 imports spiking to ₦1.00 trillion (over double Q1 2024's ₦401.8 billion) before stabilizing. This resulted in a trade surplus of ₦2.99 trillion (slightly down from ₦3.08 trillion in H1 2024), narrowing to ₦852.8 billion in Q1 but widening to ₦2.15 trillion in Q2. In dollar terms, growth was modest at $3.13 billion total trade, below pre-pandemic peaks like $4.51 billion in 2019, reflecting naira depreciation impact.

Africa accounted for about 10% of Nigeria's total exports (₦43.3 trillion overall), ranking fourth after Europe, Asia, and the Americas. This analysis highlights that Nigeria's total trade within Africa increased minimally during this period, and if disaggregated by bilateral relationship Nigeria-Africa trade remains less than 2% underscoring the slow pace of AfCFTA-driven trade expansion compared to the country's trade with other regions.

While trade within Africa has been slowly recovering, this may not be catching up as fast as the continent's trade with the rest of the world. For instance, as noted by Afreximbank (2025), in 2024, trade within Africa or intra-African trade rose by 12.4% culminating in a total trade estimated at US$220.3 billion. Although this growth shows some AfCFTA effect, however, African trade still represents about 16-17% of the region's aggregate trade, when related to intra-EU trade of about 70%, and Asia (60%) (MCB Group, 2025; Afreximbank, 2025). In reality, around 84% of Africa's trade remains with the rest of the world or with countries outside the region – a reality that affects the region's economic independence and exposes the continent to global shock (MCB Group, 2025). This shock is even more serious since a significant part of the continent's trade is driven largely by high commodity prices, which still account for about 80% of total exports. As global demand—particularly from China—dipped in 2023, export performance weakened in aggregate, emphasizing why African countries must trade amongst themselves.

Though some progress has been made policy-wise, such as the participation in the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) and the implementation of the Pan-Africa Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), among others, however, trading under the AfCFTA is still experiencing a lag effect. Several structural barriers hinder full trade integration. Consequently, the key questions this research aims to answer include: What are the challenges affecting the full implementation of the AfCFTA, five years after take-off? What are the major impediments to Nigeria's full participation in the AfCFTA? What progress has been made thus far in implementing the AfCFTA in Africa, focusing on Nigeria? What are the opportunities for Nigeria and Africa? What policy recommendations can be made to improve Nigeria's trade performance under the AfCFTA? This study will examine these challenges and successes, offering recommendations for policy adjustments to maximize the agreement's benefits. Therefore, the overarching objective of this study is to review the implementation of the AfCFTA in the last five years. Specifically, the study will examine:

i. Challenges militating against its full implementation of the Agreement;

ii. Progress made thus far in implementing the AfCFTA in Africa, focusing on Nigeria.

iii. Opportunities for Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

FTAs are a core factor in economic integration, allowing trade liberalization to increase market access and boost economic growth. A review of the literature shows that the implementation of FTAs in developing economies is seriously hampered by several factors, which include weak institutions, infrastructure deficits, political resistance, and economic constraints. These challenges impede the realization of trade agreements, thus limiting their benefits and retarding regional economic integration.

A major challenge in implementing FTAs in developing economies is the lack of strong institutional and regulatory frameworks. In Africa, as in other developing countries, effective trade liberalization requires transparent and enforceable regulations, but many countries in the region struggle with weak governance structures, including in emerging economies of South Africa (John, 2022) and Nigeria (Chukwubuikem et al., 2021). Regulatory misalignment and the persistence of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) in the form of import regulations (Karunanidhi, 2011) have led to challenges in implementing FTAs. These regulations are put in place to increase foreign trade revenue, improve health standards, etc. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, corruption, and limited institutional capacity further weaken the enforcement of trade agreements. Many customs administrations lack the technical expertise and modernized systems required to facilitate seamless cross-border trade, leading to delays and increased transaction costs (World Trade Organization, 2021).

Dilapidated infrastructure seriously erodes the optimal operationalization of free trade agreements (FTAs) in developing countries. Ineffective transport, inefficient ports, and unreliable energy supply increase the cost of doing business and reduce the competitiveness of trade. For example, all African and South Asian countries suffer from weak roads and railways, making it difficult for firms to access regional and extra-regional markets efficiently (UNECA, 2019). Inadequate warehousing and logistics services are also responsible for causing inefficiencies in trade facilitation. Weak digital infrastructure adds to the problem, limiting access to sophisticated customs management systems and trade-related information necessary for the successful implementation of FTAs (RSIS International, 2025)

Deployment of FTAs in developing economies is typically thwarted by financial limitations. It is common for most governments to suffer revenue losses due to tariff reductions, which are a key component of FTAs. Since trade tariffs constitute an enormous share of government revenues in developing economies, removing them or reducing them severely can lead to fiscal challenges, particularly in economies that possess weak tax collection systems (Baunsgaard & Keen, 2010). Trade diversion is also an issue that can be brought about by the possibility that trade may be diverted from more productive foreign suppliers to less productive regional partners on account of preferential tariffs, potentially reducing economic welfare as a whole (AfriPoli, 2024)

There is typically no industrial base and productive capacity within developing economies to use FTAs to the maximum. Compared to developed economies with diversified production structures, the majority of developing countries are still dependent on a single or two major commodities or low-value-added goods. This discourages their competitiveness in free markets, which leads to trade deficits and reliance on imports rather than exports. The absence of value chains and manufacturing potential further reduces the potential benefits of FTAs because domestic industries are not capable of producing products at international standards and according to market needs (AfricanLII, 2023)

Technical ability and experts are required to execute FTAs effectively. Most developing countries lack adequately trained professionals, which presents limits in effective implementation and trade agreement compliance. Inefficient capacity in trade policy formulation also leads to less appropriate negotiation results, with developing economies possibly not being aware of the implications of trade commitments or receiving unfavorable terms. Additionally, poor awareness on the part of businesses and the private sector of the benefits of FTAs limits their ability to benefit from new opportunities (RSIS International, 2025).

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to learn from FTAs that are doing better, which provide great, valuable lessons for regions such as Africa aiming to harness FTAs for sustainable economic development. **Sustainable FTAs arise from strong political will, complementary economic structures, and proactive collaboration among partner countries. for instance, as noted in UNECA (2020) several Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have not been able to effectively implement important resolutions and decisions adopted by their policy and decision making organs, partly because of lack of political will, as well as inadequate financial and human resources.**

This is exemplified in the case of Brazil-China trade cooperation and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Brazil-China trade relationship exemplifies this through its remarkable growth in bilateral trade and investment cooperation. Since the early 2000s, Brazil’s exports to China surged from approximately USD 11.6 billion in 2005 to USD 64.2 billion in 2019, driven by complementary economic structures and strategic partnerships. Brazil’s exports to China have increased substantially over recent years, with exports reaching nearly USD 105 billion by 2023, reflecting a strong upward trend since 2005 (Statista, 2024). The Centro Brasileiro de Relações Internacionais (CEBRI) policy paper highlights that Brazil has posted trade surpluses with China in 17 of the last 20 years, with exports growing steadily, particularly in commodities like iron ore, soybeans, and crude oil, which accounted for around 80% of Brazilian exports to China in recent years (CEBRI, 2022).

This success was supported by preferential trade agreements such as the China-Brazil Bilateral Investment Agreement (2015) and the Economic and Trade Cooperation Agreement, which reduced trade barriers and enhanced market access. With this success, joint ventures such as Petrobras’s collaboration with Chinese oil companies and Embraer’s partnership with COMAC demonstrate how targeted investment projects and technology sharing can generate mutual benefits. This case highlights how tailored trade agreements combined with strategic industry collaboration can yield exceptional outcomes beyond general regional trends.

Similarly, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented in 1994 between Canada, Mexico, and the United States, is a classic example of a successful FTA that increased trade, promoted investment, and created jobs across the three countries (FasterCapital, 2024). NAFTA’s comprehensive tariff eliminations and regulatory cooperation facilitated the integration of supply chains, particularly in manufacturing and agriculture, fostering economic growth and competitiveness in the region. The agreement’s success lies in its ability to harmonize policies and reduce trade frictions, enabling businesses to leverage comparative advantages effectively.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopts a descriptive research design combined with a mixed-methods approach and the

positive deviance (PD) approach. The descriptive research design simply explains the dynamics of a situation or condition using the scientific method of enquiry. It aims to answer questions such as where, when, and how instead of focusing on the why. It shows an individual's profile, events, or situation, drawing from techniques such as surveys as well as content analysis of research reports. Instead of manipulating the variables, this method simply observes and reports the result as observed from the data. The method has been employed in studies where research topics are nascent before conducting further exploratory studies (Scribbr, 2023; Enago, 2025; Dovetail, 2023). The mixed methods, on the other hand, use a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches for comprehensive analysis.

This study also employed the PD approach, referred to as an asset-based improvement approach. The main thesis of this approach is the assumption that to solve a problem, the solution already exists within communities; thus, identifying, understanding, and sharing these solutions enables improvements at scale (Baxter & Lawton, 2022). Originating from a behavioral science background, the PD approach is defined as an innovative problem-solving technique that spots and learns from persons, groups, institutions domiciled inside a community who succeed in spite of any prevailing challenges despite having access to similar resources and constraints as others (O'Malley et al., 2022). PD research usually asks this question: What are the successful factors driving change in the PD population, and how can we scale this success?

This approach has been used in several practical research including in the health sector. For instance, O'Malley et al. (2022) in their research attempted to explore how the PD approach has been used in the field of medicine, especially in primary care, and reported on the findings. It was noted that from the 27 studies reviewed, the focus was on identifying positive deviants, those performing particularly well, while finding out what aided them in such performance. The finding has been used to improve primary care in several settings. Other sectors PD has been applied to include studies on social welfare (Mette & Anna, 2024), agriculture and gender relations (Bullock et al., 2025), and international development (Gizaw et al., 2023).

Generally, PD approaches have some distinguishing features from non-PD approaches. First, there is the identification of deviants. This involves identifying individuals or groups who succeed where others fail, even without additional resources (Foster et al., 2021). Second, there is the discovery of uncommon practices**.** This involves observing and understanding the unique behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs that enable these positive outcomes. These might be practical, innovative solutions or specific processes. The PD approach contrasts with traditional methods that often focus on identifying risk factors or what is going wrong. Instead, it supports the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative methodologies to understand and disseminate successful strategies. It is particularly effective for problems requiring behavioral or social change, especially those considered intractable, and when there is a suspicion that positive deviant behaviors already exist within the community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section includes discussions on the challenges militating against the full implementation of the AfCFTA agreement, the progress made thus far in implementing the AfCFTA in Africa, focusing on Nigeria, and its dive into opportunities for Nigeria and Africa if implemented successfully. It concludes with the application of the positive deviance approach, explaining or describing features of a successful FTA and lessons for the AfCFTA.

Challenges militating against its full implementation of the Agreement

Ratification and Domestication Gaps

As of 2025, several countries have not domesticated AfCFTA rules into national law. The AfCFTA stands as a transformative project for Africa's economic integration, with 48 of 55 African Union member states having ratified the agreement as of early 2025. Eritrea remains the only AU member yet to sign the agreement. Ratification signals a country's formal consent to be bound by the AfCFTA, but it is only one step in a multi-stage process required for the agreement to become effective at the national level. While ratification is widespread, domestication—the process of enacting AfCFTA rules into domestic law—lags in several countries. In dualist legal systems, such as Nigeria's, international treaties like the AfCFTA do not automatically have the force of law domestically. Instead, they require explicit legislative action to be integrated into national law. For instance, Nigeria's constitution mandates that treaties must be enacted by the National Assembly to be enforceable; without domestication, citizens and businesses cannot rely on AfCFTA provisions in national courts. Consequently, the domestication gap in several countries creates practical barriers. Countries that have not domesticated AfCFTA rules cannot fully operationalize the agreement, creating uncertainties for businesses if faced with legal issues, as AfCFTA provisions cannot be invoked or enforced domestically. At the end, the pace of intra-African trade liberalization slows, undermining the continent's integration goals.

Table 1: Number of Africa Countries that have followed the Stages of the AfCFTA Legal Lifecycle

Legal Lifecycle Stage	**Description**	**Number of Countries**	**Notes / Examples**
Signing	Expresses political intent; not legally binding	54 out of 55	The five AfCFTA Phase II Protocols on Investment, Competition Policy, and Intellectual Property Rights were adopted/signed at the AU Heads of State Summit in February 2023. The Protocols on Digital Trade and Women/Youth in Trade followed in February 2024. These require ratification by member states for entry into force, with annex negotiations ongoing. 54 AU member states have signed the principal AfCFTA Agreement; Eritrea remains the sole non-signatory. Adoption does not imply ratification or domestic implementation.
Ratification	Confirms legal commitment via legislative approval.	48 countries	48 countries had ratified by August 2024.Mozambique had already Ratified and deposited her instruments of ratification to the AUC on 5 July 2023 as the 47th, while Liberia ratified and deposited same on 31 July 2024 as the 48th state party.
Gazetting	Official publication in the national gazette, marking activation	Not precisely reported	Nigeria gazetted only the ECOWAS Tariff Schedule for AfCFTA Trade in Goods Protocol in April 2025, as a collective ECOWAS position permitted by AfCFTA using RECs as building blocks. Under Nigerian treaty law, only domesticated agreements are gazetted for public notice. No AfCFTA legal instruments have been domesticated; the principal Agreement and Phase I protocols (signed, ratified, in force) await the Draft Domestication Bill 2025 for NASS passage and presidential assent before gazetting
Domestication	Integration of AfCFTA provisions into national law. integration of binding AfCFTA provisions	At least non-confirmed	Countries are at various stages, but comprehensive data is limited

	(Agreement + Phase I Protocols on Goods, Services, DSM—signed, ratified, in force by 48 states including Nigeria) into national laws. Phase II protocols (Investment, Competition, IPR adopted Feb 2023; Digital Trade, Women/Youth Feb 2024) remain unratified. Draft Domestication Bill 2025 awaits NASS.		

Source: Author's description.

As of 2025, while the majority of African states have ratified the AfCFTA, several have yet to complete domestication, stalling the full realization of the agreement's benefits. Bridging this gap requires targeted legislative action, capacity building, and coordination among governments, regional bodies, and the private sector to ensure AfCFTA rules are embedded in national legal frameworks and become a practical reality for African businesses and citizens.

Disjointed Customs Systems

National customs procedures are fragmented, with different levels of digitalization and interoperability. National customs systems across Africa remain fragmented, characterized by varying levels of digitalization and limited interoperability, which hampers efficient trade facilitation and regional integration. Many countries still rely **on siloed customs platforms** that are not fully connected internally or with other national agencies such as tax authorities, port systems, and quarantine services. This fragmentation leads to inefficiencies, increased risk of errors, and opportunities for data manipulation.

Efforts to digitalize customs processes have seen progress in some countries, with web-based customs clearance systems gradually replacing manual, paper-based procedures. However, the pace and extent of these upgrades differ widely across the continent. For example, Nigeria has achieved about 90% digital integration in customs operations through initiatives like the B'Odogwu platform, advanced scanners, and officer training, yet it continues to advocate for broader improvements in digital infrastructure and interconnectivity across West and Central Africa. At the same time, interoperability challenges are compounded by the use of different customs management systems within regional blocs. In the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), member states employ diverse platforms such as ASYCUDA World, iCBS, and Crimson Logic, which complicates seamless data exchange. Pilot projects have shown that real-time data exchange is technically feasible, but remain hindered by legislative, data protection, and coordination issues.

On the positive side, some African ports and countries have demonstrated the benefits of integrating customs with port management and national single windows. Benin's interoperability efforts have led to a revenue increase of over 30%, while Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea have improved logistics and reduced processing times through digital platforms. At the continental level, the African Union is advancing interoperability frameworks for digital identity and data exchange, recognizing that trust, standardization, and secure data sharing are critical to transforming fragmented customs and trade systems into a cohesive digital ecosystem. The vision encompasses cross-border data flows that respect privacy and sovereignty, enabling smoother trade and integration under the AfCFTA.

Services Liberalization Lag

Trade in services is yet to pick up despite the establishment of the services protocols. Trade in services

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has yet to gain significant momentum despite the establishment of the Protocol on Trade in Services, which entered into force in 2019. The protocol aims to progressively liberalize services trade across member states, focusing on priority sectors such as business, communication, financial, tourism, and transport services. However, actual liberalization and implementation have been slow, with many countries still finalizing sector-specific commitments and aligning national laws to enable effective administration of the new rules.

Several factors contribute to this lag. Unlike trade in goods, services trade liberalization does not involve tariffs but rather requires the removal or simplification of regulatory barriers, which are often complex and vary widely across countries. The protocol incorporates special provisions for Least Developed Countries, allowing transitional periods and technical assistance, but the practical application of these measures remains unclear. Additionally, the diversity in economic development levels and regulatory environments among member states has led to staggered implementation and cautious commitments.

The slow uptake undermines the potential benefits of the AfCFTA in boosting intra-African trade, industrial development, and economic growth. The service sector is a critical enabler of Africa's growth, representing a significant share of GDP and employment, yet its productivity lags behind other regions. Accelerating the liberalization of services trade is essential to unlock new market opportunities, enhance competitiveness, and foster innovation across the continent.

Limited Private Sector Engagement

Businesses often lack awareness or the capacity to leverage AfCFTA. Limited private sector engagement in the AfCFTA is a significant challenge, largely due to businesses' lack of awareness and capacity to fully leverage the agreement's opportunities. Despite the private sector accounting for over 80% of Africa's production and providing about 90% of employment, many enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), remain insufficiently informed or prepared to engage with AfCFTA mechanisms effectively[1]. SMEs, which constitute over 90% of African businesses and employ a large share of women and youth, face barriers such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and regulatory complexities that hinder their participation in intra-African trade.

The African Union and AfCFTA Secretariat recognize the private sector as a critical driver of economic growth and have initiated public-private partnerships and strategic programs to enhance engagement. However, gaps persist in translating these efforts into widespread private sector ownership and utilization of AfCFTA benefits. Many businesses lack the capacity to navigate the complex regulatory environment and to exploit new market opportunities created by the AfCFTA, resulting in underutilization of the agreement's potential to boost intra-African trade by over 50% and increase GDP significantly.

Moreover, political and institutional challenges, such as mismatches between continental aspirations and national priorities, limited trade facilitation infrastructure, and varying institutional capacities, further constrain private sector involvement. While policies exist, there is a pressing need for tailored policies that address the unique needs of SMEs and for enhanced efforts to raise awareness and build capacity among businesses to foster inclusive participation. Strengthening partnerships with business associations and improving the dissemination of AfCFTA implementation strategies are crucial steps to create an enabling ecosystem that empowers African businesses to benefit fully from the continental market.

Overlapping REC Commitments

Dual memberships lead to incoherent tariff applications. Overlapping memberships in Regional Economic Communities (RECs) pose a significant challenge to the coherent application of tariffs under the AfCFTA. Many African countries belong simultaneously to multiple RECs, each with its own trade rules, tariff

[1] The problem is that several Africa Government are yet to sufficiently fund advocacies and capacity building for AfCFTA in their respective countries. Funding mainly comes from development partners. Key funders include AfDB, EU, World Bank, UNECA, ITC, GIZ, the former USAID, and private sector foundations.

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

schedules, and rules of origin (RoO). This multiplicity creates a "spaghetti bowl" effect (Figure 1), where conflicting and duplicative regulations increase complexity and transaction costs for traders and customs officials. For example, countries that are members of both COMESA and SADC face difficulties in determining which RoO to apply, leading to delays and inefficiencies in customs procedures. The coexistence of multiple trade regimes results in inconsistent tariff applications and undermines the AfCFTA's goal of simplifying and harmonizing trade across the continent.

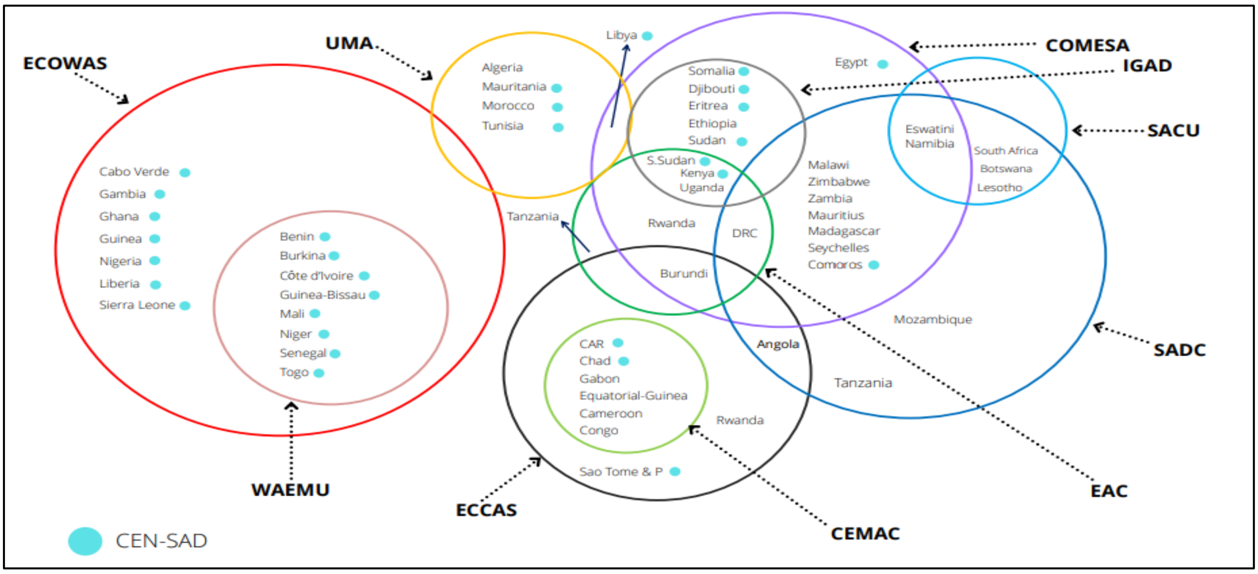


Figure 1: Regional Trade Arrangement in Africa as the 2019, Source: MacLeod, Luke and Guepie (2023, p.41)

The AfCFTA Agreement acknowledges these challenges and includes provisions, such as Article 19, aimed at managing the interface between the AfCFTA and existing RECs to promote harmonization and reduce regulatory costs. However, **weak enforcement mechanisms, institutional capacity gaps, and differing interpretations of principles like subsidiarity and complementarity among stakeholders hinder progress**. The preservation of RECs' acquis communautaire, while politically important, complicates efforts to streamline trade rules continent-wide. Furthermore, overlapping memberships can dilute member states' commitment to integration and increase administrative burdens, particularly affecting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that lack the resources to navigate complex regulatory environments. Without effective coordination and harmonization of tariffs, RoO, and customs procedures, the full potential of the AfCFTA to boost intra-African trade and economic integration remains constrained.

Slow Tariff Phase-Down

Sensitive and excluded products have delayed full liberalization. The slow tariff phase-down under the AfCFTA is primarily due to the classification of certain products as sensitive or excluded, which delays full liberalization. Member states have agreed to liberalize tariffs on 90% of goods within five years for non-Least Developed Countries (non-LDCs) and ten years for Least Developed Countries (LDCs). However, 7% of tariff lines are designated as sensitive products, requiring longer phase-down periods—up to 10 years for non-LDCs and 13 years for LDCs—and 3% of tariff lines are completely excluded from liberalization to protect sectors critical for food security, national security, fiscal revenue, and industrial development.

Six countries—Ethiopia, Madagascar, Malawi, Sudan, Zambia, and Zimbabwe—have secured an extended 15-year phase-down period due to specific development challenges they face. This extended timeline reflects the need for special and differential treatment to accommodate varying levels of economic development across the continent. The phased approach aims to balance trade liberalization with protecting vulnerable industries and ensuring socio-economic stability. However, the phased tariff reduction has contributed to delays in the full operationalization of the AfCFTA, as negotiations on rules of origin and sector-specific commitments continue, particularly for complex sectors like textiles and motor vehicles. These sectors account for about

10% of the rules of origin and have more restrictive product-specific rules, complicating tariff liberalization efforts. Furthermore, infrastructural challenges have slowed implementation.

Despite these delays, the AfCFTA Secretariat has developed complementary strategies, including the Guided Trade Initiative and trade facilitation tools, to accelerate liberalization and support intra-African trade growth. The ultimate goal remains the elimination of tariffs on 97% of goods over a phased timeline, fostering economic integration and industrialization across Africa.

Progress made thus far in implementing the AfCFTA in Africa, focusing on Nigeria

African Perspective

Progress has been made in several policy angles; however, this has barely increased trading. Figure 1 presents data by month from 2016 to 2024, January to December. The figure represents the value of imports (CIF) and exports (FOB) between African countries in U.S. dollars. Exports have surpassed imports throughout the duration, showing a stable positive balance of trade within Africa. Monthly exports between 2016 tended to range from \$5.8 billion to \$7.3 billion, while imports tended to range from \$4.1 billion to \$5.7 billion. This export surplus trend was sustained in 2017 and 2018, as trade volumes progressively increased to reflect growing trade integration on the continent. The values of exports increased to more than \$8 billion in some months by 2019, though imports were relatively lower, standing at around \$6.2 billion, confirming Africa's internal trade surplus.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted this trend in 2020 with the dramatic decline in second quarter trade volume. April 2020 saw exports decline to approximately \$4.1 billion and imports to \$3.6 billion due to supply chain constraints, lockdown effects, and muted demand. Trade accelerated by mid-2020, with volumes slowly coming back to where they were before the pandemic. Recovery accelerated in 2021, particularly the second half of it, with monthly exports crossing \$9 billion, which indicated revival of momentum in regional trade. The peak in January 2022 was a record \$14.9 billion in exports, more than double the import value of \$6.3 billion for that month. This unprecedented surge may have been driven by rising commodity prices or maybe a surge in some industries like mining, energy, or agriculture.

Intra-African trade was thriving and fairly stable in the years 2022 and 2023. Export levels consistently stayed at over \$9 billion per month, while imports ranged between \$6.5 billion and \$8.7 billion. At the end of 2023 and into 2024, exports and imports remained at strong levels, with the highest export recorded at \$11 billion in October of 2024. This points to strong and steady regional demand and supply chains, which could have been initiated by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) activation. The persistent trade surplus, whereby imports are overwhelmed by consecutive monthly exports of \$1.5–\$2.5 billion, reflects Africa's growing domestic production capability and regional economic integration potential. The surplus also talks of possibilities in improving the balance through greater intra-African sourcing of imported goods.

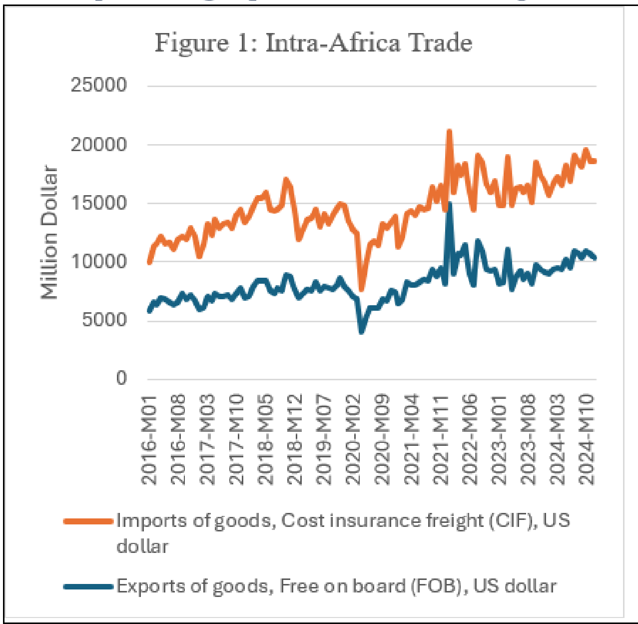
The data show Africa's trade performance—merchandise exports and imports—over the period from January 2016 to mid-2024 is presented in Figure 2. Exports (FOB, i.e., insurance and shipping excluded) and imports (CIF, i.e., freight, insurance, and costs included) of Africa capture the short-run volatility and the long-run structural impulses due to global demand, commodity prices, domestic reforms in trade, and external shocks.

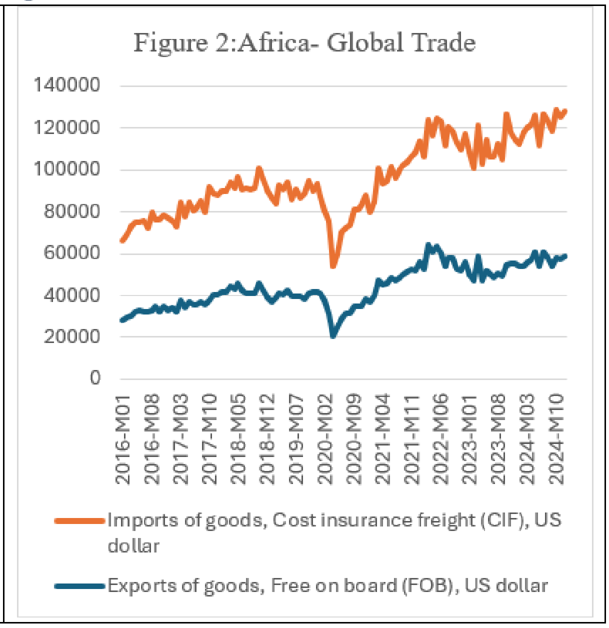
In early 2016, Africa’s exports to the World hovered just above \$28 billion monthly while imports exceeded \$37 billion, indicating a substantial trade deficit. Over time, exports also increased incrementally, passing \$40 billion towards the end of 2017 and hitting an all-time high of more than \$64 billion in February 2022. Imports, being more sensitive, also rose to a record high of more than \$72 billion in July 2023. But along the way, imports consistently outpaced exports, pointing to Africa's consistent reliance on foreign production and high import intensity for consumption and capital goods. From 2020, the trade balances show a COVID-19 trough effect, with exports and imports declining significantly between April–May 2020 to about \$21 billion in exports and \$33 billion in imports. Recovery, however, kicked in between late 2020 and early 2021, potentially driven by a rebound in commodity prices (specifically oil and minerals), improving demand in partner economies like China and Europe, and the easing of global supply chain bottlenecks. Exports by 2021–2022

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

had grown outstandingly, reaching and maintaining monthly figures of over $50 billion, showing improved performance due to enhanced prices of Africa's key exports, including oil, gold, and foodstuffs. Importation also rose, capturing the recovery in local demand for consumption and production across African economies.

In terms of intra-regional trade in Africa, while the dataset aggregates Africa's total global trade, the persistence of a trade deficit in Africa shows that intra-African trade remains underdeveloped compared to Africa's external trade. This is what the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to address through the expansion of intra-African trade, reducing external dependence, and enhancing regional value chains. Nevertheless, information up to mid-2024 indicates that regional integration and structural change need to strengthen further in order to address the persistent trade deficit. Despite increases in export value, Africa's import bill rises faster, reflecting sustained weaknesses and opportunities for building competitive manufacturing and processing capacities to substitute imports and improve trade balance.





Source: Author's Calculation from IMF International Trade in Goods (by partner country) (IMTS) Statistics

Despite the differential between intra-Africa as well as Africa-global trade as presented in preceding figures, the little improvement in trade results from several initiatives taking place in the region. These initiatives include the design of an AfCFTA Private Sector Database and the operational instrument, and the recent launch of the AfCFTA Digital Trade Forum in Lusaka, which aims at enabling e-commerce in the region through digital integration, the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS).

GTI

The Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) under the AfCFTA was launched in October 2022 as a pilot phase to enable preferential trade among a select group of African countries while key protocols such as tariff schedules and rules of origin were still being finalized. Initially, seven countries, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, and Tanzania, participated, trading a carefully chosen range of products including ceramic tiles, batteries, tea, coffee, processed meat products, corn starch, sugar, pasta, glucose syrup, dried fruits, and sisal fiber. The GTI's main objectives are to test the operational, institutional, legal, and trade policy environment of AfCFTA, demonstrate the effectiveness of its legal framework, assess private sector readiness, and identify interventions to boost intra-African trade. Since its inception, the initiative has expanded to over 30 countries, including Nigeria and South Africa, significantly broadening market access and trade opportunities. The GTI has facilitated real transactions, such as Kenya exporting batteries and tea to Ghana, and Rwanda exporting instant coffee, providing practical experience and confidence to businesses across the continent. Furthermore, the GTI is expected to evolve by incorporating trade in services in priority sectors like business, communication, financial, transport, and tourism services, thereby fast-tracking the implementation of AfCFTA commitments. This initiative represents a critical step in operationalizing the AfCFTA, promoting

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

value chain development, and advancing Africa's economic integration despite ongoing negotiations on technical trade instruments(Africa Sustainability Matters. (2025), Trade Law Centre (tralac). (2025); African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank). (2025); South Centre. (2025); Market Access Map. (2025). African Union Pan-African Payments and Settlement System (PAPSS)(2024). African Union Commission. (n.d.).)

AfCFTA Private Sector Database

The AfCFTA private sector database is a tool developed by the AfCFTA Secretariat to facilitate the matchmaking between African businesses. It aims at promoting business connections, partnerships, and collaborations among African economic operators that are interested in developing partnerships or collaboration opportunities with other commercial entities on the continent. More precisely, the platform collects data on enterprises involved or willing to engage in intra-Africa trade transactions or in other AfCFTA-related activities (ex., investments, skills training, or provision of logistics services), by sharing such data with potential business partners who voluntarily register on the platform. The purpose of the database is to help African companies create new connections, explore new markets, and promote collaboration, so as to unlock new opportunities across the continent. Companies that register must indicate the kind of opportunities they are interested in developing and the regions/countries in Africa where they are interested in developing their business. The registration in the database is completely free of charge.

Operational instrument

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) officially entered into force on May 30, 2019, with its operational phase launched at the African Union Summit in Niamey, Niger, on July 7, 2019. The operational instruments governing trade under the AfCFTA regime are fundamental to its functioning and include five key components: the Rules of Origin, tariff concessions, an online mechanism for monitoring and eliminating non-tariff barriers, the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS), and the African Trade Observatory. These instruments collectively facilitate the progressive liberalization of trade in goods and services, ensure compliance with agreed trade rules, and support the smooth conduct of cross-border trade across member states.

The Rules of Origin define the conditions under which goods qualify for preferential tariff treatment, ensuring that only products substantially produced or transformed within Africa benefit from duty-free access. Tariff concessions involve the progressive elimination of tariffs on 90% of goods over 10 years for non-least developed countries, with a 5-year transition for least developed countries, while allowing exclusions for sensitive and excluded products to protect national interests such as food security and industrialization. The online mechanism serves as a platform for tracking and resolving non-tariff barriers that hinder trade flows. PAPSS facilitates seamless cross-border payments in local currencies, reducing transaction costs and enhancing financial integration. The African Trade Observatory provides data and market intelligence to support evidence-based trade policies and business decisions.

Together, these operational instruments underpin the AfCFTA's goal to create a single continental market for goods and services, promote sustainable socio-economic development, and accelerate Africa's economic integration in line with Agenda 2063. Trading under the AfCFTA regime officially commenced on January 1, 2021, marking a new phase in intra-African trade cooperation and integration. The AfCFTA Secretariat, based in Accra, Ghana, coordinates the implementation and administration of these instruments, working with member states to ensure effective adoption and operationalization across the continent.

Nigeria's current progress and opportunities for Nigeria

From Nigeria's angle, there are a number of policy directions the country is promoting or has promoted to implement the AfCFTA agreement in-country, which is gaining traction. These actions include:

The Inauguration of the Central Coordination Committee (CCC)

In March 2025, CCC was inaugurated to streamline Nigeria's AfCFTA implementation. The CCC brings

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

together government and private sector stakeholders to harmonize efforts, ensure unified representation, and accelerate the domestication of AfCFTA protocols into national frameworks (Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment (Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment, 2025a).

Gazetting and transmission of ECOWAS Schedule of Tariff Offers

Nigeria officially gazetted and transmitted its ECOWAS Schedule of Tariff Offers to the AfCFTA Secretariat in April 2025, committing to phased tariff reductions on 90% of tariff lines. By 2025, Nigeria will have implemented a 50% tariff cut on goods traded with least developed African countries and full elimination for developing countries, enhancing export competitiveness and regional integration Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment, 2025b). It was highlighted that sectors such as **agriculture and fisheries**, which could see up to a 73% increase in trade volume under AfCFTA, while manufacturing benefits from price reductions and increased competitiveness (Focus on Africa, 2025)

Launch of AfCFTA Market Intelligence Tool and Air Corridor

Nigeria launched initiatives such as the AfCFTA Market Intelligence Tool and an air corridor to Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, reducing export costs by up to 75% and facilitating trade in textiles, cosmetics, and agro-products (FMITI, 2025; Nairametrics, 2025)

In consonance with the above development, a survey was conducted amongst the Nigerian stakeholders to understand the awareness and perception of AfCFTA, **five years post-AfCFTA implementation.** Between 20th March and 23rd June, 2025, questionnaires were sent to over 300 respondents, while 111 were retrieved. At least 34.5% of the respondents represent research/ academic institutions, 24.5% are from the private sector, this is followed by government (policy & regulation), 23.6%, as well as 17.3% from civil society (Figure 3).

As per the level of involvement in AfCFFA-related activities, it was found that 37.3% have limited knowledge but interest in the AfCFTA, at least one-third (30.9%) were indirectly involved in the development of the AfCFTA activities in the country, either in the form of consultation, research, and/or advocacy. Direct involvement in the AfCFTA and no involvement at all were the least in the entire sample of responses. Around 15.5% of the respondents were either involved in the formulation of AfCFTA policy, design of the implementation strategy, or benefited from actual trade. At least 16.4% indicated no involvement in whatsoever way.

Figure 3: Sectors represented

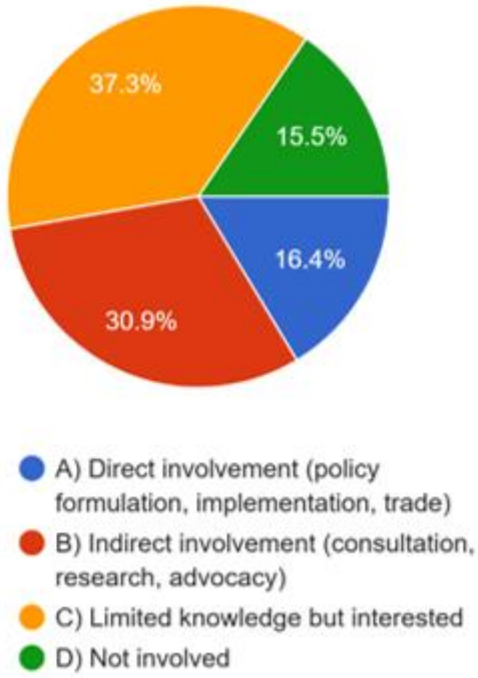


Figure 4: Level of involvement in AfCFTA-related activities

There is an increasing familiarity with the AfCFTA and its objectives, albeit most agree that their organizations have not benefited from it. As illustrated in Figure 5, at least one-third (37.3%) of the respondents noted that they were familiar with the AfCFTA and its objectives, which are to make Africa a single market. However, 29.1% have limited knowledge, 22.7% are somewhat familiar and 10.9% are not familiar with the AfCFTA and its objectives.

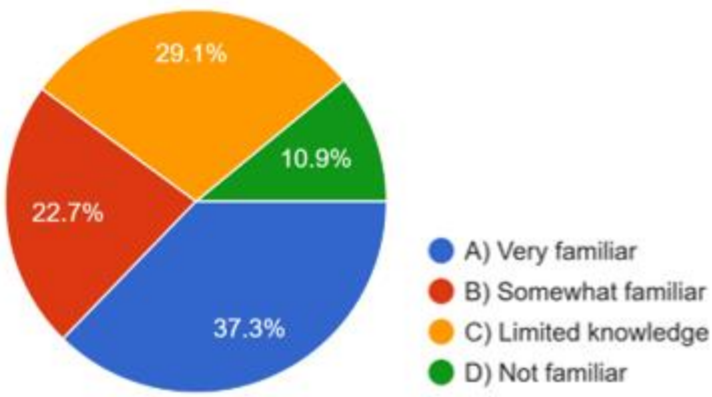


Figure 5: Familiarity with AfCFTA and its Objectives

This agrees with an earlier survey conducted in 2021, where respondents were asked a related question on familiarity with the AfCFTA. Intuitively enough, a vast majority of these firms are aware of the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) signed in 2019. The responses elicited from the respondents show that 77.8% of the respondents in the agricultural sector, 71% in the manufacturing sector, and the entire 100% of the respondent firms in the mining and quarrying sector are aware of the AfCFTA signed in 2019. Figures 3 and 4 imply that the knowledge of the AfCFTA is not a scarce commodity. Then and now, it is not expected that the knowledge and/or familiarity with the AfCFTA will have been dampened. It is expected that more and more people will be aware, given the media discussions around it.

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

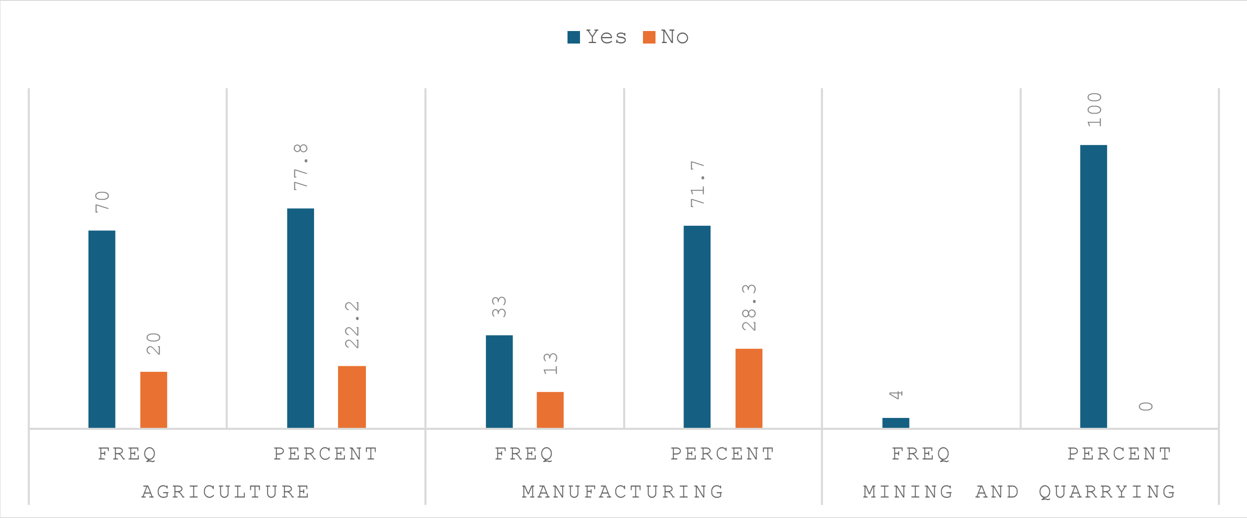


Figure 4: Knowledge of AfCFTA Signed in 2019. Source: Pre-AfCFTA Implementation Strategy Design Survey, 2022.

As per benefiting from the AfCFTA as an organization, more than half of the respondents (62.7%) said "No, they have not benefited from the AfCFTA, but are interested in opportunities". This implies organizations in Nigeria are yet to benefit from the single market agenda, albeit they are interested in benefiting from the market access the AfCFTA will create for domestically produced goods in the region. However, only 6.3% have benefited from the AfCFTA significantly, while 16.2% have benefited but with some challenges.

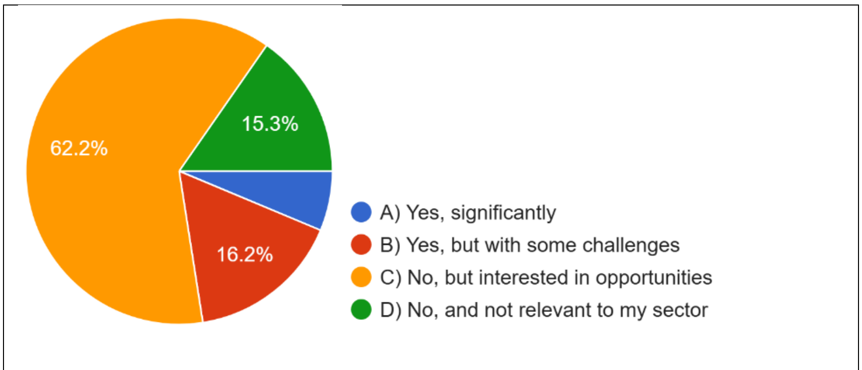


Figure 4: Benefiting from the AfCFTA as an organization

Perceptions on benefits or opportunities of the AfCFTA were positive since the last pre-AfCFTA implementation Survey in Nigeria, but the reality is different today. As noted in this pre-survey, respondent firm owners believe that the AfCFTA will have positive effects on all the components of business and economic transactions across the continent, including in Nigeria. These are more prominent for the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. In all, most of the respondent firms do not share the opinion that AfCFTA will have negative effects on their businesses (Figure 5).

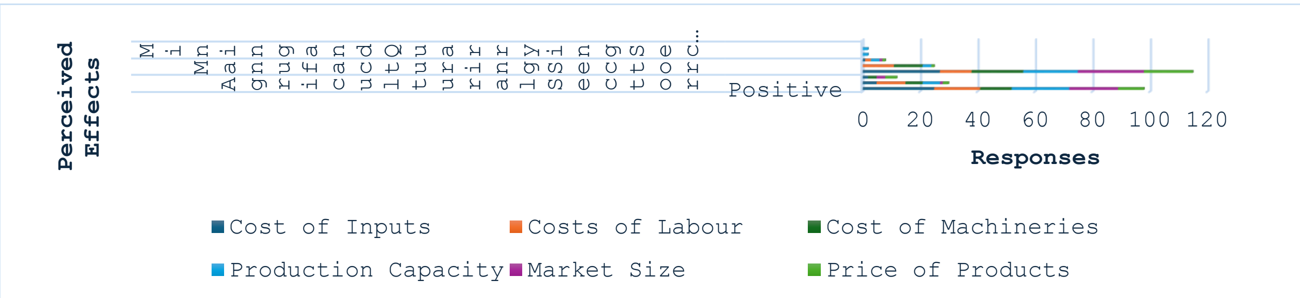


Figure 5: Perceived Effects of AfCFTA on Businesses Source: Pre-AfCFTA Implementation Strategy Design Survey, 2022.

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

As found from the pre-AfCFTA implementation survey in Nigeria, in terms of the potential opportunities of the AfCFTA to MSMEs in Nigeria, firm owners in the three major sectors are optimistic that the implementation of the AfCFTA would provide valuable opportunities to MSMEs in Nigeria. Specifically, the respondent firm owners in the three major sectors think that, once AfCFTA has been implemented in Nigeria, there would be more access to new markets and there would be an enlarged market size too. The respondent firm owners in both the agricultural and manufacturing sectors share the view that the AfCFTA would provide access to cheaper inputs and cheap labour too (Figure 6). However, only those in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors further opine that many more opportunities lie ahead of the MSMEs on the attendant implementation of the AfCFTA in Nigeria. Despite this perception, the current survey in this study shows that businesses are not benefiting from the AfCFTA but are still interested in the opportunities it creates.

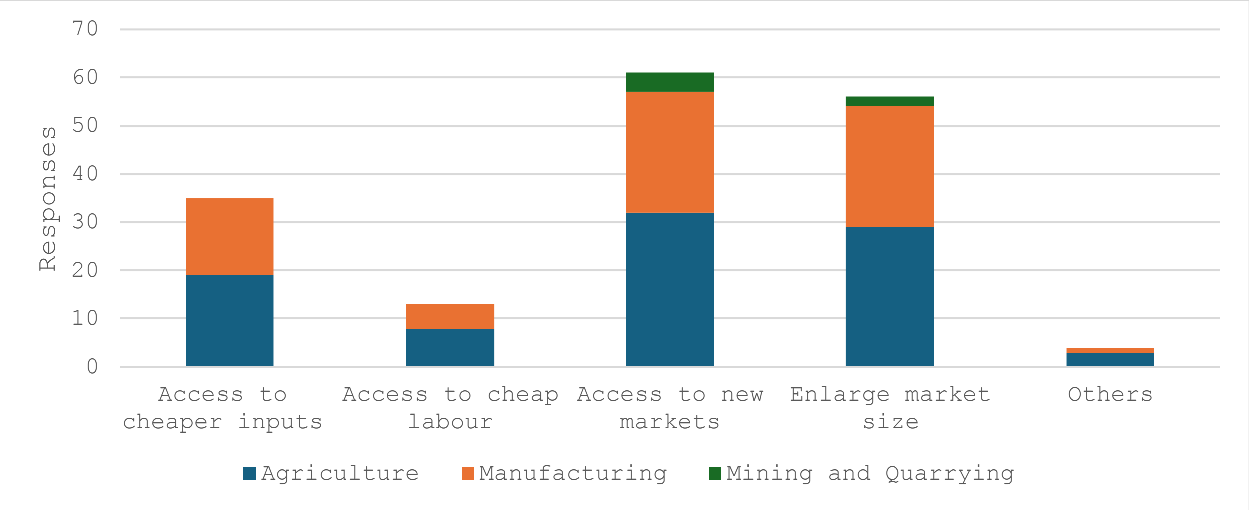


Figure 6: Major Opportunities of AfCFTA to MSMEs in Nigeria

In the last survey, the challenges faced are described as threats that would confront businesses if the AfCFTA is completely implemented in the country. As tabulated in Table 1, three major threats are prominent in the agricultural sector. These are cheaper goods in competition with local produce (38.5%), neglect of other important factors (28.0%), and an increase in foreign competition (17.1%). Similarly, these three factors have potential threats to the manufacturing sector accounting for corresponding 31.7%, 25.6% and 15.9 % respectively, while the first two threats are the major potential threats to the mining and quarrying sector accounting for 75.0% and 25% respectively (Table 2).

Table 2: Threats of African Continental Free Trade Agreements to MSMEs in Nigeria

	Agriculture		Manufacturing		Mining and Quarrying	
Threats of AfCFTA to MSMEs in Nigeria	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Cheaper goods in competition with local produce	45	38.5	26	31.7	3	75
Neglect of other important factors	28	23.9	21	25.6	1	25
Increase foreign competition	20	17.1	13	15.9		
Reduce the demand for	10	8.6	11	13.4		

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

local goods						
Promote sub-standard products and dumping	l14	11.9	11	13.4		
Total	117	100.0	82	100.0	4	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2021)

Trade policy and regulations, investment and industrial growth, Trade Facilitation, and market access for goods and services are the most relevant aspects of AfCFTA to several organizations. Figure 7 shows that at least 33% of organizations believed that the AfCFTA would improve policy and regulations. With the implementation of the AfCFTA, this is supposed to lead to the harmonization of several trade laws and policies of AU members, ensure that customs procedures in the region are aligned, while regulatory frameworks **and technical standards are unified to promote simpler and predictable regional trade (**Aliyu & Onitekun, 2024).

As reported in Figure 7, the aspect of the AfCFTA that is most relevant is the further investment and industrial growth that it will create (25.9%) and trade facilitation(14.2%), and market access for goods (18.8%). Studies agree with this thesis**.** Empirical studies and computable general equilibrium (CGE) models have shown that liberalizing trade and investment under the AfCFTA will significantly boost investment flows, catalyze technology transfer, and drive economic diversification (Fofack & Mold, 2021; Oramah, 2021; Taoufik, Oudghiri, and Jibali, 2023).

Furthermore**,** the AfCFTA is expected to remove tariffs on at least 90% of intra-African trade, reduce non-tariff barriers, and simplify customs procedures. This creates a much larger, unified African market, making it easier for organizations to access and compete in new markets for commodities and manufactured goods. Studies confirm that AfCFTA will boost intra-African exports and create new market opportunities, especially for commodities and value-added products (WJARR, 2024; Oramah, 2021).

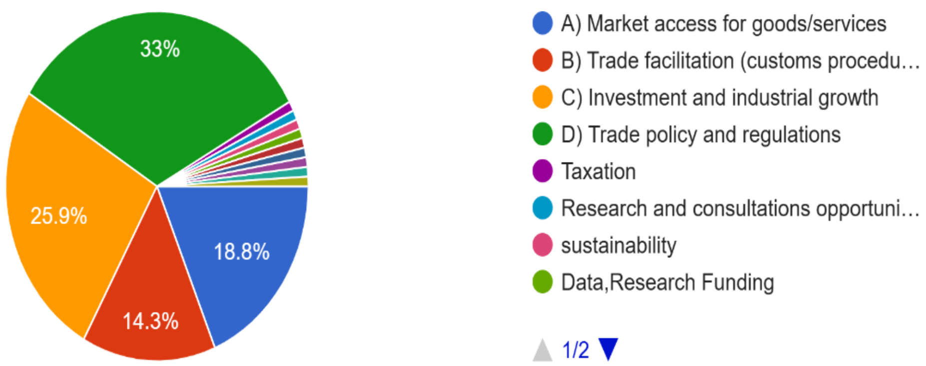


Figure 7: Most relevant Aspect of the AfCFTA to Organizations

Expansion of intra-African trade remains the biggest opportunity of the AfCFTA to Nigeria. Close to half of the respondents (48.7%) noted that the AfCFTA will create this opportunity. The AfCFTA will provide the opportunity for domestic traders to participate in the largest **market it provides.** The expansion of intra-African trade represents the biggest opportunity for Nigeria under the AfCFTA framework. In 2024, Nigeria led West Africa as the region's largest intra-African trading country, with trade reaching approximately **$18.4 billion**, more than doubling from $8.1 billion in 2023. This growth was driven primarily by crude oil exports, but there is increasing momentum in refined product exports following the commissioning of the Dangote Refinery, signaling diversification in Nigeria's trade portfolio within Africa (Afreximbank, 2025).

Despite some recent declines in Nigeria's exports to African countries, particularly in oil exports due to global market fluctuations, non-oil exports have shown resilience and growth, increasing by 11.45% in Q1 2025. Stakeholders emphasize that the future of Nigeria's intra-African trade hinges on expanding non-oil sectors, which aligns with AfCFTA's goal of boosting diversified trade and industrialization (Economic Confidential, 2025).

Experts predict that full implementation of AfCFTA could **double intra-African trade within the next decade**, offering Nigeria a vast opportunity to deepen regional integration, enhance market access, and stimulate economic growth. Nigeria, alongside other key African economies such as South Africa, Egypt, and Kenya, is considered a major driver of this intra-continental trade expansion (Afreximbank, 2025).

Academic research supports these trends, showing that the expansion of intra-African trade is positively correlated with Nigeria's long-term economic growth. The AfCFTA is expected to improve macroeconomic conditions through increased trade, job creation, investment, and poverty reduction (Aigheyisi & Iyoha, 2023).

Apart from the larger market benefit, growth in manufacturing, as well as job creation and employment growth, are other opportunities the AfCFTA will bring to Nigeria, including increased foreign direct investment. About 22.1%, 20.4% and 8,8% of the respondents made these assertions, respectively. Apart from the expansion of intra-African trade, the AfCFTA presents Nigeria with substantial opportunities for growth in manufacturing, job creation, employment growth, and increased foreign direct investment (FDI). By reducing trade barriers and expanding market access, the AfCFTA enables Nigerian manufacturers to move from dependence on commodity exports to value-added manufacturing, making the economy less vulnerable to commodity price shocks and enhancing resilience (Aigheyisi & Iyoha, 2023; World Bank, 2020). Participation in regional value chains and integration with other African economies allows Nigerian industries—such as textiles—to leverage affordable raw materials, access new technologies, and benefit from knowledge transfer, which collectively boosts competitiveness and productivity (Afreximbank, 2025).

The manufacturing sector is expected to play a pivotal role in industrialization and economic diversification, generating direct and indirect employment opportunities and stimulating other sectors of the economy. The Central Bank of Nigeria projects that the AfCFTA could create over 13 million stable jobs, particularly as Nigerian SMEs expand into other African markets and as manufacturers set up plants to take advantage of the continent's large and growing consumer base (Central Bank of Nigeria, 2023). This expansion is also likely to attract significant FDI, as foreign investors seek to tap into the unified African market and as Nigeria becomes a more attractive location for regional production hubs. The World Bank estimates that full AfCFTA implementation could increase Africa's FDI by up to 120%, with Nigeria well-positioned to benefit from this surge if it maintains reforms and macroeconomic stability (World Bank, 2020; Afreximbank, 2025).

The biggest challenges facing the Nigerian business are poor infrastructure and logistics, representing 37.2% of all challenges, limited business finance follows at 26.5%, and regulatory compliance issues (17.7%). Research shows that inadequate transport infrastructure, such as poor roads, congested ports, and weak logistics networks, significantly hamper the efficient movement of goods across borders, increasing costs and reducing competitiveness for Nigerian firms (Mustapha & Adetoye, 2020; Freetrade Nigeria, 2024). Additionally, limited access to affordable finance constrains especially micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) from scaling up production and meeting the demands of expanded intra-African markets (Freetrade Nigeria, 2024). Regulatory compliance issues, including complex customs procedures, multiple overlapping rules of origin regimes, and inconsistent trade policies, create barriers that delay shipments and increase transaction costs, further discouraging Nigerian businesses from fully leveraging AfCFTA opportunities (South Centre, 2025; Mustapha & Adetoye, 2020). These challenges are compounded by trade protectionism tendencies and political uncertainties that affect regional cooperation and market integration (Aigheyisi & Iyoha, 2023).

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

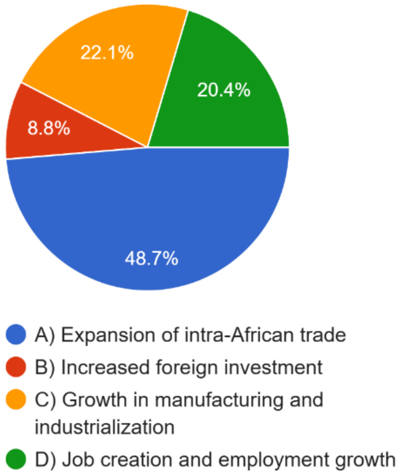


Figure 8: Biggest Opportunities of AfCFTA to Nigeria

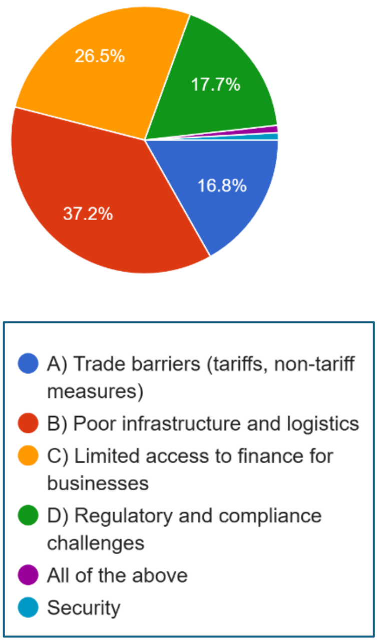


Figure 9: Biggest challenges facing Nigerian businesses under AfCFTA

Supporting trade facilitation and providing financial incentives for manufacturers are the two most important policies that will support the implementation of the AfCFTA in Nigeria. As shown in Figure 10, findings from the survey show that at least 29% and 27% made this assertion, respectively, that those policies are important. The success of the AfCFTA in Nigeria, to a large extent, depends on policy interventions specifically aimed at it. Trade facilitation remains the greatest among all since it involves simplifying, modernizing, and harmonizing export and import procedures. This implies that the reforms of institutions at the border in Nigeria, including the customs authority. Doing this will mean streamlining customs processes to make it simple, removing bureaucratic issues as well as delays at the points by upgrading the port infrastructure and transit route, and fully adopting the single window. Undertaking these changes is sacrosanct if the country must promote trade competitiveness. The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, which the AfCFTA Annex on Trade Facilitation is modelled after, serves as a checklist to measure trade facilitation in-country. This agrees with Nigeria's AfCFTA Strategy and Implementation Plan (2021), which states that"full implementation of the AfCFTA is expected to enhance intra-African trade, and more specifically intra-regional trade in manufacturing, through trade cost reduction as a result of the drop in non-tariff barriers and the use of trade facilitation measures" (PDF Nigeria, 2021).

Fiscal incentives are essential to assist Nigerian manufacturers in overcoming intensified competition and seizing new market opportunities under AfCFTA. These incentives may be in the form of tax holidays and relief to local manufacturers, subsidized credit facilities and loans to increase the availability of finance, insurance schemes and financing for exports to facilitate regional trade, and investment grants to finance capacity increase and technology improvement.

Incentives improve production, ensure quality, and promote healthy competition, especially for small and medium-scale enterprises in the AfCFTA market. Studies signal that controlling financial incentives and bringing them in line with industrial and trade policies of a country can drive economic transformation and value chain integration. Fofack (2020) observes that "policymakers need to make aligning financial sector incentives with growth and structural transformation goals a top priority to facilitate the implementation of AfCFTA reforms" (Brookings Institution, 2020).

Complementarity between trade facilitation and financial incentives leads to an enabling environment for Nigerian manufacturers to thrive under AfCFTA. Lower trade costs enable firms to export and import inputs more conveniently, while financial support enables the investment in innovation and productivity. Greater

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

competitiveness positions Nigerian products suitably in the regional market. Policy simulation analysis positions Nigeria's real income between 2.2% and 4.2% higher by 2035, depending on manufacturing exports development and improved trade infrastructure (ECDPM, 2020).

This agrees with Figure 11, that infrastructure development remains the backbone of the AfCFTA, including roads, ports, and logistics infrastructure. This is followed by supporting SMES and startups to grow and ensuring government effectiveness and the rule of law. Infrastructure development remains the backbone of the AfCFTA, and major investments need to go into port, road, and logistics infrastructure in order to unlock the trade potential of the continent. According to Antonio Pedro, deputy executive secretary for programme support at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), AfCFTA requires an estimated $411 billion worth of transport infrastructure to make intra-African trade efficient. This includes truck, rail wagon, aircraft, and ship investments that are required to reduce transport costs and boost interconnectivity across Africa's vast geography (Business Day, 2025). This shows that Nigeria will need to invest almost half of this fund, given the size of its economy.

Furthermore, the African Development Bank (AfDB) emphasizes that regional corridors and integrated transport networks are essential engines of continental integration and economic development. Investments such as the Abidjan-Lagos transnational motorway and Tabora-Kigoma railway are among the infrastructure investments that will integrate economic hubs, improve market access, and unlock underdeveloped resources. The AfDB has invested in transport corridors, roads, bridges, and border posts worth more than $13.5 billion, facilitating access and reducing trade barriers (African Development Bank, 2025). Nigeria's investment in corridors within especially the Lagos-Calabar coastal road, will boost trade.

Apart from physical infrastructure, small and medium enterprises (SME) and startup promotion are critical to leveraging the opportunities offered by the AfCFTA. The Economic Report on Africa 2025 emphasizes the need for sectoral industrial policies and investment in productive capacities to establish regional value chains, most notably in agro-processing, manufacturing, and renewable energy sectors. These services include market, technology, and finance access, which will enable SMEs to scale and have a sizable contribution to intra-African trade (Economic Commission for Africa, 2025).

Besides this, the rule of law and government effectiveness are key to the success of the AfCFTA. Trade policy convergence, elimination of non-tariff barriers, and open regulatory systems will underpin an enabling business environment. Policy convergence between regional economic communities and institution building will reduce fragmentation and facilitate enhanced free movement of goods, services, and capital (Economic Commission for Africa, 2025). Improved effective governance will also facilitate investment in infrastructure and SME development, with the aim that projects are delivered efficiently and the benefits shared fairly.

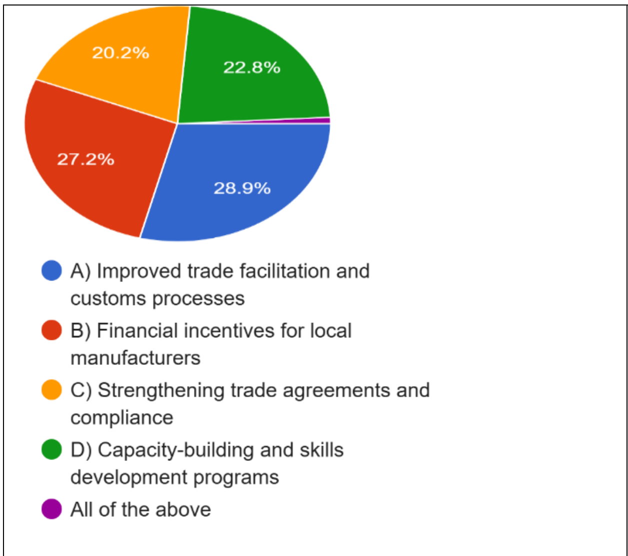


Figure 10: Government policy that will best support AfCFTA implementation in Nigeria

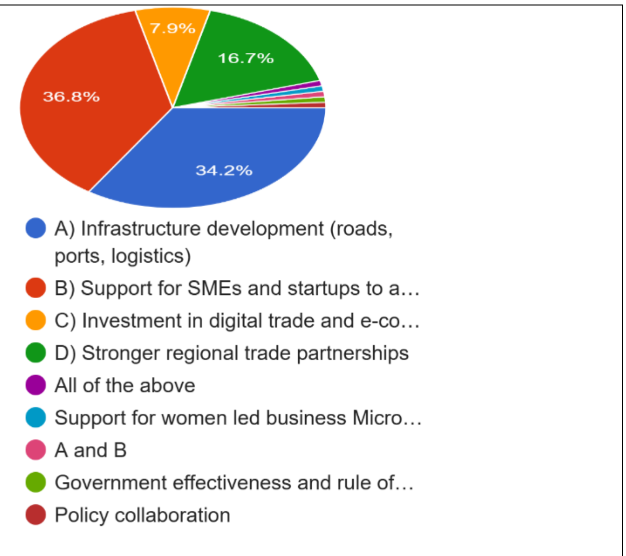


Figure 11: Interventions critical for Nigeria to maximize the AfCFTA benefits

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

Following the above requirements, around 44.7% Nigerians are cautiously optimistic that Nigeria will benefit from the AfCFTA. This means progress depends on policy improvements. Around one-fifth (21.1%) are uncertain if Nigeria will greatly benefit, given that challenges outweigh benefits, and only one-third (32.5%) are highly optimistic that Nigeria will benefit. Many still believe that for Nigeria to benefit from the AfCFTA, especially in the area of increased income and employment growth, it needs to fully implement policies that can spur the economy.

In addition, AfCTA has a future if Nigeria's private sector engages and the governments support them to do so fully through industry collaboration to access new markets, increase advocacy for trade-friendly policies, strengthen supply chains and production capacity, and technology adoption. Collaboration between the government and the private sector to promote firms in Nigeria. Nigeria's recent public reaffirmation of commitment to AfCFTA implementation is a major milestone. In April 2025, Nigeria formally came out with the list of products to be given tariff concessions under AfCFTA, signaling preparedness to phase out customs duties on intra-African trade products (Focus on Africa, 2025). This is considerable in light of Nigeria being one of the largest economies in Africa and its potential to influence broader continental trading dynamics.

Nigeria's private sector is already leveraging AfCFTA opportunities. Nigerian businesses signed over $11 billion in trade agreements at the 2023 Intra-African Trade Fair (IATF), the highest among participating countries, with Nigeria dominating intra-African trade (Zawya, 2025 and StocksNG, 2025). This is a testament to growing confidence in business and potential for more expansion with proper policies.

Government support is also essential. Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment is seriously striving towards speeding up AfCFTA implementation, focusing on trade corridors and policy regimes enabling market access and competitiveness (ThisDayLive, 2025). The Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC) identifies the necessity for structured, sustainable value chains that will drive inclusive growth at home and across the continent (StocksNG, 2025). Government-private sector collaboration can also enhance trade-friendly policy advocacy, reduce non-tariff trade barriers, and facilitate technology adoption that boosts manufacturing efficiency. Such platforms as the IATF provide critical platforms for business-to-business and business-to-government to engage, foster partnership, and innovation required for AfCFTA industrialization (CNBC Africa, 2025)

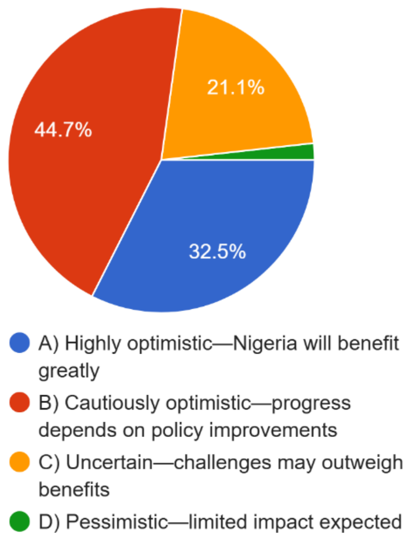


Figure 12: Outlook on Nigeria's participation in the AfCFTA in the next five years

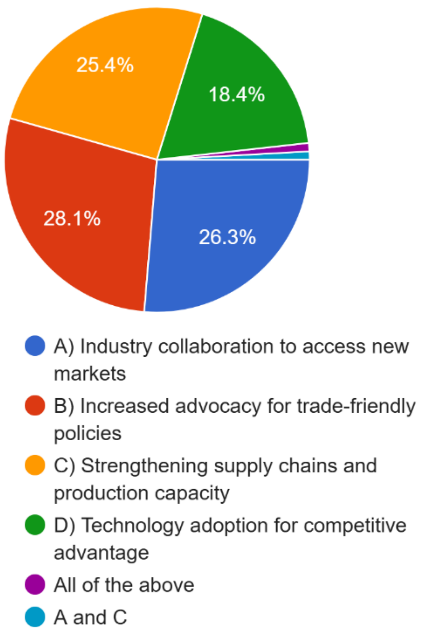


Figure 13: How Nigeria's private sector should engage more with the AfCFTA

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

Application of Positive Deviance (PD)

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the PD approach has never been applied in the field of international trade, especially in study areas such as FTA. FTAs are treaties signed between two or more countries to reduce or eliminate trade barriers among themselves, such as tariffs, quotas on importation, while offering preferential benefits on several goods and services traded between them. Applying the PD approach to studying FTAs implies examining why some FTAs succeed while others do not. Using this approach is rational enough given that there are 621 cumulative notifications of regional trade agreements (RTAs) in force as of 2025 that have been notified to the WTO under the WTO RTAs transparency mechanism. As of 2025, at least there were at least 376 cumulative number of RTAs in force, rising from 9 in 1973 (Figure 14).

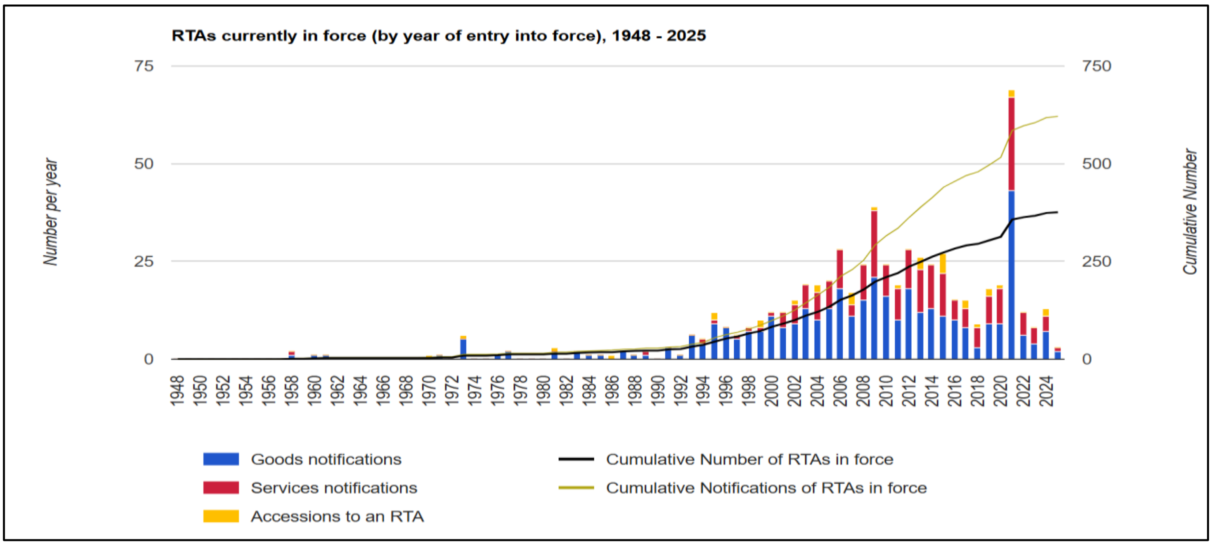


Figure 14: Annual RTA in force from 1948-2025.

Source: WTO Regional Trade Agreement Database.

By region, Europe has the highest number of RTAs notifications in force about 178 notifcations, Africa has 50 notifications and caribbeans posses 11 notifications (Figure 15).

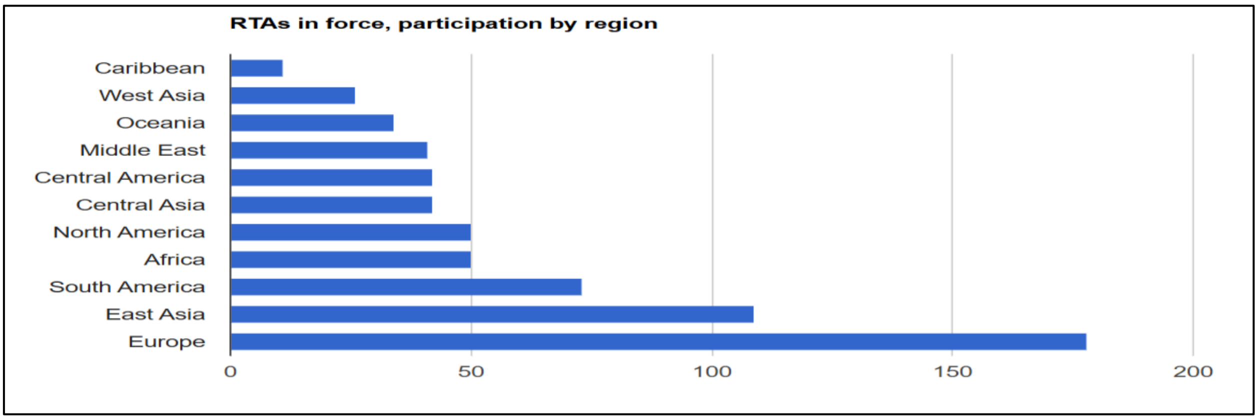


Figure 15: RTA in force, Participation by regions.

Source: WTO Regional Trade Agreement

To apply the PD approach, there is a develop a framework for identifying a PD FTA. Table 3 presents a typical matrix that describes a Free Trade Agreement (FTAs) through the view of positive deviance. In the table's horizontal axis, there is a comparison of practices that is what is common vs deviant/ what is innovative against the vertical axis which compares performance outcomes, that is struggling FTA vs exceptional FTA.

The top right part of the table presents the positive deviance which is focus of the section of the study where some FTAs perform usually well despite facing similar conditions

Table 3: A Two-by-Two Matrix of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) Through a Positive Deviance Lens

	Common FTAs (Average/Struggling Performance)	**Positive Deviant FTAs (Exceptional Performance)**
Typical Practices	Generic policy adoption Poor enforcement Weak engagement with private sector Limited institutional support	Locally tailored policy adaptations Strong enforcement and monitoring Deep private sector involvement Effective institutional frameworks
Performance Outcomes	Modest or negligible trade growth Disputes and trade frictions Social/economic inequalities persist	Significant trade growth Smooth dispute resolution Inclusive economic and social benefits

Following the PD framework, two steps will be taken to draw out lessons for Africa. First, identifying “Positive Deviants” among FTAs in the WTO Regional Trariff Database. That is, look for countries or regions where an FTA has delivered exceptional results in increasing trade, growth, or social benefits, despite similar regional challenges. The second, is to analyze what Successful FTAs did differently. Positive deviance entails examining the specific practices, local innovations, or relationship management strategies these “positive deviant” FTAs use. To do this, subsequent discussion will focus on how the FTA has effectively implemented harmonized standards and regulations, their proactive engagement with private sectors, transparent dispute resolution mechanisms, and strong institutional frameworks supporting agreements.

Choosen Positive Defiant RTA: South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area (AFTA)

Based on a number of factors, this study adopts the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Free Trade Area (AFTA) as a PD RTA. Both the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) are ambitious regional trade agreements designed to: Foster regional economic integration, Boost intra-regional trade by reducing tariffs and non-tariff barriers as well encourage investment and economic development within their respective regions. However, there are several striking similarities between both FTAs when analysed from a historical context, cultural similarities, economic and developmental similarities, and political similarities.

In terms of historical context, both regions have experienced colonialism, which has significantly impacted their cultures and political structures(Amit & Landry, 2024; While in Africa, 2019). This shared history has led to a "duality of language" (local and colonial) and other cultural residues (While in Africa, 2019). Both regions have saw natives reluctant to leave their lands, and ultimately won back their independence. Although Southeast Asia achieved this sooner than Africa (Aidan, Allison, Isheta and Loan, 2014). In the area of cultural similarities, People from Southeast Asia migrated to Madagascar over 1,000 years ago. Studies have shown that about half of the Malagasy gene pool can be traced back to Southeast Asia, particularly from Indonesia and the Philippines. The Malagasy language belongs to the Austronesian language family, which has its roots in Southeast Asia(Jones, 2023; Objective Lists, 2024).

Another similarity is the area of economics and politics. Both regions have developing industries and agriculture as major parts of their economies (Aidan, Allison, Isheta and Loan, 2014). The vast majority of people in both continents share similar development and economic challenges(Amit, & Landry, 2024). As presented in Table 4, countries in these regions have varying GDPs and GDP per capita, showing that there are

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

both decently developed and very poor (third world) countries in these areas, which means that both these regions are suffering from wide income gaps(Aidan, Allison, Isheta and Loan, 2014). Policy differences, including governance issues, explain the differential development performance between the two regions (Bernad & Henk, 2025).

Table 4: Side-by-Side Comparison: GDPs of ASEAN and Selected African Countries (2024)

ASEAN Country	**GDP (Nominal, $Bn)**	**Population (Mn)**	**GDP per Capita ($)**	**African Country**	**GDP (Nominal, $Bn)**	**Population (Mn)**	**GDP per Capita ($)**
Indonesia	1,371.2	282.0	4,862	Nigeria	668.2	220	3,037
Singapore	564.8	5.9	95,729	South Africa	410.0	60	6,833
Thailand	550.3	70.2	7,836	Egypt	347.0	110	3,155
Philippines	494.0	113.3	4,361	Algeria	269.0	45	5,978
Vietnam	476.3	100.7	4,730	Kenya	131.0	55	2,382
Malaysia	445.5	33.5	13,306	Angola	119.0	36	3,306
Myanmar	78.4	54.5	1,439	Côte d’Ivoire	95.0	29	3,276
Cambodia	33.5	17.2	1,948	Uganda	55.0	51	1,078
Brunei	18.9	0.45	42,000	Mali	23.0	24	958
Laos	16.2	7.7	2,104	Rwanda	15.0	13	1,154

Source: Source: IMF World Economic Outlook (Oct 2025), World Bank estimates. ASEAN total GDP: $4,049.1 Bn; Selected Africa: $2,132.2 Bn. GDP per capita rounded.

Politically, South/Southeast Asia and Africa have seen similar rates of political conflict (Kishi, 2015). Countries in both SSA and SEA are not fundamentally different in terms of their institutional landscape-populated by corrupt and non-democratic governments (Bernad, & Henk, 2025).

What ASEAN AFTA did differently

Despite the challenges bedeviling the ASEAN region, the **share of intra-ASEAN trade** as a percentage of the region's total trade was approximately **21.5 percent in 2023**. This figure has remained relatively stable around this level, reflecting moderate progress in regional economic integration through initiatives such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). This represents at least one-third of intra-EU trade, which is about 67 percent, and intra-Americas trade is about 46 percent (Pacific Forum, 2025). Sources confirm that ASEAN’s intra-regional trade accounts for roughly one-fifth to one-quarter of its total trade volume, illustrating both successes in integration and ongoing challenges such as non-tariff barriers, infrastructure gaps, and regulatory heterogeneity. The ASEAN Secretariat continues to work on initiatives like the ASEAN Customs Transit System and trade facilitation frameworks to improve these figures.(ASEAN, 2025; Prasetya & Imlati, 2024).

Several factors have driven this success in the ASEAN AFTA. This include the regions effective implementation of harmonized standards and regulations, been proactive in engagement with private sectors, maintaining a transparent dispute resolution mechanisms and having a strong institutional frameworks supporting.

Effective implementation of harmonized standards and regulations.

AFTA's success in harmonizing standards and regulations rests on a combination of well-designed tariff reduction schemes, robust institutional coordination, political commitment by member states, and continuous efforts to align national regulations with regional frameworks. These factors have collectively enhanced intra-ASEAN trade and competitiveness.

The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) has successfully implemented harmonized standards and regulations primarily through the **Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme**, which gradually reduced intra-ASEAN tariffs to between 0 and 5% on manufactured and processed products. This tariff reduction was complemented by systematic efforts to eliminate non-tariff barriers (NTBs), harmonize customs procedures, and establish institutional mechanisms for coordination, such as the AFTA Council and Senior Economic Officials' Meeting (SEOM) to oversee implementation (Wong, Liew, & Arip, 2020); (Chiou, 2010).

The effectiveness of AFTA in harmonizing standards is also credited to the **institutional frameworks** that ASEAN established early on. For example, the ministerial-level AFTA Council was mandated to supervise and coordinate integration efforts, which ensured that member states adhered to agreed schedules and addressed domestic challenges constructively (Chiou, 2010). Moreover, **domestic political support from member governments**—including protection for sensitive sectors via "general exceptions"—helped reconcile national priorities with regional goals, providing flexibility while maintaining commitment to deeper integration (Chiou, 2010).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that the elimination of tariffs and NTBs under AFTA has **generated significant trade creation effects among ASEAN members**, increasing manufacturing exports and imports within the region more than import diversion from non-member countries (Wong et al., 2020). Additionally, institutional efforts to **multilateralize tariff reductions and reduce preferences** helped focus the integration on supply-chain trade, where parts and components cross borders duty-free or at very low tariffs, thus promoting the harmonization of technical standards and customs practices (Pomfret, 2018).

Countries have supported the harmonization by aligning their regulatory frameworks to ASEAN-wide agreements, adopting mutual recognition arrangements and standardizing product requirements to facilitate smoother cross-border trade (Wong et al., 2020). This harmonization has been reinforced through ongoing ASEAN Economic Community initiatives aimed at facilitating trade in goods and services, reducing NTBs, and promoting cooperation in standards and conformity assessments (Paramita et al., 2023).

ASEAN member states—including Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Brunei, and Laos—have successfully implemented harmonized standards and regulations through sustained regional cooperation, institutional frameworks, and alignment with international standards, supported by capacity building and mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs). Key factors explaining this success include:

ASEAN Consultative Committee for Standards and Quality (ACCSQ)

Established in 1992, the ACCSQ is the main regional body driving standards harmonization. It coordinates setting targets and timelines, developing harmonized technical regulations, and facilitating capacity-building among member states to align national standards with ASEAN-wide agreements. It also promotes the "One Standard, One Test, Accepted Everywhere" principle via MRAs, where conformity assessment results are mutually recognized across countries to avoid repeated testing and facilitate trade (ERIA, 2013),

Adoption of ASEAN Policy Guideline on Standards and Conformance

This guideline mandates member states to harmonize national standards with relevant international ones, participate in international standard development, and reduce differences in conformity assessment procedures where full alignment is unfeasible. It also encourages cooperation among national accreditation bodies to ease MRAs implementation (ERIA, 2013).

Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs)

MRAs are formal agreements whereby member states recognize test results, certifications, and inspections issued by other member states' accredited bodies. For example, the ASEAN Sectoral MRA on Electrical and Electronic Equipment helps avoid duplication of testing and certification, enhancing the free movement of goods. This has been critical for sectors such as electronics, pharmaceuticals, and food safety (ERIA, 2013; Tri Handayani & Putri 2021).

Technical Cooperation and Capacity Building Supported by External Partners

ASEAN countries have engaged in standards cooperation with developed countries (EU, US, South Korea, etc.) that provide technical assistance and knowledge transfer, supporting regulatory convergence and enhancing productive capacities. These partnerships have helped ASEAN address technical barriers to trade and improve trade facilitation, especially in emerging areas such as digital trade and environmental standards (Tri Handayani & Putri, 2021).

Institutional Working Groups and Joint Sectoral Committees

ASEAN has formed specialized working groups dealing with standards, conformity assessment, accreditation, and legal metrology that coordinate harmonization efforts and monitor progress. These groups enhance cooperation, build confidence among regulators, and ensure post-market surveillance and transparency, which underpin market integration (ERIA, 2013).

National Commitment and Flexibility

Member states support harmonization by aligning their national standards with agreed ASEAN frameworks while retaining flexibility for legitimate national interests or sensitive sectors. This pragmatic approach balances regional integration goals with domestic political and economic realities, fostering stronger ownership and compliance (ERIA, 2013).

Proactive engagement with private sectors.

ASEAN AFTA has been proactive in engaging the private sector through multiple mechanisms that foster dialogue, collaboration, and mutual feedback between governments and businesses. ASEAN recognizes that the private sector is a critical partner for effective trade facilitation and regional economic Are finance gaps and customs procedures, creating a more business-friendly environment (WTO, 2013).

Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns:

ASEAN-led campaigns like "Doing Business in Free Trade Areas" seek to raise awareness among micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) about the benefits and utilization of FTAs. This recognizes private sector diversity and addresses information asymmetries that may otherwise limit FTA usage (IISD, 2014).

National Trade Facilitation Committees:

Most ASEAN Member States have established national committees or equivalents that consult with the private sector regularly or as needed. Such committees provide dynamism to reforms by incorporating technically competent private sector input, improving legislation and trade facilitation systems (ERIA, 2021).

Transparent dispute resolution mechanisms

ASEAN AFTA's dispute resolution mechanisms provide a transparent, structured pathway emphasizing

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

amicable resolution supported by clear rules, institutional frameworks, and respect for the parties' prerogatives, while balancing regional cultural and political sensitivities. AFTA has established **transparent dispute resolution mechanisms** aimed at ensuring fair, efficient, and amicable settlement of trade disputes between member states. The framework primarily emphasizes consultations, mediation, and arbitration while respecting ASEAN's principles of consensus-building and non-confrontation.

Multi-tiered Dispute Settlement Process:

AFTA's dispute resolution begins with mandatory **consultations** between disputing parties to amicably resolve issues without escalating to formal proceedings (UNCTAD, 2021). If consultations fail, parties may proceed to **mediation or conciliation** facilitated by bodies like the ASEAN Secretariat or specialized committees. Arbitration is the last resort, governed by agreed procedural rules to guarantee due process and impartiality (Ke, 2023).

ASEAN Protocol on Enhanced Dispute Settlement Mechanism (2004):

This Protocol codifies the rules, procedures, and institutional arrangements for dispute resolution, assuring parties of **predictability, transparency, and fairness**. It applies broadly to disputes arising under ASEAN agreements, including AFTA. The Protocol allows parties to select arbitration panels from rosters of qualified arbitrators and provides for appointing an impartial chairman by an external authority (UNCTAD, 2021; Mingjiang, 2015). It also maintains confidentiality, encourages voluntary settlement, and sets strict timelines to prevent undue delays.

Institutional Support and Independence:

ASEAN has established mechanisms such as the **High Council** and the **AFTA Council**, along with ministerial and senior official meetings to oversee dispute resolution. While ASEAN traditionally emphasizes consensus and avoids compulsory enforcement, these bodies facilitate transparency through documented proceedings, clear timelines, and public reporting on outcomes (UNCTAD, 2021; Jus Mundi, 2022).

Respect for Party Autonomy and Cultural Considerations:

The dispute resolution process respects the parties' autonomy, including choice of venue and method. Given ASEAN's diverse cultural and political context, there is an emphasis on **dialogue, mediation, and allowing political solutions** before resorting to binding arbitration, reinforcing regional norms of harmony (Ke, 2023; UNCTAD, 2021).

Challenges and Reforms:

Scholars observe that while the dispute mechanism promotes transparency, the absence of a **permanent standing tribunal** and limited enforcement powers can prolong dispute resolution and affect credibility (Mingjiang, 2015). Proposals to enhance transparency include establishing a permanent arbitration body and clearer institutional mandates to oversee procedures impartially (Qingqing & Lili, 2012).

What Explains the Faster Progress of AFTA Compared to AfCFTA?

Why AFTA Implementation Was Faster Than AfCFTA

The ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) was implemented faster than the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) due to several interrelated factors rooted in ASEAN's early start, strong institutional mechanisms, pragmatic phased implementation, and political-economic environment:

Early and Clear Phased Timetable

AFTA was officially launched on **January 1, 1993**, with member countries agreeing to reduce tariffs gradually over a **15-year period** through the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) scheme, later accelerated and sometimes shortened to 10 years for earlier realization (ITCILO, nd). This clear, structured, and binding timeline gave ASEAN members a concrete roadmap and accountability framework. In contrast, AfCFTA, launched only in **2021**, deals with a more complex and larger continent-wide integration with phased tariff eliminations expected over a longer period (UNECA, 2020).

Smaller and More Homogeneous Group of Member States

ASEAN started with six countries with relatively closer geographic proximity, economic ties, and more similar development levels, easing coordination and reducing negotiation complexities. AfCFTA covers 55 countries with significant differences in economic development, infrastructure, and political situations, making consensus building slower and challenging.

Strong Institutional Framework and Active Oversight

AFTA benefits from an established institutional framework comprising the **AFTA Council**, ASEAN Economic Ministers, and the ASEAN Secretariat, which actively coordinate, monitor progress, address bottlenecks, and facilitate dispute resolution (WTO,2024; WorldTradeLaw, nd). ASEAN developed these mechanisms alongside implementation, ensuring continuous oversight. AfCFTA institutions are newer, still evolving, with limited enforcement capacity compared to ASEAN's decades-old structures (UNECA, 2020).

Political Will and Economic Integration Experience+

ASEAN members exhibited strong political commitment early on, motivated by the desire to create a competitive production base and attract investment. Several ASEAN countries had prior experience with preferential trade arrangements, facilitating faster harmonization (ERIA, 2023). African countries face more diverse political systems and varying levels of commitment, affecting uniform implementation.

Supportive Legal Frameworks and Trade Facilitation

ASEAN evolved its legal framework from CEPT to the **ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA)** in 2010, which enhanced implementation with rules on tariff elimination, non-tariff barriers, and trade facilitation (MITI, 2025). The clear legal foundation helped ASEAN member states align regulations and reduce barriers rapidly. AfCFTA legal frameworks are recently adopted, with many supporting protocols still under negotiation or implementation.

Incremental Enlargement and Flexible Timeframes for New Members

ASEAN allowed late joiners (Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia) longer periods to comply with tariff reductions, ensuring inclusiveness without jeopardizing the overall pace. AfCFTA similarly phases integration but faces greater heterogeneity and larger scale, naturally slowing implementation.

Policy Recommendation

For Nigeria

Based on the findings from this study, the following recommendations categorized into **short-term**, **medium-term**, and **long-term** is necessary to improve the next phase of AfCFTA implementation in Nigeria:

a. Short-term Recommendations (within 1-2 years)

- **Fully Implement the National Single Window System (NSW):** Expedite the establishment of a National Single Window Authority to streamline trade documentation and customs processes, reduce red tape, and improve transparency.

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

- **Enhance Awareness and Capacity Building:** Although several awareness campaigns have taken place, however, there is a need to intensify targeted awareness campaigns and training programs for businesses, especially MSMEs, to increase knowledge and direct engagement with AfCFTA.
- **Enhance Capacity of Trade Agencies:** Provide targeted training for staff in key trade agencies on trade policy formulation, rules of origin, and international trade law to improve implementation effectiveness.
- **Address Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs):** Implement mechanisms to identify and reduce NTBs such as licensing and technical standards through technology and inter-agency cooperation.
- **Strengthen Private Sector Engagement:** Foster stronger collaboration platforms between government and private sector actors to integrate business concerns and opportunities into AfCFTA strategies.

b. Medium-term Recommendations (2-5 years)

- **Strengthen Trade Infrastructure and Logistics:** Improve transport networks, ports, and warehousing facilities to reduce trade costs and enhance Nigeria's competitiveness in regional trade.
- **Formalize and Support MSMEs:** Simplify business registration, increase awareness, and link formalization to access to finance and export opportunities to enable MSMEs to benefit from AfCFTA.
- **Promote Trade Facilitation and Dispute Resolution:** Establish one-stop border posts and digital customs solutions; develop accessible trade dispute arbitration panels for businesses, especially MSMEs.
- **Strengthen Quality Infrastructure and Standards:** Accelerate implementation of the National Quality Policy and promote accreditation of testing laboratories to improve product competitiveness.
- **Harmonize Trade Policies and Regulations:** Accelerate alignment of Nigeria's trade laws, customs procedures, and technical standards with AfCFTA protocols and regional economic communities.

c. Long-term Recommendations (5+ years)

- **Develop Trade Defense Mechanisms:** Establish and empower a Trade Defense Department to monitor dumping and unfair trade practices; expedite relevant legislation to protect local industries.
- **Foster Regional Integration and Cooperation:** Deepen collaboration with ECOWAS and other RECs by developing joint customs transit schemes, one-stop border posts, and harmonizing trade policies.
- **Prioritize Product and Service Sectors for Export:** Identify and support sectors with high export potential (e.g., telecommunications, financial services, creative industries) with targeted incentives.
- **Implement Fiscal and Financial Incentives:** Offer tax reliefs, subsidized credit, export financing, and grants for technology adoption to help manufacturers compete in the AfCFTA market.
- **Promote Industrial Diversification and Value Chain Development:** Encourage diversification beyond commodities into manufacturing and services, fostering regional value chains that create employment.
- **Strengthen Institutional Coordination and Governance:** Establish a dedicated AfCFTA coordination unit with clear mandates to ensure coherent policy execution and monitoring.

(a) For AU and AfCFTA Secretariat.

The following recommendations can improve AfCFTA based on Positive Deviance and AFTA Successes:

1. **Strengthen Institutional Capacity with Regional Decentralization**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN's strong institutional framework with empowered councils and a Secretariat that actively monitors and coordinates integration has been critical to AFTA's progress.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA should decentralize its Secretariat's functions closer to Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to enhance responsiveness and ownership while strengthening its legal personality and enforcement capacity. This can reduce silo mentalities and enable tailored support reflecting regional specificities within Africa.

2. **Implement Clear and Realistic Phased Timelines**

- Positive deviance insight: AFTA's success partly stemmed from a clear phased tariff reduction schedule (CEPT) with defined deadlines and flexibility for new or less developed members.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA should establish similarly detailed, phased implementation timelines, allowing for flexibility but anchoring accountability, especially for tariff liberalization, NTB removal, and standards harmonization to maintain progress and incentivize compliance.

3. **Enhance Harmonization of Technical Standards and Mutual Recognition**

- Positive deviance insight: AFTA benefited from mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs) and harmonized standards, which reduced technical barriers and built trust among members.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA should prioritize harmonization of product standards and conformity assessments, learning from ASEAN's sectoral MRAs, to overcome current disparities that hinder trade and reduce costly duplication of testing and certification processes.

4. **Promote Robust Public-Private Dialogue and Private Sector Involvement**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN's inclusion of private sector stakeholders in policymaking helped address practical business concerns and increase FTA utilization.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA should institutionalize multi-level public-private platforms to improve awareness, tackle challenges like customs inefficiencies and NTBs, and align policies with private sector needs, including MSMEs and cross-border traders.

5. **Invest Strategically in Critical Infrastructure and Trade Facilitation Tools**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN's implementation of the ASEAN Single Window and investment in transport infrastructure facilitated faster customs procedures and logistics.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA needs coordinated investments, especially in digital trade facilitation platforms (e.g., African Single Window), road and rail networks, and energy supply, leveraging private sector financing through liberalization to address the persistent infrastructure deficit that inflates trade costs.

6. **Address Currency and Payment Barriers Through Regional Financial Integration**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN countries benefit from regional financial cooperation and currency stability that ease cross-border trade.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA members should accelerate efforts toward financial integration, including harmonizing currency exchange mechanisms, promoting the use of common digital payment platforms, and considering regional currency initiatives to reduce transaction costs and volatility.

7. **Establish Transparent and Binding Dispute Resolution Mechanisms**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN's dispute settlement procedures, though consensus-based, have clear protocols; stronger enforcement and impartial arbitration have helped maintain confidence.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA should operationalize and publicize its dispute settlement body with binding procedural rules, timely resolution, and transparency, drawing on best practices from ASEAN and WTO frameworks to increase trust in the system.

8. **Build Political Will through Awareness, Inclusivity, and Incentives**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN gradually built political buy-in by demonstrating economic benefits, including raising awareness in smaller member states.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA must enhance awareness campaigns targeting government officials, traders, and civil society—especially women and youth—and design incentive structures to offset perceived revenue losses and encourage uniform adoption.

9. **Manage Overlapping Regional Economic Communities (RECs) for Coherent Integration**

- Positive deviance insight: ASEAN involves a relatively integrated bloc without complex overlapping memberships, enabling clearer coordination.
- **Recommendation:** AfCFTA should develop protocols clarifying the interface with RECs, possibly through formalized roles for existing RTAs, to avoid fragmentation and duplication of efforts, promoting coherence in policies and institutional frameworks.

REFERENCES

1. Afreximbank. (2025, June 26). Full implementation of Free Trade Agreement to double intra-African trade by 2035. Nairametrics. https://nairametrics.com/2025/06/26/full-implementation-of-free-trade-agreement-to-double-intra-african-trade-by-2035-afreximbank-president/
2. Afreximbank. (2025, June 26). Nigeria tops West Africa in intra-African trade with $18.4 billion in 2024. Nairametrics. https://nairametrics.com/2025/06/26/nigeria-tops-west-africa-in-intra-african-trade-with-18-4-billion-in-2024-afreximbank/
3. Africa Sustainability Matters. (2025). Economic report on Africa 2025: Advancing the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). https://africasustainabilitymatters.com/economic-report-on-africa-2025-advancing-the-implementation-of-the-african-continental-free-trade-areaafcfta/
4. African Development Bank. (2025, May 14). 2025 Annual Meetings: Regional corridors as drivers of continental integration. African Development Bank Group. https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/2025-annual-meetings-regional-corridors-drivers-continental-integration-81924
5. African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank). (2025). Ghana accelerates efforts to boost intra-African trade. https://www.afreximbank.com/ghana-accelerates-efforts-to-boost-intra-african-trade/
6. African Union Commission. (n.d.). African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). https://au.int/en/african-continental-free-trade-area
7. African Union Pan-African Payments and Settlement System (PAPSS). (2024, September 19). Significant progress in AfCFTA implementation highlighted at conference. https://pap.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2024-09-19/significant-progress-afcfta-implementation-highlighted-conference-s
8. AfriPoli. (2024). Trade infrastructure financing in Africa: an exploration of geopolitical funds for private sector participation. https://afripoli.org/trade-infrastructure-financing-in-africa-an-exploration-of-geopolitical-funds-for-private-sector-participation

9. Aigheyisi, O. S., & Iyoha, M. A. (2023). Implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area for Nigeria's economic growth. Central Bank of Nigeria Research Department. https://www.cbn.gov.ng/Out/2023/RSD/Implications%20of%20the%20African%20Continental%20Free%20Trade%20Area.pdf
10. ASEAN Secretariat. (2004). ASEAN Protocol on Enhanced Dispute Settlement Mechanism. https://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20141217102933.pdf
11. Asia Law. (1997). Open Regionalism and Deeper Integration in ASEAN. https://asialaw.tripod.com/articles/lawanasean4.html
12. Benachenhou, A. (1983). South-South Cooperation: The Lagos Plan of Action and Africa's Independence. Africa Development / Afrique et Développement, 8(4), 5–19.
13. Business Day. (2025, March 18). AfCFTA needs $411bn for transport infrastructure to boost trade, says UN. https://businessday.ng/maritime/article/afcfta-needs-411bn-for-transport-infrastructure-to-boost-trade-says-un/
14. Central Bank of Nigeria. (2023). Implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area for Nigeria's economic growth. https://www.cbn.gov.ng/Out/2023/RSD/Implications%20of%20the%20African%20Continental%20Free%20Trade%20Area.pdf
15. Chiou, Y.-H. (2010). A two-level-games analysis of AFTA agreements. Journal of Contemporary Asia, 29(1), 1-23. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/186810341002900102
16. Chukwubuikem, J.S., Chinedu, A.O., & Queen, O.A. (2021). Weak Institutions and Poor Governance in Nigeria: A Socio-legal Perspective. Africa Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration, 4(2), 61–70.
17. CNBC Africa. (2025, July 1). Nigeria hosts IATF 2025 business roadshow. https://www.cnbcafrica.com/media/7751375787451/nigeria-hosts-iatf-2025-business-roadshow/
18. ECA. (n.d.). History of Africa's Regional Integration Efforts | United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Retrieved February 2, 2025, from https://archive.uneca.org/oria/pages/history-africa%E2%80%99s-regional-integration-efforts
19. ECDPM. (2020). The promise of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Retrieved from https://ecdpm.org/download_file/161/1116
20. Economic Commission for Africa. (2025, April 25). ERA 2025: With effective implementation, the AfCFTA can open alternative markets to sectors. https://www.uneca.org/stories/era-2025-with-effective-implementation,-the-afcfta-can-open-alternative-markets-to-sectors
21. Economic Commission for Africa. (2025, March 17). AfCFTA benefits will be across sectors – Economic Report on Africa 2025. https://www.uneca.org/stories/afcfta-benefits-will-be-across-sectors-%E2%80%93-economic-report-on-africa-2025
22. Economic Confidential. (2025, June 27). Nigeria's exports to African countries decline by N631.5bn. https://economicconfidential.com/2025/06/nigeria-exports-decline/
23. ERIA. (2013). Standards Harmonisation in ASEAN: Progress, Challenges and Way Forward. ERIA Discussion Paper No. 2013-30. https://www.eria.org/ERIA-DP-2013-30.pdf
24. ERIA. (2021). Towards Seamless Trade Facilitation in ASEAN. Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/Research-Project-Report/2021-08-Towards-Seamless-Trade-Facilitation-ASEAN/6_Ch.1-Summary-Report.pdf
25. ERIA. (2023). ASEAN's Initiatives for Free Trade in East Asia under AEC. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24761028.2021.1902068
26. Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment. (2025, May 27). FG inaugurates AfCFTA tool to strengthen trade competitiveness. https://nannews.ng/2025/05/27/fg-inaugurates-afcfta-tool-to-strengthen-trade-competitiveness/
27. Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment. (2025a). Nigeria advances commitment to AfCFTA with inauguration of central coordination committee. https://fmino.gov.ng/nigeria-advances-commitment-to-afcfta-with-inauguration-of-central-coordination-committee/
28. Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment. (2025b). Nigeria signs ECOWAS tariff offer: Advancing AfCFTA implementation. https://www.frontierafricareports.com/article/nigeria-signs-ecowas-tariff-offer-advancing-afcfta

29. Focus on Africa. (2025, April 19). Nigeria breakthrough in African trade with African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) implementation. https://www.focusonafrica.info/nigeria-breakthrough-in-african-trade-with-african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-implementation/
30. Fofack, H. (2020). Making the AfCFTA work for 'The Africa We Want'. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/20.12.28-AfCFTA_Fofack.pdf
31. Fofack, H., & Mold, A. (2021). The AfCFTA and African Trade—An Introduction to the Special Issue. Journal of African Trade, 8(2), 1–11. https://jat.afreximbank.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=journal
32. Freetrade Nigeria. (2024). Nigeria in the AfCFTA: Opportunities and challenges. https://freetradenigeria.com/nigeria-in-the-afcfta-opportunities-and-challenges/
33. IISD. (2014). Maximizing the Utilization of ASEAN-Led Free Trade Agreements. International Institute for Sustainable Development. https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/tkn_maximizing_asean.pdf
34. International Training Centre of the ILO (ITCILO). (n.d.). Timeline and Mechanism of AFTA Implementation. https://training.itcilo.org/actrav_cdrom1/english/global/blokit/afta.htm
35. John, M. (2022). Understanding the Complex Interplay of Governance, Systematic, and Structural Factors Affecting Service Delivery in South African Municipalities. Commonwealth Youth and Development, 20(2), 28. https://doi.org/10.25159/1727-7140/12230
36. Jus Mundi. (2022). The ASEAN Protocol on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms – An appraisal. https://jusmundi.com/en/document/publication/en-the-asean-protocol-on-dispute-settlement-mechanisms-an-appraisal
37. Karunanidhi, R. (2011). Developing Africa: Trade barriers, liberalization and inequality in the World Trade Organisation. African Journal of Business Management, 5(22), 8686–8696.
38. Ke, W. (2023). Evaluation of dispute resolution mechanism of China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. Pakistan Journal of Law and Social Sciences, 21(1), 2492-2504. https://www.pjlss.edu.pk/pdf_files/2025_1/2492-2504.pdf
39. Magu, S. M. (2023). Introduction—Africa's Regional Economic Communities (RECs). In S. M. Magu (Ed.), Towards Pan-Africanism: Africa's Cooperation through Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Ubuntu and Communitarianism (pp. 1–17). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8944-5_1
40. Market Access Map. (2025). African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). https://www.macmap.org/en/learn/afcfta
41. MDPI. (2023). The Impact of AfCFTA on Welfare and Trade: Nigeria and South Africa. Sustainability, 15(6), 5090. Retrieved from https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/6/5090
42. Mingjiang, L. (2015). Problems with the ASEAN Free Trade Area dispute settlement mechanism. Journal of World Trade, 49(2), 251-273. https://kluwerlawonline.com/journalarticle/Journal+of+World+Trade/49.2/TRAD2015012
43. Ministry of International Trade and Industry Malaysia (MITI). (2025). ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). https://fta.miti.gov.my/index.php/pages/view/asean-afta
44. Mustapha, A. H., & Adetoye, D. (2020). Nigeria and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement Area (AfCFTA): Issues, challenges and prospects. Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 7(2), 1-15. https://journals.scholarpublishing.org/index.php/ASSRJ/article/download/7698/4814/19460
45. Nairametrics. (2025, May 26). Nigeria opens AfCFTA air corridor to Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, cutting export costs by up to 75%. https://nairametrics.com/2025/05/26/nigeria-opens-afcfta-air-corridor-to-kenya-uganda-south-africa-cutting-export-costs-by-up-to-75/
46. National Bureau of Statistics (2024) Foreign Trade Data
47. Nigeria AfCFTA Readiness Report. (2019). Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)—Impact and Readiness Asseement. https://www.nipc.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20210125-AfCFTA_Impact-and-Readiness-Assessment-Report_Exec-Summary.pdf
48. Nigeria's AfCFTA Strategy and Implementation Plan. (2021). PDF Nigeria. Retrieved from https://www.pdfnigeria.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210302AfCFTA-Implementation-Strategy-and-Plan-Final-007-MITI-NAC-JU-vs-0.1.pdf

49. Oramah, B. (2021). Afreximbank in the Era of the AfCFTA. Journal of African Trade, 8(2), 24–35. https://jat.afreximbank.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1042&context=journal
50. Paramita, G. L. et al. (2023). ASEAN's initiatives for free trade in East Asia under AEC. Asia Pacific Journal of Business and Local Economy, 12(4), 45–62. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24761028.2021.1902068
51. Pomfret, R. (2018, April 10). How should we measure ASEAN's success? East Asia Forum. https://eastasiaforum.org/2018/04/10/how-should-we-measure-aseans-success/
52. Qingqing, W., & Lili, S. (2012). Evaluation of the dispute resolution mechanism of CAFTA: Necessity of establishing a permanent dispute resolution body. International Journal of Law and Management, 54(5), 249. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijlma-04-2012-0019
53. RSIS International. (2025). AfCFTA and Economic Integration in Africa - Issues in Implementation and Development. https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/afcfta-and-economic-integration-in-africa-issues-in-implementation-and-development/
54. South Centre. (2025). Assessing five years of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) (Research Paper No. 215). https://www.southcentre.int/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/RP215_Assessing-Five-Years-of-the-AfCFTA_EN.pdf
55. South Centre. (2025). Research Paper 215: Assessing five years of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). https://www.southcentre.int/research-paper-215-23-january-2025/
56. StocksNG. (2025, July 3). Nigeria to drive development on implementation of African Continental Free Trade Area. https://stocksng.com/nigeria-to-drive-development-on-implementation-of-african-continental-free-trade-area/
57. Taoufik, N.; Oudghiri, K.; and Jibali, B. (2023) The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): Progress and prospects. https://africanscientificjournal.com/index.php/AfricanScientificJournal/article/download/416/389/426
58. The Guardian Nigeria. (2025, June 5). Nigeria, others emerge key drivers of intra-African trade. https://guardian.ng/business-services/industry/nigeria-others-emerge-key-drivers-of-intra-african-trade/
59. ThisDayLive. (2025, July 3). FG harps on implementing policies to explore $3.4trn opportunities in AfCFTA single market. https://www.thisdaylive.com/2025/07/03/fg-harps-on-implementing-policies-to-explore-3-4trn-opportunities-in-afcfta-single-market/
60. Trade Law Centre (tralac). (2025). African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) legal texts and policy documents. https://www.tralac.org/resources/by-region/cfta.html
61. Tri Handayani, R., & Putri, N. (2021). Approaches to standards cooperation with ASEAN and the relevance of Aid for Trade (AfT). Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies, 28(3), 5-51. https://research.tue.nl/en/publications/approaches-to-standards-cooperation-with-asean-and-the-relevance-
62. UNCTAD. (2021). Regional approaches: ASEAN. In Investor-State Dispute Settlement Reform: Input from UNCTAD. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/edmmisc232add29_en.pdf
63. UNECA. (2020). Concept note: Governing the interface between the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and RECs' Free Trade Areas (RFTAs): Issues, opportunities and challenges. https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-documents/RITD/2020/concept_note_-_interface_between_the_afcfta_and_recs_ftas_issues_opportunities_and_challenges.pdf
64. UNECA. (2023). The African Continental Free Trade Area and Demand for Transport Infrastructure and Services. https://www.uneca.org/the-african-continental-free-trade-area-and-demand-for-transport-infrastructure-and-services
65. UNECA. (2025). ECA must continue to support our countries in facing AfCFTA implementation challenges. https://www.uneca.org/stories/eca-must-continue-to-support-our-countries-in-facing-afcfta-implementation-challenges-
66. Willie, S. (2023). Towards the African Economic Community: Legal and Historical Perspectives. Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal, 26(1). https://journals.co.za/doi/epdf/10.17159/1727-3781/2023/v26i0a15609
67. WJARR. (2024). African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA): The benefits to the Nigerian economy. https://wjarr.com/sites/default/files/WJARR-2024-1881.pdf

ISSN No. 2454-6186 | DOI: 10.47772/IJRISS | Volume X Issue III March 2026

68. Wong, C. K., Liew, V. K.-S., & Arip, M. A. (2020). The impact of ASEAN Free Trade Area on intra-ASEAN manufacturing trade. International Journal of Business and Society, 18(3), 705–728. https://www.ijbs.unimas.my/images/repository/pdf/Vol18-no3-paper16.pdf
69. World Bank. (2020). The African Continental Free Trade Area: Economic and distributional effects. https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/the-african-continental-free-trade-area
70. WorldTradeLaw.net. (n.d.). ASEAN Free Trade Agreements (AFTA). https://www.worldtradelaw.net/document.php?id=fta%2Fagreements%2Fafta.pdf&mode=download
71. WTO. (2013). Driving Private Sector Participation in Global Value Chains. World Trade Organization. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/devel_e/a4t_e/global_review13prog_e/aftrtg_asian_e.pdf
72. WTO. (2024). ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) – Regional trade agreements. https://rtais.wto.org/UI/PublicShowRTAIDCard.aspx?rtaid=1170
73. Zawya. (2025, July 3). Nigerian business leverage African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to grow the country's intra-African trade. https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/africa-press-releases/nigerian-business-leverage-african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-to-grow-the-countrys-intra-african-trade-irj560ir