



Political Economy of Zimbabwe's Integration into the AfCFTA: Institutional Readiness, Implementation Gaps and Developmental Prospects

Patience Gawe

College of Peace, Leadership and Governance, Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe

Email: info@africau.edu

How to cite this paper: Gawe, P. (2026) Political Economy of Zimbabwe's Integration into the AfCFTA: Institutional Readiness, Implementation Gaps and Developmental Prospects. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e15583. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115583>

Received: June 5, 2026

Accepted: July 10, 2026

Published: July 13, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This study evaluates Zimbabwe's preparedness for full integration into the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) following its ratification in May 2019. Using a political economy framework, it examines how structural conditions, institutions, actor incentives, agency and sectoral governance shape Zimbabwe's implementation trajectory. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining interviews with senior officials and business leaders, questionnaires administered to exporting firms, documentary analysis and trade data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests, while qualitative data were analyzed in NVivo to generate institutional and contextual explanations. The findings show that Zimbabwe is a mid-tier integrator with clear political commitment to the AfCFTA, but significant implementation gaps remain. Legal domestication is incomplete; tariff schedules and market-access offers have been delayed; customs and excise provisions are not fully aligned with AfCFTA requirements; and rules-of-origin preparedness is weakened by import-dependent production structures. Trade facilitation is further constrained by classification inconsistencies, corridor delays, intrusive post-clearance inspections, limited access to trade finance, currency-related risks and fragmented market intelligence. These constraints may limit Zimbabwe's ability to realize AfCFTA-related benefits, including expanded market access, investment, product diversification, wage growth and welfare gains. The study argues that Zimbabwe's readiness depends on stronger legal coherence, institutional coordination and phased implementation. It proposes an AfCFTA National Trade Ecosystem Framework built around institutional alignment, industrial development, trade finance, public-private collaboration, and monitoring and evaluation.

Subject Areas

Regional Integration Governance

Keywords

African Continental Free Trade Area, Zimbabwe, Political Economy, Institutional Readiness, Implementation Gaps, Trade Governance, Regional Integration

1. Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is one of Africa's most ambitious regional integration initiatives. It seeks to deepen intra-African trade, promote industrialization, strengthen regional value chains and create a more integrated continental market. For Zimbabwe, the AfCFTA offers opportunities for expanded market access, export diversification, higher export earnings, growth in manufacturing and services, participation in regional value and supply chains, employment creation, foreign direct investment and broader developmental gains [1] [2]. At the continental level, the AfCFTA is expected to support a transition away from commodity dependence towards a more diversified, competitive and industrialized African economy driven by deeper trade integration and continent-wide cooperation [3]-[5].

However, these benefits depend not only on formal participation but also on the depth and effectiveness of integration. Regional integration is not merely a matter of treaty ratification or tariff reduction. It also requires policy alignment, institutional coordination, productive capacity, regulatory coherence and domestic implementation capacity. This distinction is particularly important for African economies, where integration is expected to support industrialization, infrastructure development, structural transformation and inclusive growth [3] [4]. Classical trade-based approaches that emphasize tariff liberalization and welfare gains remain useful but are insufficient for analyzing economies characterized by commodity dependence, limited industrial capacity, fiscal constraints and uneven productive structures [6]-[9].

Zimbabwe ratified the AfCFTA in May 2019, signalling a formal commitment to continental trade liberalization and to the policy and institutional adjustments required for effective participation [4]. Yet ratification has not automatically translated into operational readiness. Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA unfolds within a complex political and economic environment characterized by macroeconomic instability, deindustrialization, infrastructure deficits, constrained access to international finance, limited productive capacity, and a narrow export base dominated by primary commodities [10]-[13]. These constraints affect both state capacity and firms' ability to respond to AfCFTA opportunities.

The central problem addressed in this study is the gap between Zimbabwe's

formal commitment to the AfCFTA and its practical readiness for effective integration. At the start of AfCFTA trading, Zimbabwe retained several trade-restrictive measures, including protected tariff lines, non-ad valorem rates, applied Most Favoured Nation tariffs exceeding bound levels, import surtaxes, non-automatic import licensing, restrictive statutory instruments and complex pre-shipment conformity requirements [14]. Zimbabwe's broader record of regional integration also shows uneven performance. The Africa Regional Integration Index ranked Zimbabwe below average in COMESA, while its stronger performance in SADC still revealed weaknesses in trade and productive integration, infrastructure and the free movement of people [15]-[17]. These patterns raise questions about the depth, credibility and effectiveness of Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA.

This divergence reflects a broader continental implementation challenge. Despite institutional development under the African Union and Regional Economic Communities, African regional integration has often been characterized by ambitious commitments, weak implementation, limited productive capacity, governance gaps and uneven progress [18]-[20]. The AfCFTA has now moved from treaty formation to complex implementation, where the main constraint is no longer continental political consensus but domestic institutional capacity, policy coherence, regulatory alignment and state capability [5] [21] [22]. Without functional national coordination structures and effective domestic implementation mechanisms, continental trade frameworks risk remaining aspirational rather than becoming practical instruments of transformation [23] [24].

From an International Political Economy perspective, Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation gap is not merely a technical trade policy issue. It reflects the interplay of structural factors, formal and informal institutions, actor incentives, agency and sectoral governance. Regional integration redistributes opportunities and adjustment costs across states, sectors, firms and social groups. In fragile or structurally constrained economies, integration outcomes are shaped by institutional capacity, fiscal pressures, productive structures, domestic interest groups and competing policy incentives [25]-[27]. Zimbabwe's reliance on discretionary trade measures, fiscal dependence on trade taxes, macroeconomic volatility, foreign-currency shortages and protectionist policy instruments therefore complicates its transition from formal AfCFTA participation to rules-based, development-oriented integration.

Existing scholarship offers limited insight into how Zimbabwe's political economy shapes its AfCFTA trajectory. Studies on Zimbabwe have largely examined its performance within SADC and COMESA, or modelled the potential welfare, trade and customs-revenue effects of liberalization [28]-[30]. Broader AfCFTA scholarship has also focused heavily on trade modelling, welfare gains, poverty reduction, employment effects and sectoral outcomes, with less attention to the state-level reforms, governance mechanisms, institutional incentives and domestic implementation ecosystems required to translate potential benefits into tangible outcomes [31]-[37]. This leaves a gap in understanding how country-specific

trade ecosystems, comprising institutions, actors, incentives, structural conditions and governance practices, influence the translation of AfCFTA commitments into domestic outcomes.

This article evaluates Zimbabwe's preparedness for full integration into the AfCFTA by analyzing institutional readiness, identifying implementation gaps and assessing developmental implications. It explores how Zimbabwe's political economy shapes institutional capacity, compliance and growth prospects under the agreement. The study examines Zimbabwe's regulatory alignment and institutional participation, highlights structural and institutional factors affecting adherence, and considers the reforms required for comprehensive and meaningful integration.

The article argues that Zimbabwe should be understood as a mid-tier integrator: a country that demonstrates formal political commitment to the AfCFTA but continues to face significant institutional, structural and implementation constraints. These include incomplete domestication of the legal framework, delayed tariff and market-access processes, weak preparedness for rules of origin, customs and trade-facilitation challenges, limited export readiness, inadequate trade finance, fragmented market intelligence and weak coordination between public and private actors. Without targeted reforms, these constraints may limit Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from AfCFTA opportunities and lead to uneven developmental outcomes across sectors and firm categories.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it contributes to AfCFTA and African regional integration scholarship by providing a country-specific political economy analysis of Zimbabwe's integration trajectory. Second, it advances debates on governance and development by demonstrating how domestic institutional capacity mediates the relationship between continental integration commitments and development outcomes. Third, it offers a policy-oriented framework to strengthen Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation through legal and institutional coherence, improved coordination, support for productive capacity, trade finance, public-private collaboration, and monitoring and evaluation.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The next section reviews literature on African regional integration, political economy, institutional readiness and developmental regionalism. This is followed by the methodology. The article then analyses Zimbabwe's AfCFTA context, institutional readiness, implementation gaps and developmental implications. The final section presents policy recommendations and concludes that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA gains will depend less on formal membership than on domestic governance capacity to implement, coordinate and translate continental market access into productive transformation.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA. It establishes International Political Economy (IPE) as the study's core analytical framework and applies the political economy approach

to African regional integration developed by Byiers, Vanheukelom and Kingombe [24]. The section argues that IPE is appropriate because it treats regional integration not only as an economic process, but also as a political and institutional project shaped by state interests, structural constraints, domestic actors, policy incentives, governance arrangements and implementation capacity [38]-[40].

The framework is operationalized through four analytical lenses: structural factors; formal and informal institutions; incentives, actors and agency; and sector governance. These lenses are used to examine Zimbabwe's domestic conditions and its position within the wider international and continental trade environment under the AfCFTA. The framework is also linked to the seven Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) clusters, namely trade policy, trade facilitation, trade-related infrastructure, productive capacities, trade finance, factor market integration and trade information. This enables the study to connect theory to measurable indicators of institutional readiness, implementation gaps and developmental outcomes.

2.1. International Political Economy and Regional Integration

This study is grounded in IPE, a field that examines the interaction between politics and economics, including how power, ideas, inequality, institutions and wealth are shaped across and beyond national borders [41] [42]. IPE emerged as a distinct field in the 1970s, but its foundations lie in classical political economy traditions associated with Adam Smith, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill, who treated economic and political life as interconnected rather than separate domains.

IPE is not a single theory, but a plural and evolving field shaped by diverse theoretical, epistemological and methodological traditions [42] [43]. Scholars such as Strange, Gilpin and Keohane were central to linking international economics with international relations and to placing power, institutions and interdependence at the centre of economic governance [38]-[40]. Later constructivist, critical political economy and historical-institutionalist approaches expanded the field by examining how ideas, norms, formal and informal rules, and institutions shape economic behaviour and policy outcomes [44] [45].

Contemporary IPE is useful for examining regional integration because it focuses on how political decisions shape economic options and how economic conditions constrain political choices [46]-[49]. This is particularly relevant to Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA, where formal trade commitments interact with domestic policy incentives, macroeconomic constraints, institutional capacity, private-sector readiness and the state's historical approach to economic governance.

Schneider [50] conceptualizes the political economy of regional integration as a process shaped by political leaders who balance anticipated economic outcomes against pressures from groups that support or resist integration. These pressures are filtered through domestic institutions and policy processes. This perspective

is important because Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation cannot be understood as a purely technical exercise in tariff liberalization. Rather, it is mediated by political choices, institutional constraints, actor incentives and competing national priorities.

2.2. Limitations of Classical Regional Integration Theories

Classical theories of regional integration, including Balassa's linear stages of integration, functionalism, neofunctionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism, offer useful but limited insights into African regionalism. These theories were largely developed from European integration experiences and often assume strong institutions, high levels of interdependence, predictable bureaucratic capacity and technocratic spill-over effects [6] [51] [52]. While these assumptions may explain aspects of European integration, they do not adequately capture the political, institutional and historical conditions that shape African regional integration.

African regionalism operates in a distinct context characterized by fragmented economies, overlapping regional memberships, weak bureaucratic capacity, informal economic practices, rent-seeking behaviour, contested state-society relations and uneven implementation of regional commitments [53]-[56]. Byiers, Vanheukelom and Kingombe [24] argue that African regional integration should therefore be understood less as a linear technocratic process and more as a political economy project shaped by domestic interests, regional bargaining, institutional constraints and sector-specific incentives.

Economic theories of integration, such as customs union theory, optimal currency area theory and game theory, help explain why states may choose to integrate and which sectors may benefit from market expansion [6] [57]-[59]. However, they are less effective at explaining why formal agreements often fail at the implementation stage. They tend to emphasize expected welfare gains, market access and economies of scale, while paying less attention to leadership, enforcement, institutional capacity, bureaucratic incentives and domestic political settlements.

This limitation is important for African regional integration. Bonilla Bolaños [60] argues that regional integration varies across contexts and that its political foundations, motivations and institutional design differ. Aniche [61] similarly shows that African integration is constrained by overlapping memberships, fragmented national politics, rent-seeking behaviour and post-colonial structural conditions. These arguments support the view that African integration requires analytical frameworks that place domestic institutions, state capacity and implementation politics at the centre.

Accordingly, this study does not reject classical integration theories. Rather, it treats them as partial explanations. They help illuminate incentives, sectoral interests and expected economic gains, but they do not adequately explain the institutional and political conditions under which African states implement or fail to

implement regional commitments. This gap justifies the use of an IPE framework that is more sensitive to African realities and to Zimbabwe's specific political economy.

2.3. The IPE Analytical Framework

To evaluate Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA, this study adopts the political economy framework developed by Byiers, Vanheukelom and Kingombe [24]. The framework is useful because it examines how interests are formed, aggregated through institutions and information, and reflected in national policy choices. It also moves beyond a purely trade-centred approach by linking regional integration outcomes to domestic political settlements, institutional arrangements, actor incentives and sector-level governance.

The study applies four analytical lenses. First, structural factors encompass the underlying economic, geographical, historical and productive conditions that shape Zimbabwe's capacity to integrate into the AfCFTA. These include the size and structure of the economy, industrial capacity, employment, infrastructure, export diversification, macroeconomic stability, regional memberships, geographical position and historical patterns of integration. In Zimbabwe's case, structural constraints such as deindustrialization, limited export diversification, infrastructure deficits, exchange-rate instability and weak productive capacity directly affect the country's ability to benefit from access to the continental market.

Second, formal and informal institutions encompass the legal, policy, regulatory and administrative systems that govern trade and implementation. Formal institutions include trade policies, tariff schedules, customs rules, legal frameworks, border regulations, industrial policies and AfCFTA-related obligations. Informal institutions include political practices, patronage networks, discretionary enforcement, bureaucratic norms and informal arrangements that shape how formal rules operate in practice. This lens is important because Zimbabwe's integration is affected not only by the existence of formal commitments but also by the credibility, predictability and enforcement of domestic institutions.

Third, incentives, actors and agency concern the interests, motivations and behaviour of state and non-state actors involved in regional integration. These include government ministries, customs authorities, business associations, exporting firms, regional institutions, development partners and political elites. Their incentives determine whether AfCFTA commitments are prioritized, delayed, resisted or translated into policy action. This lens is central to understanding how domestic actors shape Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation and how firms respond to emerging regional market opportunities.

Fourth, sector governance comprises the institutional and policy arrangements that shape performance in specific sectors affected by AfCFTA integration. These include trade facilitation, productive capacity, infrastructure, trade finance, services, digital trade, standards, rules of origin and regional value chains. Sector governance is important because the AfCFTA's developmental effects will not be

uniform across the economy. Zimbabwe may pursue liberalization in some sectors while remaining cautious in others, depending on competitiveness, fiscal implications, domestic political interests and sector-specific adjustment costs.

Together, these four lenses enable the study to examine how Zimbabwe's structural conditions, institutional arrangements, actor incentives and sector governance practices interact to shape its AfCFTA trajectory. They also provide a basis for assessing whether Zimbabwe's integration is merely formal or supported by the domestic capacity required for effective implementation and developmental outcomes.

2.4. Operationalizing the Framework through BIAT Clusters

The four IPE lenses are operationalized through the seven BIAT clusters central to effective AfCFTA implementation: trade policy, trade facilitation, trade-related infrastructure, productive capacities, trade finance, factor market integration and trade information. These clusters provide measurable domains through which Zimbabwe's readiness can be evaluated.

Trade policy assesses the extent to which Zimbabwe's tariff schedules, market-access commitments, statutory instruments, trade remedies and regulatory frameworks align with AfCFTA obligations. Trade facilitation focuses on customs efficiency, border management, rules-of-origin administration, non-tariff barriers, corridor delays and the predictability of clearance procedures. Trade-related infrastructure examines the transport, energy, logistics, ICT and digital systems required to support continental trade.

Productive capacity defines Zimbabwe's ability to produce competitive goods and services for regional and continental markets. This includes industrial capacity, manufacturing value added, export diversification, firm competitiveness, standards compliance, and participation in the value chain. Trade finance examines the availability of credit, export guarantees, insurance, access to foreign currency, and financial instruments needed to support exporters, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. Factor market integration considers the movement of capital, services, skills, labour, and investment across regional markets. Trade information focuses on market intelligence, exporter awareness, digital platforms, data systems, and institutional communication between the state and firms.

By linking the four IPE lenses to these BIAT clusters, the study develops a practical analytical framework for assessing Zimbabwe's institutional readiness, implementation gaps and developmental prospects under the AfCFTA. This approach also strengthens methodological coherence by translating broad political economy concepts into observable indicators.

2.5. Zimbabwe's Political Economy of Regional Integration

Zimbabwe's historical experience with regional integration reveals a persistent gap between formal policy commitments and implementation outcomes. Since

independence, the country has participated in regional arrangements such as the Southern African Development Coordination Conference (SADCC), later the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). These commitments reflected political willingness to engage in regional integration. However, the country's economic performance has been shaped by policy inconsistency, macroeconomic instability, weak industrial capacity, limited export diversification, infrastructure deficits, and an uneven approach to trade liberalization.

Structural factors remain central to Zimbabwe's integration prospects. Industrial competitiveness depends on the capacity to produce goods for domestic and regional markets through high-value, technologically upgraded activities. Yet Zimbabwe's manufacturing base has weakened over time, and manufacturing value added per capita has remained low, limiting structural transformation and export competitiveness [62] [63]. Export diversification also remains limited, with the export basket concentrated in minerals and agricultural products. This dependence on primary commodities constrains Zimbabwe's ability to take advantage of AfCFTA preferences and increases the risk that the country may remain a market for more industrialized African economies rather than becoming a competitive producer within continental value chains.

Macroeconomic instability further weakens Zimbabwe's integration capacity. Inflation, exchange-rate volatility, foreign-currency shortages, multiple exchange-rate practices, low investment and limited structural transformation have undermined competitiveness and reduced firms' ability to plan, invest and export [64]-[66]. In this context, AfCFTA liberalization cannot generate broad-based developmental gains unless accompanied by credible macroeconomic stabilization, predictable exchange-rate management and policy consistency.

Formal and informal institutions also shape Zimbabwe's integration trajectory. The country's post-independence policy history shows repeated shifts between state-led development, liberalization, protectionism, crisis management and reform. Early redistributive policies expanded social services but also increased fiscal pressures and strengthened state intervention in the economy [67]-[69]. The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme introduced market liberalization, trade reforms and foreign-exchange liberalization, but its outcomes were undermined by poor sequencing, limited stakeholder engagement, drought shocks, fiscal indiscipline, weak industrial competitiveness and social resistance to austerity [70]-[72].

The ESAP experience remains relevant to Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration. It shows that trade liberalization without productive capacity, social dialogue, industrial support and institutional coherence can expose domestic firms to competition before they are able to compete. This lesson is important because AfCFTA implementation similarly requires Zimbabwe to balance market opening with industrial upgrading, safeguards, social protection and domestic productive transformation.

Subsequent policy frameworks, including ZIMPREST, Vision 2020, ZIMASSET, the Transitional Stabilization Programme and the National Development Strategy 1, reveal a persistent pattern of ambitious policy design but weak implementation. These frameworks sought to restore macroeconomic stability, promote export-led growth, attract investment, support industrialization and improve infrastructure. However, implementation was constrained by inflation, fiscal pressures, currency instability, governance weaknesses, infrastructure deficits and limited investor confidence [63] [73]-[76].

This historical pattern is directly relevant to the AfCFTA. Zimbabwe's challenge is not the absence of policy ambition, but the difficulty of translating policy frameworks into sustained outcomes. The AfCFTA requires precisely the areas where Zimbabwe has historically struggled: legal certainty, regulatory coherence, customs modernization, trade facilitation, infrastructure investment, export finance, private-sector coordination, industrial upgrading and monitoring mechanisms.

Zimbabwe also has strong incentives to participate in the AfCFTA. These include access to a continental market, opportunities for price convergence, export expansion, manufacturing growth, participation in regional value chains, services sector development, reduced import dependence and employment creation in the digital economy [2] [77] [78]. However, these incentives are offset by limited industrial capacity, high production costs, exchange-rate volatility, infrastructure bottlenecks, weak trade finance and fragmented market intelligence.

Actors and agency are therefore critical. The state remains the central actor in negotiating, domesticating and implementing AfCFTA commitments, but non-state actors, including exporting firms, business associations, civil society, academia and development partners, also shape the quality of implementation. Zimbabwe has formal platforms for public-private engagement, yet these have often been more representative than effective. Weak coordination among private-sector associations and limited structured dialogue reduces firms' capacity to influence trade policy and implementation priorities [2]. This reinforces the need to examine how public and private actors interact to shape Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation ecosystem.

Overall, Zimbabwe's political economy of regional integration shows that the benefits of the AfCFTA are not automatic. They depend on the country's ability to strengthen productive capacity, stabilize the macroeconomic environment, align domestic laws and policies with continental commitments, reduce non-tariff barriers, improve trade facilitation, expand trade finance, generate reliable market information and coordinate actors across the public and private sectors. Without these reforms, Zimbabwe risks remaining a formal participant in the AfCFTA rather than a substantive and competitive beneficiary of continental integration.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a pragmatic, sequential exploratory mixed-methods design to analyze Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA. It aligns with the four-lenses

political economy framework by Byiers, Vanheukelom, and Kingombe [24], which examines how structural conditions, institutions, actor incentives, and governance shape regional integration outcomes across the seven clusters identified in the AfCFTA strategic implementation document, Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT). The clusters considered vital for AfCFTA integration include Trade Policy, Trade Facilitation, Trade-Related Infrastructure, Productive Capacities, Trade Finance, Factor Market Integration, and Trade Information. The four IPE lenses are operationalized as measurable variables and indicators to enhance the methodological coherence of the IPE framework, thereby providing a clear, transformative pathway from theory through the four IPE lenses to a historical review. This process presents an empirical framework grounded in the theoretical foundations of IPE. The methodology combines an initial documentary analysis covering 1980 to 2023 with firm-level surveys conducted over three months in 2024 and in-depth interviews conducted over nine months in the same year. This approach assesses Zimbabwe's institutional readiness, implementation gaps, and developmental prospects within the AfCFTA. The study's final analysis therefore combines trade-related performance indicators for Structural Factors, Institutions, Incentives, Actors, agencies, and Sector Governance from 1980, the year Zimbabwe joined regional integration initiatives, marking the beginning of efforts to boost trade under the AfCFTA, to 2025.

3.1. Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

The study is grounded in a pragmatic research philosophy. Pragmatism is appropriate because it prioritizes the research problem and allows methods to be selected for their usefulness in addressing complex real-world issues [79]-[81]. This orientation suits AfCFTA implementation, which is not purely a technical trade-policy process but a politically mediated phenomenon shaped by institutions, incentives, state capacity, power relations, and uneven distributions of costs and benefits [20] [82] [83].

A pragmatic design bridges positivist and interpretivist approaches. Quantitative evidence identifies measurable patterns in firm behaviour, trade participation and regulatory constraints, while qualitative evidence explains the institutional and governance processes that produce these patterns. This is important in Zimbabwe, where integration outcomes are shaped by state policy, productive capacity, firm-level competitiveness, macroeconomic instability and institutional quality [2] [84] [85].

The study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. The first phase involved documentary analysis of trade data, policy documents and institutional reports to identify patterns in Zimbabwe's AfCFTA readiness and regional trade performance. These insights informed the development of the structured firm-level questionnaire and the semi-structured interview guide. The second phase integrated quantitative and qualitative primary data. Survey data were analyzed in SPSS to identify firm-level patterns, while interview data were analyzed

in NVivo to generate institutional and contextual explanations. The two strands were integrated during interpretation, consistent with mixed-methods practice [79] [86] [87].

This design is suitable for political economy research because it links measurement to explanation. Quantitative findings establish which patterns exist, while qualitative findings explain why those patterns persist within Zimbabwe's governance system. This enables the study to move from empirical observation to system-level explanation while remaining coherent with the four analytical lenses: structural factors, institutions, actor incentives and sector governance.

3.2. Case Study Approach

The study adopts a case study approach focused on Zimbabwe. This approach enables an in-depth, contextually grounded analysis of how continental trade commitments are mediated by domestic institutions, political incentives, sectoral structures and implementation capacity. Case study research is appropriate when the aim is to understand complex causal mechanisms within a specific empirical context [88]-[90].

Zimbabwe is treated as an analytically strategic case because its AfCFTA participation is shaped by formal commitment, macroeconomic instability, limited productive capacity, regulatory fragmentation and a historical pattern of partial implementation in regional integration. These features make Zimbabwe useful for examining how state-level political economy conditions shape the translation of AfCFTA commitments into domestic outcomes. The case study approach also supports context-sensitive policy recommendations by identifying governance contradictions, coordination failures and structural vulnerabilities that may not be visible in aggregate or cross-country studies.

3.3. Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 100 export firms and 24 key informants from government ministries, regulatory bodies, state agencies, business associations, financial institutions, and export-focused companies operating within Zimbabwe's international trade system. The institutional population included the Tariff and Competition Commission, the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, the Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, ZimTrade, the Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency, the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, and the ministries responsible for Industry and Commerce, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Transport, Finance and Economic Development, and Small and Medium Enterprises. These actors play vital roles in policy-making, regulatory enforcement, trade facilitation, export promotion, investment support, and private-sector coordination. Together, they form the core of Zimbabwe's trade governance framework.

The firm-level sampling frame focused on export-oriented companies, as these firms determine whether AfCFTA commitments translate into actual trade ex-

pansion. Export firms were selected from databases maintained by the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, and ZimTrade. Firms were categorized by sector to ensure coverage of key sectors, including agro-processing, manufacturing, services, construction, chemicals, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and engineering.

The initial sampling frame comprised 100 export-oriented firms. For these firms, Daniel's sample size formula was applied with a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, an estimated population proportion of 50%, and a finite population of 100 firms [91]. Using a z-value of 1.96, this yielded a target sample of approximately 80 firms. A 5% margin of error is standard in social science research, balancing reliability with practical fieldwork constraints. While larger samples can reduce sampling error, they often yield diminishing returns given the additional time, cost, and access challenges [91]. Consequently, a sample of 80 firms was considered sufficient to obtain reliable quantitative insights for this study. The survey was distributed to 81 firms, and after data cleaning, 62 valid firm responses were retained for quantitative analysis.

The key informants, comprising 24 targeted respondents from 12 institutions, were sampled separately, bringing the intended sample size to 104. Purposive sampling was used to select respondents for their direct relevance to Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation. This approach is appropriate for political economy research, which prioritizes analytical depth over statistical generalization, particularly when strategically positioned actors provide insight into institutional processes, governance dynamics, and incentive structures [79] [90]. Fifteen informants participated, representing ten of the twelve institutions. This yielded an institutional participation rate of 83% and a respondent participation rate of 63%. Participants included officials and representatives from government ministries, regulatory agencies, business associations, financial institutions, customs administration, investment promotion institutions, and export development institutions.

While purposive sampling was suitable for identifying key actors in Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation, it also shaped how the findings were interpreted. Efforts were made to include relevant state institutions, regulatory agencies, business associations, export-oriented firms, SMEs, large corporations, and both regional and non-regional trade participants. Because respondents were purposively selected for relevance rather than through random sampling, the results cannot be considered statistically representative of all Zimbabwean firms or policy actors. The focus on firms with regional trade exposure emphasizes those within or near formal trade and policy networks, leaving informal traders essentially invisible. In the qualitative part, the number of interviews was sufficient, given institutional diversity and thematic saturation, with recurring patterns across key informant groups. These limitations were partly addressed by including a diverse range of respondents and by triangulating survey data, interviews, and documents. Therefore, the findings are not statistically generalizable but offer credible, institution-

ally grounded insights into the political economy factors influencing Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration.

3.4. Data Collection Methods

The study utilised three main data sources: documentary evidence, in-depth interviews, and a structured questionnaire. The seven BIAT clusters were operationalized as specific empirical tools via a matrix linking each cluster to measurable survey items and interview questions. Trade policy was examined through questions on tariff liberalization, rules of origin, non-tariff barriers, and regulatory compliance, while productive capacities were assessed via items on firm preparedness, capacity utilization, competitiveness, and regional demand responsiveness. Trade facilitation, infrastructure, finance, information, and market integration were similarly translated into questions addressing customs procedures, border delays, transport routes, access to export finance, market intelligence, and the movement of people, capital, and skills. This approach ensured that both the questionnaire and key informant interviews directly aligned with the BIAT framework, allowing the study to evaluate Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration using observable policy, institutional, and firm-level indicators.

Documentary analysis provided the empirical baseline for assessing Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA. Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, trade databases, and institutional reports, including the World Integrated Trade Solutions database, the World Bank, UNCTAD, AfCFTA Secretariat reports, and the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries. These sources were used to construct indicators covering trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity, trade finance, factor market integration and trade information.

In-depth interviews were conducted over 9 months with 15 officials from key institutions involved in Zimbabwe's trade governance system. These interviews yielded context-specific insights into institutional capacity, regulatory alignment, policy coordination, trade facilitation, customs administration, investment incentives, export development, monetary stability and private-sector readiness. A semi-structured interview guide ensured consistency while allowing for probing and clarification. Interviews were conducted over nine months via face-to-face and virtual platforms. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded.

A structured questionnaire using a seven-point Likert scale was administered to export-oriented firms. The seven-point scale was selected for its greater sensitivity and discriminative power compared with shorter scales, enabling more precise measurement of firm-level perceptions [92] [93]. The questionnaire captured firms' perceptions of AfCFTA participation across market access, trade barriers, regulatory compliance, export competitiveness, trade finance and operational constraints. It was distributed via SurveyMonkey to support geographic reach, response tracking, and efficient data management.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 22. Of the 81 questionnaires distributed, 62 valid responses were retained after data cleaning. Descriptive statistics summarized firm characteristics and response patterns. Chi-square tests examined relationships among variables such as firm size, participation in African regional trade and perceptions of AfCFTA engagement. This analysis supported the study's structural and actor-incentive dimensions by identifying patterns in firm-level experiences and behaviour [94] [95].

Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo version 14. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data while remaining linked to the theoretical framework [96]. The coding process was iterative and focused on institutional dynamics, actor incentives, governance constraints, coordination gaps and implementation challenges. NVivo tools, including cluster analysis and matrix coding queries, were used to identify patterns across institutions and stakeholder groups [97] [98].

Documentary, survey and interview data were integrated through methodological triangulation. Documentary evidence established structural and policy baselines; survey data captured firm-level perceptions and patterns; and interviews elucidated institutional and governance dynamics. This integration enabled the study to link observable trade patterns to the political economy mechanisms that shape them.

3.6. Operationalization of Variables

The study operationalized the four political economy lenses through the seven BIAT clusters: trade policy, trade facilitation, trade-related infrastructure, productive capacities, trade finance, factor market integration and trade information. This approach recognizes that trade outcomes are shaped not only by tariffs and prices, but also by policy instruments, institutional capacity, productive structures, finance, information flows and factor mobility [21] [99].

Zimbabwe's level of integration into the AfCFTA was assessed using tariff, non-tariff and trade facilitation indicators. These included applied Most-Favoured-Nation tariff averages, tariff dispersion, effective protection, tariff escalation, the share of duty lines, non-tariff measures, non-automatic licensing, customs efficiency, transit procedures, documentation harmonization and cross-border trade predictability. These indicators enabled a distinction between formal commitments and effective participation.

Political economy factors affecting Zimbabwe's capacity to meet AfCFTA obligations were assessed using indicators covering tariff policy, non-tariff measures, institutional coordination, bureaucratic incentives, fiscal reliance on trade taxes and political protection of key sectors. Productive capacity and developmental outcomes were assessed using indicators such as export structure, capacity utilization, manufacturing performance, trade finance, market information and firm readiness. These indicators enabled analysis of how Zimbabwe's political econ-

omy ecosystem enables or constrains AfCFTA-related benefits.

The synthesis of these indicators provided the basis for developing institutional and governance frameworks to support effective implementation of the AfCFTA. These frameworks link state policy design, regulatory enforcement, productive capacity, trade finance, cross-border mobility and institutional coordination. Zimbabwe's participation in the AfCFTA is therefore analyzed as an institutionally mediated and politically negotiated process rather than an automatic outcome of tariff liberalization [100] [101].

3.7. Reliability and Validity

Reliability was strengthened through multiple data sources, standardized survey items, a consistent semi-structured interview guide and systematic data analysis procedures. Triangulation across official trade databases, documentary evidence, firm-level survey data and institutional interviews enhanced the consistency and credibility of the findings [102] [103]. The use of SPSS and NVivo further strengthened procedural consistency in the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

Validity was enhanced by aligning the research objectives, theoretical framework, data collection instruments, and analytical procedures. The seven-point Likert scale strengthened construct validity by capturing nuanced firm-level perceptions [93] [104]. Pre-testing improved the clarity and usability of the instruments. The interview guide was shared with participants in advance to facilitate informed, considered responses.

The study also recognized limitations inherent in qualitative research, including response bias, partial accounts and the possibility that recording may affect openness. To mitigate these risks, the researcher prioritized building rapport, maintaining confidentiality, practicing active listening and iteratively validating themes. These safeguards strengthened the credibility and interpretive validity of the findings [103] [105].

3.8. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards for data collection, analysis, confidentiality and intellectual property. All secondary sources, including databases and reports from the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, UNCTAD, UN Comtrade, TRAINS, the IDB, and CTS, were duly acknowledged.

Participation in interviews and surveys was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before interviews, and participants were informed that the study was for academic purposes, that their identities would remain confidential, and that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. Additional consent was obtained for audio recording. Interview guides and consent forms were provided in advance to support informed participation.

Survey respondents were assured of anonymity, and no personal identifiers were collected. The questionnaire was designed to be clear and concise to mini-

mize ambiguity in the absence of interviewer guidance. Recorded data were stored securely with password protection and scheduled for deletion when no longer required.

3.9. Methodological Positioning within Political Economy

The methodological approach is grounded in political economy theory, which understands economic outcomes as products of interactions among state authority, institutions, market actors and distributional interests [101] [106]. This positioning is important because the AfCFTA is not treated as a purely legal or technical trade process, but as a politically negotiated restructuring of economic relations.

Quantitative methods identify patterns in trade participation, firm behaviour and regulatory constraints, while qualitative methods explain the institutional processes, policy choices, actor incentives and governance dynamics that shape them. Purposive sampling reflects the political economy assumption that trade outcomes are shaped by state-business interactions, bureaucratic authority, institutional design and domestic bargaining [50]. By including state institutions, regulatory agencies, business associations, financial institutions and export-oriented firms, the study captures the distributional dynamics of AfCFTA implementation.

The integration of documentary analysis, SPSS-based statistical analysis and NVivo-assisted thematic analysis enabled the study to examine whether policy instruments, such as tariffs, non-tariff measures, licensing systems and trade facilitation mechanisms, function merely as technical tools or also as instruments of state control, rent distribution and institutional bargaining. This is central to the study's political economy contribution.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Response Rate, Data Organisation and Overview of Findings

The empirical findings combine firm-level survey data with qualitative insights from institutional actors involved in Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation. The analysis is organized around the study's three objectives: assessing Zimbabwe's level of integration into the AfCFTA, identifying the political economy factors shaping integration, and examining how the political economy ecosystem enables or constrains the realization of AfCFTA-related economic benefits. Quantitative data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22 using frequency distributions, percentages, cross-tabulations, and selected Chi-square (χ^2) tests. The Chi-square tests served as limited exploratory tests of association between selected categorical variables. They were appropriate because the variables under examination, such as firm size and participation in intra-African trade, were categorical. However, the tests were not used to establish causality, predict outcomes, or make broad statistical generalizations. Instead, they helped identify possible patterns of association in the survey data, which were then interpreted alongside the qualitative findings.

After data cleaning and screening, 62 valid company responses were retained.

The final sample comprised 29 large corporations and 33 SMEs. Descriptive statistics indicate that 76% of firms ($n = 47$) reported participating in intra-African trade, while 24% ($n = 15$) reported no participation. Participation rates were broadly comparable across firm sizes, with 72% of large firms and 79% of SMEs engaged in regional trade. A Chi-square test of independence in SPSS examined whether firm size was associated with participation in intra-African trade. The findings showed no statistically significant association between the two variables, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 0.304, p = 0.581$. This suggests that participation in regional trade was not significantly differentiated by firm size within the sample. Both large firms and SMEs exhibited similar participation rates, indicating that access to intra-African markets is likely shaped by broader structural and institutional factors rather than firm size alone.

The qualitative component comprised 15 key informants from 12 institutions, yielding a response rate of 63%. These institutions included the Competition and Tariff Commission, Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency, ZimTrade, Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. This institutional spread spanned policy formulation, regulatory enforcement, customs administration, monetary policy, investment promotion, export development, and private-sector representation.

Qualitative data were analyzed using NVivo-assisted thematic analysis. The coding process yielded five broad thematic clusters: governance and policy, economic constraints, trade and markets, production and industry, and systems and infrastructure. These clusters were interpreted through the study's political economy framework, particularly through the lenses of structural factors, formal and informal institutions, incentives, actors and agency, and sector governance [24].

The broad findings indicate that Zimbabwe demonstrates formal political commitment to the AfCFTA but remains constrained by incomplete operational readiness. Respondents identified gaps in domestic legalization, tariff implementation, institutional coordination, customs alignment, Rules of Origin preparedness, trade finance, industrial competitiveness, market intelligence and trade facilitation. Zimbabwe's AfCFTA challenge is therefore not simply a matter of policy intent, but of implementation capacity, institutional coherence, productive readiness and governance coordination.

4.2. Zimbabwe's Overall Integration Status

The findings indicate that Zimbabwe's overall integration into the AfCFTA is moderate and incomplete. Although the country ratified the AfCFTA Agreement in 2019, participates in policy processes and engages with regional trade institutions, practical and operational integration remains limited. Essential operational tools are still incomplete, including full domestication of the agreement, gazette-

ment of tariff schedules, completion of market-access commitments, and alignment of customs and trade laws with AfCFTA obligations.

This finding supports regional integration literature which argues that free trade areas depend not only on ratification, but also on domestic implementation, legal certainty, institutional coordination, tariff phase-down schedules, Rules of Origin and practical trade instruments [107]. It also aligns with the World Bank's view that AfCFTA gains in trade, welfare, poverty reduction and employment require member states to address non-tariff barriers, trade facilitation constraints and regulatory obstacles alongside tariff liberalization [2].

The Zimbabwean case shows that the implementation gap is not merely a technical delay. It is a political economy issue shaped by weak institutional coordination, macroeconomic instability, limited competitiveness, trade-finance gaps, infrastructure constraints and fragmented systems. While the AfCFTA literature often emphasizes the agreement's continental potential, this study demonstrates that country-specific constraints hinder the translation of continental commitments into tangible trade benefits.

Zimbabwe's delayed participation in the Guided Trade Initiative illustrates this problem. Although progress has been made in tariff negotiations, the approved tariff offers have not yet been fully gazetted. This limits firms' ability to trade under AfCFTA preferences and reflects a wider gap between regional commitments and domestic operational readiness. Tariff liberalization remains largely symbolic until gazetted schedules, customs procedures and firm-level guidance are in place.

The findings also reveal a gap between formal and practical compliance. Zimbabwe's policy framework broadly supports AfCFTA goals, particularly through the National Development Strategy 1 and investment-related reforms. However, the Customs and Excise Act still requires amendment to give effect to AfCFTA tariff preferences, Rules of Origin and trade-facilitation commitments. While the ZIDA Act aligns to some extent with the AfCFTA Investment Protocol, customs, trade and regulatory systems still require harmonization. A dedicated AfCFTA implementation or harmonization law could reduce legal uncertainty, prevent conflicts with SADC and COMESA obligations, and clarify the authority of agencies such as ZIMRA.

This overlap in membership across the AfCFTA, SADC, and COMESA creates legal and procedural trade-offs for Zimbabwean firms and agencies. Companies must decide which preferential regime to utilise, based on factors such as tariff margins, Rules of Origin, documentation costs, and administrative ease. Meanwhile, agencies such as ZIMRA need to manage different tariff schedules, certificates of origin, and customs procedures efficiently, avoiding duplication, delays, or inconsistent treatment at the border. This situation highlights the importance of harmonized domestic arrangements that clearly define how AfCFTA obligations align with existing SADC and COMESA commitments.

The findings therefore distinguish three levels of integration: membership, commitment and utilization. Zimbabwe is a member of the AfCFTA and has

demonstrated commitment, but utilization remains constrained because the legal, institutional and commercial frameworks required by firms are not yet fully operational.

4.3. Industrial Capacity, Export Readiness and Rules of Origin

The findings indicate that Zimbabwe's industrial base is not yet sufficiently competitive to support effective integration with the AfCFTA. Despite national policy frameworks emphasizing industrialization, value addition and export growth, weak industry performance continues to constrain regional competitiveness. Zimbabwe remains a net importer, with limited export diversification, low value addition and inadequate productive transformation.

This finding aligns with UNCTAD's argument that the benefits of the AfCFTA depend on productive capacity, industrial diversification and firms' ability to participate in higher-value trade, rather than on tariff reductions alone [18]. It also supports the World Bank's analysis that the greatest gains from the AfCFTA are likely when tariff liberalization is accompanied by trade facilitation and the reduction of non-tariff barriers [2].

The evidence indicates that Zimbabwe's productive capacity remains fragile. Manufacturing accounts for only a modest share of GDP, and manufactured exports remain limited. Mining continues to dominate exports, while manufacturing faces high input costs, outdated equipment, slow technology adoption, energy shortages, weak export readiness and reliance on imported raw materials. As a result, Zimbabwe's engagement with the AfCFTA appears more transactional than production-oriented, limiting its ability to convert tariff preferences into sustained export growth.

Rules of Origin emerged as a major constraint. Some firms lack adequate understanding of the AfCFTA Rules of Origin, while others are uncertain about their ability to comply. Reliance on imported raw materials and intermediates heightens compliance risks, with an average import dependence of about 52%, and much higher levels in some sectors. This creates the risk that Zimbabwean firms may fail to qualify for AfCFTA preferences, even where tariff benefits exist.

This finding is important because Rules of Origin compliance is not merely a customs matter. It is also an industrial-capacity matter. Firms may identify market opportunities, but without meeting origin thresholds they cannot use AfCFTA preferences effectively. Zimbabwe therefore requires stronger local supplier networks, intermediate-goods production, sourcing audits, documentation support, standards compliance, and sector-specific technical assistance.

The findings also indicate limited reliance on comparative advantage. Only 32% of companies reported that their exports are based on comparative advantage. This suggests that many firms are not yet fully utilizing Zimbabwe's natural resources, agro-processing capacity or sector-specific strengths to enhance regional competitiveness. However, 63% of firms reported offering complementary products or services in African markets, suggesting that Zimbabwe's immediate op-

portunity may lie less in dominating final-goods markets and more in integrating into regional value chains through inputs, semi-processed goods, packaging, services, logistics and niche products.

This shifts the policy implication from general export promotion to strategic value-chain positioning. Zimbabwe should therefore use the AfCFTA not only as a market-access arrangement but also as a platform for industrial development, intermediate-goods production, SME inclusion, supplier upgrading, and productivity transformation.

4.4. Political Economy Constraints to AfCFTA Integration

The findings indicate that Zimbabwe's political economy factors affecting AfCFTA integration are complex, interconnected and largely constraining. While the country has shown political intent to participate more fully in continental integration, its practical ability to compete is constrained by macroeconomic instability, exchange-rate volatility, high business costs, infrastructure gaps, limited industrial development, reliance on imported inputs, regulatory uncertainty and unequal access to policy platforms.

This finding aligns with existing research indicating that the benefits of the AfCFTA depend on more than tariff liberalization. The World Bank argues that the largest gains are likely where tariff reductions are paired with the removal of non-tariff barriers, improved trade facilitation and regulatory reform [2]. UNCTAD likewise emphasizes that African countries can benefit from the AfCFTA only if they build productive capacity, diversify exports and participate more actively in regional value chains [18].

Structural constraints are particularly significant. Zimbabwe's narrow, commodity-dependent economy, weak confidence in the domestic currency, foreign-exchange controls, high compliance costs, weak rail and power infrastructure, uneven road conditions and numerous checkpoints along trade corridors all increase production and transport costs. These conditions reduce Zimbabwe's competitiveness in terms of price, quality, reliability, and delivery.

Macroeconomic instability emerged as a major constraint. Exchange-rate volatility, low confidence in the Zimbabwean dollar and foreign-currency shortages complicate business planning. Firms often pay for imported inputs in hard currency while selling some products in a weaker or unstable domestic currency, exposing them to currency losses and pricing risks. Foreign-exchange surrender requirements further undermine exporters' confidence by reducing incentives to export and encouraging some firms to retain funds offshore. This weakens domestic liquidity and constrains the financial system's capacity to support export-oriented production.

Formal and informal institutions also shape implementation outcomes. Zimbabwe's formal ratification of the AfCFTA has not yet been fully translated into enforceable domestic legal instruments, predictable customs procedures and coordinated implementation structures. Policy uncertainty persists, as evidenced by

the continued use of protectionist measures such as SI 122 of 2017. These measures may protect local firms in the short term, but they also act as non-tariff barriers and may reduce incentives for productivity, innovation, certification and competitiveness.

This finding aligns with political economy research indicating that firms often favour access to external markets while resisting import competition at home [108] [109]. In Zimbabwe, many firms support the AfCFTA in principle but continue to rely on domestic protection in practice. This contradiction reflects a fragmented approach to integration and indicates that effective AfCFTA implementation requires a managed transition from protectionism to competitiveness.

The findings also show that institutional participation is uneven. Large, regionally active firms are more likely to participate in discussions on Rules of Origin, non-tariff barriers, trade facilitation and policy enforcement. SMEs, by contrast, often have weaker access to information, finance, policy platforms and compliance support. This creates an access gap, with larger firms better positioned to shape policy and utilize preferences, while SMEs face greater uncertainty and the risk of exclusion.

The study therefore shows that AfCFTA implementation is not socially neutral. Without deliberate mechanisms to include SMEs, new exporters and firms outside traditional regional markets, the benefits of the AfCFTA may reinforce existing inequalities rather than generate broad-based participation.

4.5. Trade Facilitation, Infrastructure and Systems Readiness

Trade facilitation remains a central obstacle to Zimbabwe's effective integration into the AfCFTA. Although Zimbabwe has made progress in customs modernization, border improvements, electronic documentation, ASYCUDA use and Beitbridge modernization, its systems still lag behind regional and continental requirements. Firms continue to face documentation issues, inconsistent tariff classification, unpredictable inspections, road checkpoints, post-clearance controls and limited alignment with neighbouring countries' customs systems.

This finding aligns with World Bank and UNCTAD analyses, which argue that AfCFTA gains depend not only on tariff reductions but also on lowering non-tariff barriers and improving trade facilitation [2] [18]. In Zimbabwe, trade-facilitation constraints translate into tangible business costs: delays, unpredictable delivery times, higher insurance and transport costs, uncertain customs treatment, and reduced reliability in regional supply chains.

The findings indicate that Zimbabwe has not yet fully operationalized AfCFTA-specific trade-facilitation systems. Existing WTO-based structures provide a foundation, but they are insufficient unless adapted to the AfCFTA's requirements. Limited use of platforms such as tradebarrier.org and low uptake of the AfCFTA Hub suggest that many firms have not adopted available problem-solving tools. This weakens feedback between firms and policymakers and leaves non-tariff barriers unresolved.

Roadblocks and corridor disruptions remain particularly harmful. Delays caused by police and other agencies often involve impromptu stops and document checks beyond customs. These practices increase lead-time variability, transport and insurance costs, and opportunities for rent-seeking. For SMEs, the effects are more severe because they lack the financial cushion and logistics capacity of larger firms. Shifting from random roadblocks to intelligence-led mobile enforcement would improve corridor efficiency while preserving legitimate security and compliance objectives.

The Authorized Economic Operator system offers a useful mechanism for faster clearance, but its benefits are offset by post-clearance inspections and administrative uncertainty. Zimbabwe can improve AEO credibility by providing predictable procedures, clear risk-assessment criteria, and mutual recognition agreements with regional partners. These gains should not be limited to large firms. SME-friendly compliance pathways are necessary to prevent AfCFTA benefits from concentrating among established traders.

Technology adoption also remains uneven. Systems such as PAPSS, electronic customs, digital documentation, and NTB-reporting platforms can reduce transaction costs and improve predictability, but slow uptake limits their impact. Trade facilitation should therefore be understood not merely as border infrastructure but as a broader system encompassing digital interoperability, customs cooperation, NTB reporting, corridor governance, and institutional coordination.

4.6. Trade Finance, Market Information and Firm-Level Readiness

The findings identify trade finance as a major barrier to Zimbabwe's AfCFTA readiness. Few firms have accessed trade finance, export guarantees or bank funding for cross-border projects. Available facilities are often too large, too small, too costly or poorly matched to firms' needs. This is particularly problematic for SMEs, which often require affordable working capital, export guarantees, certification finance, transport finance and short-term production support.

The study identifies a trade-finance mismatch and a bankability trap. Firms need finance to become exporters, but banks often require collateral, export records and predictable cash flows before lending. As a result, potential exporters cannot easily obtain the finance needed to upgrade machinery, import inputs, meet standards, certify products, package goods and fulfil regional orders. Trade finance is therefore a core condition for utilizing the AfCFTA, rather than a secondary constraint.

Zimbabwe requires trade-finance instruments aligned with local business realities. These could include pooled SME guarantees, performance bonds, micro-hedging tools, export credit insurance, warehouse-receipt finance, receivables finance and short-term working-capital loans. Blended finance from public entities, development banks, commercial banks and regional trade-finance agencies could also help reduce risk for banks and firms.

Market information is another major constraint. Many firms lack reliable data

on demand trends across Africa, buyer preferences, standards, pricing, logistics costs, Rules of Origin requirements, and potential distribution channels. Current outreach is fragmented and largely focused on familiar Southern African markets. Firms have limited knowledge of opportunities in North, West, Central, and East Africa.

This information gap is both geographic and institutional. Large firms have better access to trade fairs, policy platforms and market intelligence, whereas SMEs are often excluded. Market information systems should therefore support SMEs and new exporters, not just established regional traders. Practical support should include buyer databases, sector-specific market intelligence, standards guidance, logistics mapping, Rules of Origin compliance tools and export clinics.

Capacity building should also move beyond general awareness. Firms require practical, shipment-level support with HS classification, Rules of Origin calculations, documentation, standards compliance, NTB reporting, customs procedures and certification. Training should be assessed by whether it enables firms to complete compliant transactions, not merely by the number of workshops held.

4.7. Developmental Outcomes and Conditional Benefits

The findings indicate that the AfCFTA offers Zimbabwe real socio-economic opportunities, but these benefits remain conditional. Respondents identified potential gains from export expansion, industrialization, value addition, regional and continental investment, employment creation, participation in regional value chains, technology transfer and improved consumer welfare. This supports the African Union's view of the AfCFTA as a framework for establishing a single continental market and deepening economic integration [110]. It also aligns with World Bank projections that the AfCFTA could increase trade, incomes, employment and poverty reduction, provided complementary reforms are implemented [2].

However, the study confirms UNCTAD's warning that the benefits of the AfCFTA are not automatic [18]. In Zimbabwe, potential benefits are constrained by macroeconomic instability, high production costs, foreign-exchange volatility, weak industrial competitiveness, fragmented institutional efforts, infrastructure deficits, costly licensing, and limited participation in intermediate-goods manufacturing.

The evidence suggests that Zimbabwe's cost structure remains higher than that of many regional competitors. Even where tariff preferences reduce border costs, firms may remain uncompetitive if energy, finance, tax, logistics, compliance and infrastructure costs remain elevated. Tariff liberalization can therefore be offset by domestic cost barriers.

The findings further show that Zimbabwe's current engagement is largely focused on trade in goods, particularly customs inefficiencies, Rules of Origin, non-tariff barriers, transit arrangements and border costs. Less attention is paid to services, investment, intellectual property rights, competition policy, digital trade

and dispute settlement. This narrow focus may limit the realization of deeper AfCFTA benefits, particularly in services, innovation, digital trade and investment-led value-chain development.

The study, therefore, argues that Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from the AfCFTA depends less on access to the continental market than on domestic readiness to use it productively. Benefits will depend on macroeconomic stabilization, domestic legalization, industrial upgrading, trade finance, infrastructure investment, market intelligence, institutional coordination and firm-level compliance support.

4.8. Discussion: Zimbabwe as a Mid-Tier Integrator

Collectively, the findings show that Zimbabwe has made clear political and institutional commitments to the AfCFTA. Still, its ability to translate these commitments into effective integration and measurable development gains remains constrained by structural, institutional and political economy barriers. Objective A showed that Zimbabwe's overall integration is moderate and incomplete. Objective B showed that structural constraints, weak institutions, fragmented incentives, limited finance, poor infrastructure and uneven sector governance shape this incompleteness. Objective C showed that socio-economic benefits are real but conditional on Zimbabwe's ability to address these constraints.

The findings therefore support the thesis's central argument that Zimbabwe is best understood as a mid-tier integrator. It has joined the AfCFTA on political grounds. It participates in regional trade, but it has not yet established the domestic legal, institutional, productive, financial, and infrastructural systems required for full utilization. Its challenge is not simply a lack of political will. Rather, it lies in translating political commitment into binding legal instruments, coordinated institutions, firm-level readiness and practical trade integration.

This study contributes to AfCFTA scholarship in four ways. First, it distinguishes between formal participation and operational readiness. Zimbabwe has joined the AfCFTA, but the domestic legal, institutional and commercial frameworks for effective use remain incomplete. Second, it shows that Rules of Origin compliance is an industrial capacity issue rather than merely a customs issue, as reliance on imported inputs limits the utilization of preferences. Third, it identifies a trade-finance mismatch and a bankability trap that restricts SMEs and new exporters from accessing AfCFTA opportunities. Fourth, it shows that AfCFTA benefits may be unevenly distributed unless policies deliberately include SMEs, non-exporters, and less-connected firms through capacity-building, market information systems, trade finance, and inclusive policy platforms.

Zimbabwe's AfCFTA strategy should therefore shift from commitment to implementation, from protectionism to competitiveness, from awareness to firm-level compliance, and from market access to productive transformation. Without macroeconomic stabilization, domestication of the law, industrial upgrading, infrastructure development, trade finance and inclusive governance, Zimbabwe risks participating in the AfCFTA without fully benefiting from it. Conversely, if

these reforms are pursued, the AfCFTA can serve as a platform for export expansion, engagement in regional value chains, industrial growth, job creation, and broader socio-economic development.

4.9. Policy Implications: Towards an AfCFTA National Trade Ecosystem

The findings point to the need for a more integrated national implementation framework. Zimbabwe's AfCFTA strategy should not be limited to tariff liberalization or general awareness campaigns. It should be organized as a coordinated national trade ecosystem that integrates policy alignment, industrial development, trade facilitation, finance, market information, public-private collaboration, and monitoring.

First, Zimbabwe needs stronger policy and institutional alignment. This requires domesticating AfCFTA commitments, amending relevant customs and trade legislation, gazetting tariff schedules, clarifying Rules of Origin procedures, and harmonizing AfCFTA obligations with those of SADC and COMESA.

Second, Zimbabwe requires industrial and investment development. SEZs and EPZs should be transformed from isolated investment zones into value-chain hubs that support local sourcing, supplier development, Rules of Origin compliance, export readiness and regional production networks. Industrial support should focus on sectors with potential in agro-processing, mineral beneficiation, pharmaceuticals, packaging, textiles, digital services and intermediate goods.

Third, trade facilitation must be strengthened. This includes simplifying customs procedures, improving system interoperability, expanding single-window functionality, reducing corridor disruptions, improving NTB reporting, and establishing SME-friendly compliance pathways.

Fourth, trade finance should be embedded in AfCFTA implementation. Zimbabwe needs export credit, guarantees, working capital finance, receivables finance, warehouse-receipt finance, micro-hedging tools, and blended finance instruments tailored to SMEs and new exporters.

Fifth, public-private collaboration and awareness should become more inclusive and practical. Training should move beyond general AfCFTA awareness and focus on firm-level compliance, documentation, standards, HS classification, Rules of Origin, market entry strategies, and shipment execution. SMEs should be formally integrated into AfCFTA policy platforms to prevent implementation from favouring established firms alone.

Overall, Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration will depend on whether the country can build a coherent national trade ecosystem that translates continental commitments into legal certainty, productive capacity, firm-level utilization, and inclusive development outcomes.

5. Contribution of the Study: The AfCFTA National Trade Ecosystem

This study's primary contribution is the development of the AfCFTA National

Trade Ecosystem (AfCFTANTE), illustrated in **Figure 1**. The model presents an institutional and governance framework for strengthening Zimbabwe's transition from formal participation in the AfCFTA to operational integration, improved competitiveness, and inclusive socio-economic growth. It builds on the findings from Objectives A, B, and C, which show that Zimbabwe has demonstrated political commitment through ratification, tariff negotiations, customs modernization, regional participation, and institutional engagement. However, implementation remains incomplete, fragmented, and weakly coordinated. The seven pillars of AfCFTANTE are directly grounded in the empirical findings: legal and institutional gaps inform the policy alignment pillar; industrial weaknesses and Rules of Origin constraints inform productive capacity; corridor delays and customs uncertainty inform trade facilitation; finance shortages inform trade finance; unequal access to information and policy platforms inform public-private collaboration; and weak implementation tracking informs monitoring, evaluation, and feedback. The need for AfCFTANTE, therefore, stems from the central finding that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA challenges are interconnected. Legal domestication, tariff gazetting, Rules of Origin compliance, customs procedures, trade finance, infrastructure, market intelligence, industrial competitiveness, SME inclusion, monitoring, and stakeholder coordination cannot be addressed in isolation. These constraints are part of a broader political economy ecosystem that determines whether access to the continental market translates into real gains in trade, investment, production, and welfare.

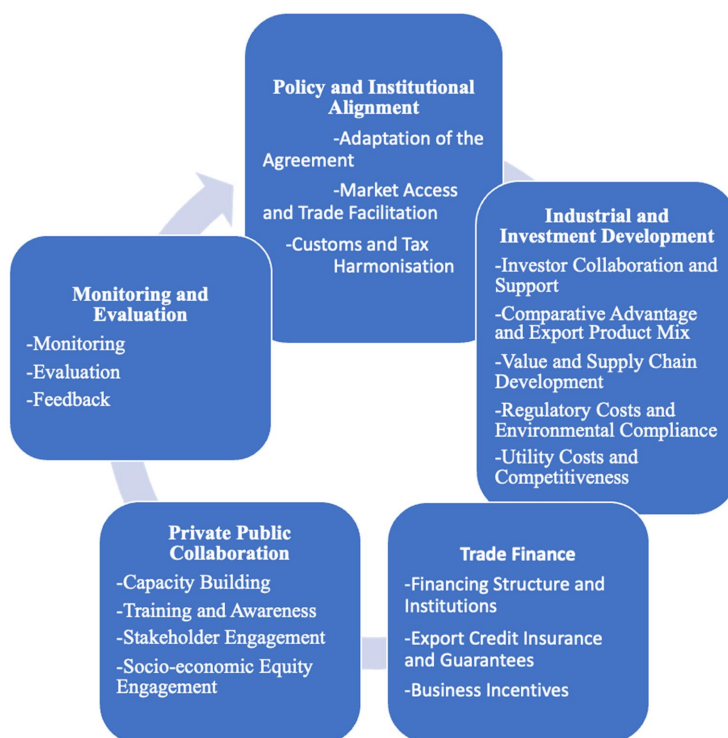


Figure 1. AfCFTA national trade ecosystem. (Source Researcher's Implementation Framework Model).

This contribution extends classical regional integration theory, which emphasizes tariff reduction, trade creation, larger markets and economies of scale [6] [111]. It also builds on political economy and institutional approaches, which show that integration outcomes depend on domestic institutions, state capacity, distributional bargaining and governments' ability to coordinate reforms across sectors [112]-[114]. While the AfCFTA literature highlights tariff liberalization, non-tariff barrier reduction, customs cooperation, trade facilitation, industrialization, SME participation and regional value-chain development as key implementation priorities [2] [20] [110], these issues are often treated in isolation. AfCFTANTE contributes by integrating them into a single national trade ecosystem.

The distinctiveness of AfCFTANTE lies in its shift from formal membership to operational capacity. It recognizes that firms cannot benefit from AfCFTA preferences merely because Zimbabwe has ratified the agreement or reduced tariffs. Firms require enforceable domestic laws, predictable customs procedures, affordable trade finance, stable currency conditions, reliable infrastructure, practical support for Rules of Origin, market intelligence, digital trade tools, sector-specific upgrading, and sustained public-private collaboration. In this sense, AfCFTANTE reframes AfCFTA implementation as a coordinated national system rather than a sequence of isolated administrative reforms.

5.1. Policy and Institutional Alignment

This pillar addresses the finding in Section 4.2 that Zimbabwe has progressed beyond formal membership but has not yet reached full operational use, primarily because tariff schedules, customs procedures, Rules of Origin systems, and domestic legal instruments are still incomplete. The AfCFTANTE emphasizes that policy and institutional alignment is imperative if Zimbabwe is to fully participate in the AfCFTA. The findings show that incomplete domestication, delayed tariff gazetting, fragmented institutional mandates and unclear interactions among AfCFTA, SADC and COMESA obligations constrain Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation. Although ratification demonstrates political commitment, it does not automatically create enforceable domestic obligations. Under Zimbabwe's constitutional and statutory framework, treaty commitments require domestic legal incorporation before they can provide certainty for customs authorities, regulators, investors and firms.

AfCFTANTE therefore proposes a coherent legal and institutional architecture. This includes an AfCFTA Implementation and Harmonization Act, clear domestication timelines, gazetted tariff schedules, harmonized customs procedures, conflict-of-laws guidance on AfCFTA, SADC and COMESA obligations, and parliamentary oversight. The framework also proposes an AfCFTA Commission as a central coordinating institution responsible for implementation, monitoring and inter-agency alignment.

This contribution treats domestication not merely as a legal act but as an eco-

system function. Legal alignment must be linked to tariff implementation, customs procedures, Rules of Origin certification, regulatory reform, private-sector awareness, digital systems, and monitoring. Without such alignment, AfCFTA commitments risk remaining policy declarations rather than operational tools for firms.

5.2. From Protectionism to Performance-Based Competitiveness

This pillar is based on the finding in Section 4.4 that Zimbabwean firms frequently facilitate access to regional markets yet still rely on domestic protections, creating a policy tension between liberalization and immediate industrial shielding. This pillar seeks to primarily address the framework's treatment of protectionism. The findings show that Zimbabwe's trade regime remains characterized by high levels of protection, non-tariff barriers, licensing requirements, and policy instruments such as SI 122/2017. While such measures may temporarily protect selected industries, they can also create uncertainty, raise input costs, encourage rent-seeking, reduce incentives to improve productivity, and conflict with AfCFTA liberalization commitments.

AfCFTANTE does not advocate abrupt liberalization without adjustment support. Instead, it recommends a transition from discretionary protection to rules-based, performance-linked competitiveness. Protection for vulnerable industries should be transparent, time-bound and linked to measurable upgrading outcomes, such as productivity improvements, export readiness, standards compliance, local sourcing and Rules of Origin preparedness.

This contribution refines the policy debate by recognizing the political economy reality that firms may support access to regional markets while resisting import competition at home. Therefore, AfCFTA implementation in Zimbabwe requires a managed transition in which tariff rationalization, review of non-tariff measures, customs simplification, SME support and industrial capacity development are pursued together.

5.3. Industrial Upgrading and Rules of Origin Compliance

This pillar relates to the findings in Section 4.3, which highlighted how dependence on imported inputs, limited knowledge of Rules of Origin, and weak productive capacity restrict firms' ability to fully benefit from AfCFTA tariff preferences. This pillar treats RoOs as an industrial policy issue rather than merely a customs matter. The findings show that many Zimbabwean firms rely heavily on imported raw materials and intermediate inputs, which may prevent them from qualifying for AfCFTA preferences. Firms may therefore have market opportunities but still fail to utilize tariff preferences because their production structures do not meet the origin requirements.

AfCFTANTE therefore links Rules of Origin compliance to industrial upgrading, supplier development, value chain mapping, local sourcing, standards compliance, and firm-level technical support. It proposes sector-specific upgrade

strategies for agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, packaging, textiles, mining beneficiation, tradable services, and intermediate-goods production. This approach helps Zimbabwe move beyond raw-material exports towards value-added production and greater participation in regional value chains.

The framework thus contributes to the AfCFTA implementation literature by showing that preference utilization depends on productive capability. Tariff reductions alone cannot generate export growth if firms cannot produce competitively, meet standards, document origin, access inputs and deliver reliably.

5.4. Trade Facilitation, Infrastructure and Digital Systems

This pillar reflects the findings in Section 4.5, which show that corridor delays, inconsistent customs classification, road checkpoints, post-clearance inspections and weak system interoperability increase trade costs and reduce predictability for firms. The pillar simplifies the integration of trade facilitation, infrastructure and digital systems into the national trade ecosystem. The findings indicate that Zimbabwean firms continue to face these constraints, including corridor delays, inconsistent customs classification, road checkpoints, post-clearance inspections, weak system interoperability and incomplete single-window functionality. These constraints increase costs, reduce predictability and weaken Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from AfCFTA preferences.

AfCFTANTE treats trade facilitation as more than border efficiency. It links customs modernization to digital documentation, electronic Certificates of Origin, non-tariff barrier reporting, risk-based inspections, corridor service charters, single-window systems, PAPSS readiness, market intelligence platforms, and firm-level compliance tools. This integrated approach is important because trade preferences have limited value if firms cannot move goods quickly, predictably, and affordably.

The implementation framework also links infrastructure to industrial competitiveness. Reliable energy, transport corridors, ICT systems, SEZ infrastructure and logistics networks are treated as productive capabilities rather than mere public works projects. SEZs and EPZs should therefore serve as value-chain hubs, linked to local suppliers, customs systems, finance, standards and regional markets.

5.5. Trade Finance, Currency Stability and Cross-Border Payments

This pillar responds to the findings in Section 4.6 that trade finance remains a significant obstacle to AfCFTA utilization, especially for SMEs and new exporters who need working capital, guarantees, certification finance, and affordable foreign currency to participate effectively in regional trade. This pillar, therefore, positions trade finance as a central pillar of implementation. The findings show that Zimbabwean firms, especially SMEs, struggle to access working capital, export guarantees, trade credit insurance, letters of credit, performance bonds, cross-border finance and affordable foreign currency. Existing financial instruments are

often mismatched to firm size, collateral capacity, currency needs or export-readiness levels.

AfCFTANTE frames trade finance as part of the national trade ecosystem rather than as a standalone banking issue. It proposes pooled SME guarantees, first-loss facilities, micro-hedging instruments, receivables-backed finance, warehouse-receipt finance, export credit insurance, pre- and post-shipment finance, and performance bonds. These tools would help firms finance inputs, certification, packaging, logistics, standards compliance, and regional orders.

The framework also links trade finance to currency stability and payment systems. PAPSS can reduce reliance on hard-currency settlement, but it cannot replace macroeconomic stability, credible foreign-exchange management, or confidence in domestic settlement systems. This contribution shows that finance, currency, and payments are core conditions for the utilization of preferences and export growth.

5.6. Inclusive Public-Private Collaboration

This pillar is based on the observation that engagement with AfCFTA-related policy platforms varies, with larger, regionally active firms having better access to information, finance, and policy influence, whereas SMEs and less-connected companies are more likely to be excluded. This pillar therefore emphasizes inclusive public-private collaboration. The findings show that Zimbabwe's current consultation and implementation platforms tend to favour larger, regionally active firms. SMEs, women-owned enterprises, youth-led firms, and new exporters often have weaker access to finance, information, compliance support, trade platforms, and policy influence.

AfCFTANTE places equity and stakeholder participation at the heart of implementation. It proposes structured sectoral dialogues, SME forums, investor roundtables, customs-business consultations, academic-policy platforms, regional trade clinics, and practical firm-level support. Public-private collaboration should not be limited to consultation; it should serve as a problem-solving mechanism to identify bottlenecks, test solutions, monitor implementation, and improve policy design.

This contribution is significant because it shows that AfCFTA implementation is not socially neutral. Without deliberate, inclusive mechanisms, AfCFTA benefits may be captured mainly by large firms, leaving SMEs and new exporters marginalized. The implementation framework, therefore, links competitiveness with inclusion.

5.7. Monitoring, Evaluation and Feedback (MEF)

This pillar addresses the study's finding that Zimbabwe lacks a dedicated AfCFTA implementation committee, and therefore a system is needed to monitor and track whether tariff liberalization, trade reforms, SME support, Rules of Origin compliance, and financing are effectively used by firms. The pillar's contribution is the

introduction of monitoring, evaluation and feedback as a core pillar of AfCFTA implementation. The findings show that Zimbabwe lacks a robust AfCFTA-specific monitoring system. Without systematic tracking, policymakers cannot determine whether tariff liberalization is increasing exports, whether non-tariff barriers are being resolved, whether SMEs are utilizing preferences, whether Rules of Origin compliance is improving, or whether trade facilitation reforms are reducing costs.

AfCFTANTE proposes a monitoring system to track tariff implementation, non-tariff barrier resolution, customs clearance times, trade volumes, export diversification, Rules of Origin certification, SME participation, financing uptake, investment flows, infrastructure performance, PAPSS usage and employment impacts. The implementation framework also tracks inclusion by measuring participation across SMEs, women-owned businesses, youth-led enterprises, sectors and regions.

MEF also makes AfCFTANTE a learning system rather than a static framework. Implementation data should feed back into policy reform, capacity building, financing instruments, trade facilitation improvements, and industrial support. This cyclical structure distinguishes the implementation framework from linear implementation approaches.

5.8. Operational Sequencing and the AfCFTA Commission

This pillar stems from the study's main conclusion that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA challenges are interconnected and cannot be addressed through isolated reforms. This is because aspects such as domestic legalization, productive capacity, trade finance, customs predictability, market information, and institutional coordination are interdependent. This pillar's contribution addresses the operational sequencing of reforms. The findings show that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation cannot follow a simple linear model in which tariff cuts and automatic export growth follow ratification. Tariff reductions will not yield trade gains without productive capacity; productive capacity requires finance and infrastructure; finance requires currency stability and bankable firms; and firms require compliance with Rules of Origin, standards, customs predictability and market intelligence.

AfCFTANTE, therefore, proposes an iterative sequencing process. The first phase should focus on domesticating legal frameworks, gazetting tariffs, coordinating institutions and establishing the AfCFTA Commission. The second should focus on harmonizing customs and taxation, reporting non-tariff barriers, digital certification and trade facilitation. The third should support industrial upgrading, Rules of Origin compliance, market intelligence and sectoral value chains. The fourth should expand trade finance, export guarantees, investment facilitation and SME inclusion. The fifth should strengthen monitoring, evaluation and feedback.

The proposed AfCFTA Commission would serve as the operational body responsible for coordinating the AfCFTANTE. It would align ministries, agencies, customs authorities, financiers, infrastructure bodies, business associations, uni-

versities and regional partners. Its mandate would include legal coordination, tariff implementation, Rules of Origin support, non-tariff barrier resolution, capacity building, trade finance coordination, private-sector engagement, and monitoring and oversight of implementation.

5.9. Overall Contribution

Overall, the AfCFTA National Trade Ecosystem contributes to knowledge by showing that Zimbabwe's limited integration into the AfCFTA is not primarily due to a lack of political will. Rather, it stems from incomplete domestication of the legal framework, fragmented institutions, weak productive capacity, high transaction costs, limited access to trade finance, infrastructure constraints, currency volatility, uneven private-sector participation, and weak monitoring systems.

The framework contributes theoretically by extending the regional integration and political economy literature from formal commitments to operational capacity. It contributes empirically by providing Zimbabwe-specific evidence on how legal, industrial, financial, infrastructural, institutional and firm-level constraints interact to shape readiness for the AfCFTA. It contributes practically by proposing an integrated implementation framework to guide Zimbabwe's transition from symbolic participation to effective, competitive and inclusive integration.

In this respect, AfCFTANTE is both a conceptual and a policy contribution. It reframes AfCFTA implementation as a national trade ecosystem and provides a roadmap for coordinating institutions, policies, firms, financiers, infrastructure agencies and trade-support organizations towards measurable implementation goals. Its central argument is that Zimbabwe can meaningfully benefit from the AfCFTA only if access to the continental market is matched by domestic legal certainty, productive capacity, trade finance, infrastructure readiness, digital systems, inclusive governance and continuous monitoring.

6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This article examined Zimbabwe's readiness for full integration into the African Continental Free Trade Area, focusing on institutional readiness, implementation gaps, political economy constraints and developmental outcomes. The findings show that Zimbabwe has demonstrated formal political commitment through ratification, participation in regional frameworks, tariff scheduling, customs modernization and institutional engagement. However, this commitment has not yet translated into full operational readiness.

Zimbabwe occupies a mid-tier position in integration. It has taken foundational steps towards AfCFTA participation. Still, actual integration remains limited, uneven, and constrained by delayed domestic legalization, incomplete operationalization of market access, fragmented institutional coordination, weak industrial capacity, limited trade finance, infrastructure deficits, and continued reliance on protectionist instruments such as SI 122/2017. This confirms that Zimbabwe's

AfCFTA challenge is not primarily a lack of political will but rather a gap between formal commitments and the capacity for practical implementation.

The findings further indicate that Zimbabwe's productive sector is not yet sufficiently prepared to capitalize on opportunities under the AfCFTA. Heavy reliance on imported inputs, limited domestic value addition, low levels of technological upgrading, weak export readiness and difficulties in meeting Rules of Origin requirements reduce firms' ability to utilize tariff preferences. These constraints are particularly pronounced among SMEs, which have weaker access to finance, information, policy platforms, compliance tools and export-support mechanisms.

The study also concludes that Zimbabwe's governance and institutional environment remain fragmented. Formal rules, policies and strategies exist, but overlapping mandates, regulatory discretion, high compliance costs, limited coordination and uneven private-sector participation undermine implementation. Large firms are better placed to engage with AfCFTA forums and utilize available support, whereas SMEs remain relatively marginalized. This risks concentrating AfCFTA benefits among established firms unless deliberate inclusion mechanisms are introduced.

Overall, Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from the AfCFTA depends on building an integrated national trade ecosystem. Market access alone is insufficient. The benefits of the AfCFTA will only be meaningful if Zimbabwe strengthens legal certainty, productive capacity, trade finance, infrastructure, customs systems, digital platforms, market intelligence, SME inclusion and monitoring mechanisms. The proposed AfCFTA National Trade Ecosystem Implementation Framework addresses this need by integrating laws, policies, institutions, industrial development, finance, trade facilitation, infrastructure, stakeholder engagement and monitoring into a single implementation framework.

Recent research on AfCFTA implementation supports the ecosystem approach, emphasizing that the agreement's development benefits depend on various factors such as institutional quality and state capacity [115], regulatory coordination and digital preparedness [116], Rules of Origin capabilities and preference use [117] [118], regional value-chain development [119], and firm-level adoption [120]. These factors are more impactful than tariff liberalization alone. This underscores the study's assertion that Zimbabwe requires a coordinated trade ecosystem that links state capacity, domestic policy coherence, productive upgrading, market intelligence, trade finance, and firm-level engagement.

6.1. Policy Recommendations

6.1.1. Strengthen Legal and Institutional Alignment

Zimbabwe should prioritize full legal domestication of AfCFTA commitments. Ratification alone is insufficient unless continental obligations are incorporated into enforceable domestic law. The study recommends the enactment of an AfCFTA Implementation and Harmonization Act to domesticate the agreement,

amend relevant customs and trade legislation, clarify conflict-of-laws issues between AfCFTA, SADC and COMESA obligations, and authorize electronic Rules of Origin certification.

A statutory National AfCFTA Commission should also be established to coordinate implementation across ministries, agencies, private-sector bodies, customs authorities, financiers, infrastructure institutions and development partners. The Commission should have clear Key Performance Indicators, quarterly reporting requirements and parliamentary oversight.

6.1.2. Move from Discretionary Protection to Rules-Based Competitiveness

Zimbabwe should gradually shift from discretionary protection to predictable, rules-based support for competitiveness. Protectionist measures, such as SI 122/2017, should be reviewed and placed on a transparent sunset schedule. Protection should be time-bound, performance-linked and tied to measurable improvements in productivity, export readiness, standards compliance and Rules of Origin preparedness.

The Ministry of Finance and Economic Development should publish a rolling three-year tariff schedule to provide greater certainty for firms and investors. Transitional support should be provided to vulnerable firms, but only if they commit to upgrading, exporting and becoming regionally competitive.

6.1.3. Treat Rules of Origin as an Industrial-Upgrading Challenge

Rules of Origin compliance should be treated as a productive-capacity issue, not merely a customs matter. Many Zimbabwean firms rely heavily on imported inputs, which may prevent them from qualifying for AfCFTA preferences. The Ministry of Industry and Commerce, in collaboration with industry associations, should establish a Rules of Origin Readiness Accelerator to support firms in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, food processing, textiles, apparel, packaging, agro-processing and tradable services.

This programme should support firm-level sourcing audits, HS classification, Rules of Origin calculations, documentation templates, standards certification, packaging improvements, and supplier development strategies. On-site laboratories and pre-verification audits should be introduced within export clusters to reduce post-clearance uncertainty and improve compliance.

6.1.4. Deepen Industrial Capacity and Value-Chain Participation

Zimbabwe should focus on industrial deepening and participation in regional value chains. The country should prioritize intermediate-goods production, agro-processing, mineral beneficiation, packaging, pharmaceuticals, textiles, and services in which Rules of Origin thresholds are attainable. Industrial incentives should be linked to measurable outcomes, including export growth, domestic value addition, local input development, productivity gains and employment creation.

SEZs and EPZs should be reformed into value-chain hubs rather than isolated

enclaves. A unified SEZ/EPZ code should provide clear incentives, reliable infrastructure, local supplier linkages and support for Rules of Origin. Corridor-linked industrial clusters with stable power, efficient logistics, and on-site trade facilitation services should be prioritized.

6.1.5. Improve Trade Facilitation and Corridor Reliability

Zimbabwe should reduce the cost and unpredictability of cross-border trade. ZIMRA and relevant enforcement agencies should adopt risk-based inspection systems, reduce reliance on random roadblocks, standardize customs documentation, and publish binding guidance on tariffs and Rules of Origin. Corridor service charters should be introduced to set out clearance times, inspection procedures, complaint channels, and agency responsibilities.

A national single-window system should be strengthened to integrate customs, standards, licences, certificates, tax clearance and Rules of Origin documentation. Digital tools should also support electronic certificates, non-tariff barrier reporting, shipment tracking and customs interoperability with neighbouring countries.

6.1.6. Build an Export-Oriented Trade Finance Ecosystem

Zimbabwe should establish a trade-finance system tailored to SMEs and emerging exporters. The Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, banks, Afreximbank, insurers and development partners should develop pooled SME guarantees, first-loss facilities, export credit insurance, performance bonds, receivables finance, warehouse-receipt finance, and pre- and post-shipment finance.

Trade finance should be linked to export milestones, Rules of Origin compliance, firm upgrading and regional orders. Foreign-exchange surrender and retention rules should be clarified and stabilized to reduce risk premiums and encourage exporters to retain liquidity in the domestic financial system.

6.1.7. Expand Market Intelligence and SME Inclusion

Establish a Zimbabwe AfCFTA Market Observatory to provide firms with reliable market intelligence on demand trends, buyer requirements, pricing, standards, logistics costs, tariffs, Rules of Origin, and opportunities beyond traditional Southern African markets. Particular attention should be given to North, West, Central, and East African markets.

SME representation should be formalized within AfCFTA committees and implementation platforms. Export clinics should be introduced to move firms from general awareness to shipment readiness. These clinics should provide practical support with product classification, standards, documentation, certification, buyer identification, pricing, packaging, logistics, and non-tariff barrier reporting.

6.1.8. Accelerate Digital Trade and Payment Systems

Reforming digital systems can reduce transaction costs, improve transparency, limit discretion, and enable paperless trade. The government should prioritize electronic Certificates of Origin, digital phytosanitary and quality certificates,

electronic customs documentation, non-tariff barrier reporting systems, real-time shipment tracking, and interoperable payment systems.

A PAPSS pilot should be introduced for selected public procurement and Guided Trade Initiative transactions, with a fallback mechanism until settlement reliability and performance benchmarks are met. Digitalization should also support local software and services firms in developing trade-ready solutions for customs documentation, Rules of Origin calculations, market intelligence, payments and logistics.

6.1.9. Prioritize Energy and Infrastructure for Export Competitiveness

Energy and infrastructure should be central to competitiveness reforms under the AfCFTA. The Ministry of Energy and Power Development should provide dedicated power solutions for export-oriented industrial clusters, SEZs and value-chain hubs. Transport corridors linking Zimbabwe to Mozambique, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Namibia and wider African markets should be prioritized for rehabilitation and coordination.

Infrastructure reform should be linked to export performance, Rules of Origin compliance, SEZ reform, investor facilitation and participation in regional value chains. Reliable energy, efficient logistics and predictable corridor systems are essential for Zimbabwean firms to meet delivery commitments and to compete in continental markets.

6.1.10. Establish Monitoring, Evaluation and Feedback Systems

Zimbabwe should establish a strong AfCFTA-specific monitoring, evaluation and feedback system. The proposed AfCFTA Commission should publish a quarterly dashboard that tracks tariff implementation, Rules of Origin certification, non-tariff barrier resolution, customs clearance times, trade volumes, export diversification, SME participation, trade-finance uptake, PAPSS usage, investment flows, employment outcomes, and sectoral performance.

Monitoring should not only measure aggregate exports. It should also assess who benefits from the AfCFTA, including SMEs, women-owned firms, youth-led enterprises, new exporters, and firms outside traditional regional markets. This would ensure that AfCFTA implementation is both effective and inclusive.

6.2. Areas for Further Research

Future research could examine the legal and institutional effects of an AfCFTA Implementation and Harmonization Act on the use of preferences. Comparative studies could also assess which governance models and Key Performance Indicators are most effective for national AfCFTA implementation bodies across African countries.

Further research is needed on the economy-wide and firm-level effects of phasing out SI 122/2017, the cost of Rules of Origin compliance by sector, and the supplier-development requirements needed to meet local-content thresholds. Additional studies could assess the effectiveness of SEZ and EPZ incentive packages

in promoting Rules of Origin-compliant intermediate manufacturing.

Finally, future work could map Zimbabwe's feasible tasks across regional value chains, particularly in textiles, food processing, pharmaceuticals, packaging, agro-processing, digital services and logistics. This would help identify realistic entry points for Zimbabwe's transition from formal AfCFTA participation to productive, competitive integration across the continent.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the profound support of my supervisors, Prof. Albert Makocheke and Dr Promise Zvavahera, for their expert guidance throughout my research project and to Africa University for the knowledge acquired.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2019) Assessing Regional Integration in Africa IX: Next Steps for the African Continental Free Trade Area. UNECA.
- [2] World Bank (2020) The African Continental Free Trade Area: Economic and Distributional Effects. World Bank.
- [3] African Union (2015) Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. African Union Commission.
- [4] World Trade Organization (2023) World Trade Report 2023: Re-Globalization for a Secure, Inclusive and Sustainable Future. World Trade Organization.
- [5] Amin, S. (1976) Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism. Monthly Review Press.
- [6] Balassa, B. (1961) The Theory of Economic Integration. Richard D. Irwin.
- [7] Lipsey, R.G. (1960) The Theory of Customs Unions: A General Survey. *The Economic Journal*, **70**, 496-513. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2228805>
- [8] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2022) Economic Development in Africa Report 2022: Rethinking the Foundations of Export Diversification in Africa. United Nations.
- [9] African Development Bank (2019) African Economic Outlook 2019. African Development Bank.
- [10] Masiyandima, N., Chigumira, G. and Bara, A. (2011) Sustainable Financing Options for Agriculture in Zimbabwe. ZEPARU Working Paper Series No. ZWPS 02/10. Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit.
- [11] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. and Ruhanya, P. (2020) The History and Political Transition of Zimbabwe: From Mugabe to Mnangagwa. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [12] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2022) African Continental Free Trade Area and Industrialization in Africa. UNECA.
- [13] World Trade Organization (2021) Trade Policy Review: Zimbabwe. World Trade Organization.
- [14] African Development Bank (2021) Africa Regional Integration Index Report. African Development Bank.

- [15] African Union Commission, African Development Bank and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2021) Africa Regional Integration Index Report. African Union Commission.
- [16] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2021) Assessing Regional Integration in Africa X: Africa's Services Trade Liberalization and Integration under the AfCFTA. UNECA.
- [17] Qobo, M. (2007) The Challenges of Regional Integration in Africa: In the Context of Globalization and the Prospects for a United States of Africa. *ISS Paper*, **145**, 1-18.
- [18] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2021) Economic Development in Africa Report 2021: Reaping the Potential Benefits of the African Continental Free Trade Area for Inclusive Growth. United Nations.
- [19] World Trade Organization (2020) Trade Policy Review: Zimbabwe. World Trade Organization.
- [20] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2023) AfCFTA Implementation: From Agreement to Impact. UNECA.
- [21] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2025) AfCFTA Implementation and Regional Value Chains in Africa. UNECA.
- [22] African Union Commission (2025) AfCFTA Implementation and Coordination Report. African Union Commission.
- [23] Overseas Development Institute (2023) Implementing the AfCFTA: National Strategies and Domestic Coordination. Overseas Development Institute.
- [24] Byiers, B., Vanheukelom, J. and Kingombe, C. (2015) A Five Lenses Framework for Analyzing the Political Economy in Regional Integration. European Centre for Development Policy Management.
- [25] Frey, B.S. (1984) International Political Economics. Blackwell.
- [26] Becker, G.S. (1976) The Economic Approach to Human Behavior. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226217062.001.0001>
- [27] Binha, O. and Mwakurudza, K. (2020) An Analysis of the Concept of Derogation in Regional and Continental Integration: A Case of Zimbabwe? *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, **10**, 535-545. <https://doi.org/10.29322/ijsrp.10.12.2020.p10861>
- [28] Dzimiri, P. (2019) An Examination of the SADC Regional Integration Posture in the Context of the Contested 2008 Election Run-Off in Zimbabwe. In: *African Borders, Conflict, Regional and Continental Integration*, Routledge, 172-196. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429057014-9>
- [29] Mugano, G., Le Roux, P. and Brookes, M. (2013) The Impact of Most Favoured Nation Tariff Rate on Zimbabwe. *International Journal of Physical and Social Sciences*, **3**, 231-250.
- [30] Abrego, L., de Zamaroczy, M., Gursoy, T., Nicholls, G., Perez-Saiz, H. and Rosas, J. (2020) The African Continental Free Trade Area: Potential Economic Impact and Challenges. *Staff Discussion Notes*, **20**, 41. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513542379.006>
- [31] Fusacchia, I., Balié, J. and Salvatici, L. (2021) The AfCFTA Impact on Agricultural and Food Trade: A Value Added Perspective. *European Review of Agricultural Economics*, **49**, 237-284. <https://doi.org/10.1093/erae/jbab046>
- [32] Mataba, K. and Ismail, F. (2021) COVID-19 and Trade Facilitation in Southern Africa: Implications for the AfCFTA. SA-TIED Working Paper No. 171. Southern Af-

rica–Towards Inclusive Economic Development.

- [33] Bayale, N., Ibrahim, M. and Atta-Mensah, J. (2022) Potential Trade, Welfare and Revenue Implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) for Ghana: An Application of Partial Equilibrium Model. *Journal of Public Affairs*, **22**, e2385. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2385>
- [34] Olajumoke, A.O. and Anaele, A.A. (2021) Economic Integration and Nigeria Signature on the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3820066>
- [35] Shinyekwa, I.M.B., Bulime, E.N.W. and Nattabi, A.K. (2021) Trade, Revenue, and Welfare Effects of the AfCFTA on the EAC: An Application of Wits-Smart Simulation Model. *Business Strategy & Development*, **4**, 59-74. <https://doi.org/10.1002/bsd2.157>
- [36] Woode, G. (2024) Distributional Impact of Africa Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on Poverty Reduction & Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4830742>
- [37] Geda, A. and Yimer, A. (2023) The Trade Effects of the African Continental Free Trade Area: An Empirical Analysis. *The World Economy*, **46**, 328-345. <https://doi.org/10.1111/twec.13362>
- [38] Gilpin, R. (1987) *The Political Economy of International Relations*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400882779>
- [39] Keohane, R.O. (1984) *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.
- [40] Strange, S. (1988) *States and Markets*. Pinter.
- [41] Cohen, B.J. (2008) *International Political Economy: An Intellectual History*. Princeton University Press.
- [42] Paquin, S. (2016) *Theories of International Political Economy*. Oxford University Press.
- [43] Seabrooke, L. and Young, K.L. (2017) The Networks and Niches of International Political Economy. *Review of International Political Economy*, **24**, 288-331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2016.1276949>
- [44] Abdelal, R., Blyth, M. and Parsons, C. (2010) *Constructing the International Economy*. Cornell University Press.
- [45] Best, J. and Paterson, M. (2010) *Cultural Political Economy*. Routledge.
- [46] Frieden, J.A. and Lake, D.A. (2000) *International Political Economy: Perspectives on Global Power and Wealth*. 4th Edition, Routledge.
- [47] Gilpin, R. (1975) *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation: The Political Economy of Foreign Direct Investment*. Basic Books.
- [48] Oatley, T. (2019) *International Political Economy*. 6th Edition, Routledge.
- [49] Walter, A. and Sen, G. (2008) *Analyzing the Global Political Economy*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7swg3>
- [50] Schneider, C.J. (2017) The Political Economy of Regional Integration. *Annual Review of Political Science*, **20**, 229-248. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-023006>
- [51] Haas, E.B. (1958) *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*. Stanford University Press.
- [52] Moravcsik, A. (1998) *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*. Cornell University Press.

- [53] Bach, D.C. (1999) Regionalization in Africa: Integration and Disintegration. James Currey.
- [54] Gibb, R. (2009) Regional Integration and Africa's Development Trajectory: Meta-Theories, Expectations and Reality. *Third World Quarterly*, **30**, 701-721. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590902867136>
- [55] Draper, P. (2010) Rethinking the European Foundations of Sub-Saharan African Regional Economic Integration: A Political Economy Essay. OECD Development Centre Working Paper No. 293. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5km5zrs9075k-en>
- [56] Söderbaum, F. (2015) Rethinking Regionalism. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [57] Corden, W.M. (1972) Monetary Integration. Princeton University Press.
- [58] Krauss, M.B. (1972) Recent Developments in Customs Union Theory: An Interpretive Survey. *Journal of Economic Literature*, **10**, 413-436.
- [59] Whalley, J. (1996) Why Do Countries Seek Regional Trade Agreements? In: Frankel, J.A., *The Regionalization of the World Economy*, University of Chicago Press, 63-90.
- [60] Bonilla Bolao, A.G. (2016) A Step Further in the Theory of Regional Integration: A Look at the Unasur's Integration Strategy. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2780799>
- [61] Aniche, E. (2015) The "Calculus" of Integration or Differentiation in Africa: Post Neo-Functionalism and the Future of African Regional Economic Communities. *International Affairs and Global Strategy*, **36**, 41-52.
- [62] United Nations Industrial Development Organization (2023) International Yearbook of Industrial Statistics 2023. UNIDO.
- [63] United Nations (2024) Sustainable Development Goals Database: Manufacturing Value Added per Capita. United Nations.
- [64] World Bank (2022) Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum: Boosting Productivity and Quality Jobs. World Bank.
- [65] International Monetary Fund (2022) Zimbabwe: Staff Report for the Article IV Consultation. International Monetary Fund.
- [66] Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe (2024) Monetary Policy Statement. Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe.
- [67] Bond, P. and Manyanya, M. (2002) Zimbabwe's Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- [68] Makochekanwa, A. (2012) Zimbabwe's Experience with Trade Liberalization. AERC Research Paper No. 238. African Economic Research Consortium.
- [69] Raftopoulos, B. and Mlambo, A.S. (2009) Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008. Weaver Press.
- [70] Government of Zimbabwe (1991) Zimbabwe: A Framework for Economic Reform, 1991-1995. Government of Zimbabwe. <https://www.econbiz.de/10000838718>
- [71] Kanyenze, G., Kondo, T., Chitambara, P. and Martens, J. (2011) Beyond the Enclave: Towards a Pro-Poor and Inclusive Development Strategy for Zimbabwe. Weaver Press.
- [72] World Bank (1995) Zimbabwe: Achieving Shared Growth. World Bank.
- [73] Government of Zimbabwe (2018) Transitional Stabilisation Programme, October 2018-December 2020. Government of Zimbabwe. <https://zimbabwe.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Transitional-Stabilisation-Pro->

- [gramme-Final.pdf](#)
- [74] Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (2020) National Development Strategy 1: January 2021-December 2025. Government of Zimbabwe.
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40africa/%40ro-abidjan/%40sro-harare/documents/publication/wcms_825100.pdf
 - [75] Ndakaripa, M. (2020) 'Zimbabwe Is Open for Business': Aspects of Post-Mugabe Economic Diplomacy. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, **27**, 363-389.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2020.1826355>
 - [76] Noyes, A. (2020) Zimbabwe's New Dispensation: Reform, Repression, and the Limits of Change. Rand Corporation.
 - [77] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2019) Economic Development in Africa Report 2019: Made in Africa—Rules of Origin for Enhanced Intra-African Trade. United Nations.
 - [78] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2023) Productive Capacities Index. United Nations.
 - [79] Creswell, J.W. and Plano Clark, V.L. (2018) Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research. 3rd Edition, Sage.
 - [80] Kaushik, V. and Walsh, C.A. (2019) Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm and Its Implications for Social Work Research. *Social Sciences*, **8**, Article 255.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8090255>
 - [81] Morgan, D.L. (2014). Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: A Pragmatic Approach. Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544304533>
 - [82] Luke, D. and MacLeod, J. (2019) Inclusive Trade in Africa: The African Continental Free Trade Area in Comparative Perspective. Routledge.
 - [83] Songwe, V. (2019) Intra-African Trade: A Path to Economic Diversification and Inclusion. Brookings Institution.
 - [84] Akinkugbe, O.D. (2020) Dispute Settlement under the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement: A Preliminary Assessment. *African Journal of International and Comparative Law*, **28**, 138-158. <https://doi.org/10.3366/ajicl.2020.0335>
 - [85] Mold, A. and Mukwaya, R. (2016) Modelling the Economic Impact of the Tripartite Free Trade Area: Its Implications for the Economic Geography of Southern, Eastern and Northern Africa. *Journal of African Trade*, **3**, 57-84.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joat.2017.05.003>
 - [86] Feters, M.D., Curry, L.A. and Creswell, J.W. (2013) Achieving Integration in Mixed Methods Designs—Principles and Practices. *Health Services Research*, **48**, 2134-2156.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6773.12117>
 - [87] Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (2021) Foundations of Mixed Methods Research: Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches in the Social and Behavioral Sciences. Sage Publications.
 - [88] Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) Five Misunderstandings about Case-Study Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, **12**, 219-245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>
 - [89] Gerring, J. (2017) Case Study Research: Principles and Practices. 2nd Edition, Cambridge University Press.
 - [90] Yin, R.K. (2018) Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods. 6th Edition, Sage Publications.
 - [91] Daniel, W.W. (1999) Biostatistics: A Foundation for Analysis in the Health Sciences. 7th Edition, Wiley.

- [92] Joshi, A., Kale, S., Chandel, S. and Pal, D. (2015) Likert Scale: Explored and Explained. *British Journal of Applied Science & Technology*, **7**, 396-403. <https://doi.org/10.9734/bjast/2015/14975>
- [93] Sauro, J. and Dumas, J.S. (2009) Comparison of Three One-Question, Post-Task Usability Questionnaires. *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Boston, 4-9 April 2009, 1599-1608.
- [94] Field, A. (2018) *Discovering Statistics Using IBM SPSS Statistics*. 5th Edition, Sage.
- [95] Pallant, J. (2020) *SPSS Survival Manual: A Step by Step Guide to Data Analysis Using IBM SPSS*. 7th Edition, Routledge.
- [96] Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3**, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- [97] Creswell, J.W. (2012) *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. 4th Edition, Pearson.
- [98] Al-Yahmady, H.H. and Al-Abri, S.S. (2013) Using NVivo for Data Analysis in Qualitative Research. *International Interdisciplinary Journal of Education*, **2**, 181-186. <https://doi.org/10.12816/0002914>
- [99] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2017) *Boosting Intra-African Trade: Issues Affecting Intra-African Trade, Proposed Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade and Framework for the Fast-Tracking of a Continental Free Trade Area*. UNECA.
- [100] Khan, M.H. (2010) *Political Settlements and the Governance of Growth-Enhancing Institutions*. SOAS, University of London.
- [101] Rodrik, D. (2018) *Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400888900>
- [102] Jerven, M. (2013) *Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It*. Cornell University Press.
- [103] Silverman, D. (2001) *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*. 2nd Edition, Sage Publications.
- [104] Babbie, E. (2020) *The Practice of Social Research*. 15th Edition, Cengage Learning.
- [105] Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1994) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications.
- [106] Chang, H.J. (2014) *Economics: The User's Guide*. Bloomsbury Press.
- [107] Tralac (2024) *AfCFTA Rules of Origin and Tariff Schedules: Implementation Update*. Trade Law Centre.
- [108] Grossman, G.M. and Helpman, E. (1994) Protection for Sale. *American Economic Review*, **84**, 833-850.
- [109] Rodrik, D. (1995) Political Economy of Trade Policy. In: Grossman, G.M. and Rogoff, K., *Handbook of International Economics*, Elsevier, 1457-1494.
- [110] African Union (2018) *Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area*. African Union.
- [111] Viner, J. (1950) *The Customs Union Issue*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- [112] Mattli, W. (1999) *The Logic of Regional Integration: Europe and Beyond*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511756238>
- [113] North, D.C. (1990) *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511808678>

- [114] Rodrik, D. (2011) The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy. *Asean Economic Bulletin*, **28**, Article 420.
- [115] de Melo, J. and Solleder, J. (2025) How Can the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Help Develop Regional Value Chains across Africa? An Exploration. *Review of World Economics*, **161**, 121-149.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10290-024-00574-0>
- [116] Tsowou, K. and Davis, J. (2021) Reaping the AfCFTA Potential through Well-Functioning Rules of Origin. *Journal of African Trade*, **8**, 88-102.
<https://doi.org/10.2991/jat.k.210428.001>
- [117] Kouty, M. (2024) Boosting the Intra-African Digital Trade in the AfCFTA Context: Does Regulatory Framework Matter? *Digital Economy and Sustainable Development*, **2**, Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44265-024-00036-3>
- [118] Appiah, M.K., Toseafa, E., Sam, A., Danso, F. and Nsowah, A. (2023) Implications of Sustainability Initiatives on African Continental Free Trade Adoption by Firms under Environmental Uncertainty. *International Journal of Development Issues*, **22**, 255-277. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijdi-01-2023-0001>
- [119] Ajibo, C.C. and Kaime, T. (2025) Rules of Origin, Value Chains and African Development under the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. *Journal of African Law*, **69**, 179-195. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021855324000329>
- [120] Omeje, A.N. and Chukwu, N.O. (2025) Impact of Institutional Quality on Trade Competitiveness in African Continental Free Trade Area. *Journal of Economic Structures*, **14**, Article 18. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40008-025-00362-5>