



From Ratification to Utilisation: Zimbabwe's Operational Readiness for Integration into the African Continental Free Trade Area Strategic Clusters 2020-2025

Patience Gawe

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

Email: patiencegawe@yahoo.com

How to cite this paper: Gawe, P. (2026)

From Ratification to Utilisation:

Zimbabwe's Operational Readiness for Integration into the African Continental Free Trade Area Strategic Clusters 2020-2025. *Open Access Library Journal*, 13: e15767.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1115767>

Received: July 15, 2026

Accepted: August 23, 2026

Published: August 26, 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

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) offers African economies an opportunity to expand intra-African trade, deepen regional value chains, and strengthen industrial transformation. For Zimbabwe, however, the benefits of the AfCFTA depend on the country's ability to translate formal treaty commitments into practical market access, firm-level compliance, productive capacity, and trade-support systems. This article evaluates Zimbabwe's level of integration into the AfCFTA, with emphasis on policy alignment, institutional readiness, productive capacity, Rules of Origin compliance, trade facilitation, and market participation. Methods: The article draws on a mixed-methods study that combines documentary analysis, survey results analysed in SPSS, and interview data analysed in NVivo. The analysis focuses on Objective A of a broader study and integrates evidence from trade policy indicators, firm-level responses, and stakeholder interviews. The findings show that Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA is moderate in formal commitments but partial in practical implementation. While the country has ratified the Agreement and engaged in continental policy processes, operational barriers such as delayed tariff publication, incomplete legal framework adaptation, limited market-access tools, protectionist regulations, weak industrial capacity, uneven readiness for Rules of Origin, inadequate trade finance, and persistent trade bottlenecks hinder progress. Evidence shows that many businesses support regional market access yet still prefer protection from regional competition. The findings indicate moderate advances in formal participation and trade facilitation institutions, but partial or incomplete progress in tariff adaptation, industrial capacity, infrastructure, trade finance, market information, SME involvement, and factor-market integration. Overall, Zimbabwe's main challenge is not po-

litical will but translating commitment into enforceable reforms and competitive exports. To improve integration, efforts must focus on legal harmonisation, phased removal of protectionism, support for Rules of Origin, industrial upgrading, better access to trade finance and market intelligence, and more inclusive trade systems.

Subject Areas

Business Analysis

Keywords

AfCFTA, Zimbabwe, Regional Integration, Rules of Origin, Trade Facilitation, Productive Capacity, Trade Policy, Special Economic Zones

1. Introduction

The AfCFTA is a major effort to enhance economic integration across Africa. Its goal is to boost intra-African trade, lower market access barriers, strengthen regional value chains, and develop a larger continental market for goods, services, investments, and business activities [1]-[3]. For Zimbabwe, joining the AfCFTA offers both opportunities and challenges, testing its domestic readiness. While formally acceding to the Agreement provides a legal and diplomatic basis for continental trade, it does not guarantee effective market participation or improve export competitiveness.

The AfCFTA's implementation agenda closely aligns with the Boosting Intra-African Trade (BIAT) framework, which highlights seven key areas for expanding intra-African trade: trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity, trade-related infrastructure, finance, trade information, and factor market integration [4]. These areas provide a solid foundation for assessing Zimbabwe's level of integration because they focus on practical systems, not just legal commitments, that enable a country to participate actively in continental trade. Therefore, integration involves more than tariff reduction; it also encompasses regulatory harmonisation, customs efficiency, productive capacity, infrastructure development, access to finance, market intelligence, and the movement of productive factors. This article examines Zimbabwe's level of integration into the AfCFTA by focusing on the practical relationship between policy commitments and operational readiness in the seven clusters.

Background

Zimbabwe's involvement in regional trade groups such as SADC and COMESA demonstrates formal participation, yet implementation remains inconsistent. Despite committing to protocols on trade liberalisation, investment, competition policy, and services integration, the country's progress in diversifying exports, developing industries, creating jobs, and expanding trade sustainably has been lim-

ited. This raises questions about whether Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA is meaningful or largely symbolic.

Zimbabwe's trade policy is characterised by tension between commitments to liberalisation and a history of discretionary controls. The country often uses statutory instruments, import licensing, tariffs, and other regulations to manage imports, protect local industries, and address macroeconomic pressures. While these measures can provide short-term stability, they risk creating uncertainty and undermining the predictability essential to rules-based trade agreements such as the AfCFTA [5]-[8].

Trade facilitation remains a key aspect of Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA. Despite involvement in regional trade initiatives, the country struggles with complex customs procedures, manual licensing processes, and various regulatory controls, all of which increase transaction costs and create non-tariff barriers [7] [9]. These issues hinder firms' ability to move goods smoothly across borders and to fully exploit the benefits of preferential access to continental markets.

Zimbabwe's productive capacity highlights another key aspect of its integration. The economy is largely reliant on a narrow export portfolio of primary commodities, with declining manufacturing output, persistent trade deficits, high production costs, and limited access to foreign currency. Manufacturing's contribution to GDP has been below 10 per cent in recent years, and capacity utilisation has remained below optimal levels due to structural inefficiencies, limited investment, currency shortages, and competitiveness issues [2] [10]. These factors restrict domestic firms' ability to capitalise on AfCFTA opportunities and integrate into regional value chains.

Trade-related infrastructure further shapes Zimbabwe's capacity to integrate into the AfCFTA. Infrastructure deficits, including transport, border, energy, and logistics constraints, increase production and cross-border trade costs. These weaknesses undermine the country's ability to compete in a larger continental market and diminish the practical value of tariff preferences, as firms cannot move goods efficiently or reliably.

The trade finance cluster is also relevant to Zimbabwe's prospects for integration. Constrained access to international finance, foreign-currency shortages, and macroeconomic instability weaken firms' ability to invest, expand production, and enter new African markets [11] [12]. Without adequate trade finance, Zimbabwean firms may struggle to fulfill export orders, comply with Rules of Origin (RoO), and compete effectively in AfCFTA-related opportunities.

Trade information is crucial, as firms rely on accurate market intelligence to identify export opportunities, understand RoO, meet standards, and access preferential markets. Without robust trade information systems, companies might miss out on AfCFTA opportunities or lack the technical skills to leverage them. This issue is particularly significant for small and medium-sized enterprises, which often face higher barriers related to information and compliance.

Finally, factor market integration influences Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from

the movement and efficient use of labour, skills, capital, and enterprise capabilities across the continental market. Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA therefore depends not only on trade rules but also on whether domestic productive factors can support competitiveness, industrial upgrading, and participation in regional value chains.

Against this background, this article examines Zimbabwe's level of integration into the AfCFTA through the seven BIAT clusters. It focuses on whether Zimbabwe's domestic trade ecosystem is sufficiently aligned with the practical requirements of AfCFTA implementation since ratification of the agreement in 2019. This cluster-based approach enables the article to assess the extent to which Zimbabwe has moved beyond formal participation towards effective integration in continental trade.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

This section reviews the literature on Zimbabwe's level of integration with the AfCFTA, focusing on the seven priority clusters of the BIAT framework. The BIAT framework highlights the key operational areas needed to boost intra-African trade, including trade policy, facilitation, infrastructure, productive capacities, trade finance, factor market integration, and trade information. These clusters provide a useful basis for assessing whether Zimbabwe's engagement with the AfCFTA is merely symbolic or underpinned by domestic policies, institutions, productive sectors, financial systems, and infrastructure capable of supporting meaningful integration.

This study uses an adapted version of the political economy framework developed by Byiers, Vanheukelom and Kingombe [13]. While the original framework includes five lenses, this analysis focuses mainly on four: structural factors; formal and informal institutions; actors, incentives, and agency; and sectoral governance. These lenses were chosen because they align directly with the study's objectives and with the focus on domestic and regional political-economic conditions that shape Zimbabwe's implementation of, and ability to benefit from, the AfCFTA. The fifth lens, external factors, was not treated as a separate analytical category because the study did not systematically gather data on global geopolitical issues, donor actions, or international economic shocks. Nevertheless, external influences, such as sanctions, commodity market conditions, foreign investment, and development partner support, are acknowledged as cross-cutting contextual factors that affect the four main lenses. This adaptation narrows the framework to the dimensions directly supported by the research questions and empirical data, while recognising that it does not offer a full analysis of all external influences on Zimbabwe's AfCFTA involvement. Byiers *et al.* [13] describe the five lenses as tools for identifying actors and factors that facilitate or hinder regional integration. The framework aims to guide political-economy analysis rather than serve as a rigid measurement scale. This approach is particularly relevant to African regional integration because it goes beyond treaty commitments and tariff reduc-

tions to examine domestic conditions, institutional structures, political motivations, and governance processes that shape the implementation of regional agreements. In this article, the IPE framework serves as a tool for analysing Zimbabwe's performance within the BIAT clusters.

Each IPE lens offers a distinct explanation. Structural factors include durable economic and material conditions, such as Zimbabwe's productive base, trade structure, infrastructure, technological capabilities, macroeconomic setting, and access to finance. This lens focuses mainly on BIAT clusters related to productive capacities, trade infrastructure, trade finance, and market integration, while also informing assessments of trade-policy competitiveness. Formal and informal institutions encompass laws, regulations, public organisations, administrative procedures, established practices, and informal norms that influence policy implementation. This lens is used to analyse clusters such as trade policy, trade facilitation, trade finance, trade information, and market integration, particularly regarding tariff domestication, customs procedures, regulatory coordination, institutional mandates, and AfCFTA enforcement. Actors, interests, and agency involve government ministries, border agencies, firms, associations, financial institutions, and other stakeholders. This perspective spans all seven BIAT clusters and helps explain, for example, firms' support for regional market access alongside protection, variations in SME and large-firm participation, and institutional capacity for reform. Sectoral governance concerns coordination, accountability, decision-making, and implementation within and across sectors. It is applied across all clusters to evaluate how trade policy, productive capacity, trade facilitation, infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and market integration are governed and coordinated.

The BIAT framework [4] and the adapted IPE framework [13] serve complementary roles rather than competing classifications. The seven BIAT clusters pinpoint key policy areas where Zimbabwe's AfCFTA readiness and implementation are evaluated. The four IPE lenses illuminate the political, institutional, structural, and actor-related factors that either support or hinder performance in those areas. Structural conditions are especially important for productive capacity, infrastructure, finance, and factor markets; institutions play a key role in trade policy, facilitation, information flow, finance, and factor mobility; actor interests shape implementation across all clusters; and sectoral governance affects coordination and effectiveness within each cluster. External factors influence these relationships across the board but are not assessed as an independent fifth category due to data limitations.

2.1. Structural Factors and Zimbabwe's AfCFTA Integration

Structural factors are crucial for understanding Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA, as they influence the country's ability to compete in regional trade. These include the economy's size and structure, industrial base, export diversity, macroeconomic stability, employment rates, investment trends, ICT develop-

ment, infrastructure quality, geographic location, and regional memberships. According to the BIAT framework, these aspects are closely connected to productive capacities, trade infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration.

At the start of AfCFTA trading in 2021, the literature indicates that Zimbabwe's productive capacity remained constrained by limited industrial transformation and weak manufacturing output. Manufacturing value added per capita remained low, falling from US\$129.1 in 2000 to US\$110.4 in 2024 at constant 2015 prices [14]. Similarly, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) [15] classifies Zimbabwe as a lower-income industrial economy in Africa, with manufacturing value added per capita recently just above US\$100. These patterns imply that Zimbabwe's manufacturing sector had not grown sufficiently to enable significant structural change or a competitive role in regional value chains.

Export diversification remains a vital structural factor. UNCTAD [16] notes that Africa remains among the least diverse regions globally, with many nations relying heavily on primary commodity exports. Zimbabwe exemplifies this trend, with its export sector focused mainly on minerals and agriculture, while manufactured exports have declined over time [17]. By 2019, mineral exports accounted for a substantial share of total exports, underscoring the country's dependence on low-value or minimally processed commodities. This situation has direct consequences for AfCFTA integration, as tariff preferences alone are unlikely to yield substantial benefits without improvements in productive capacity, technological advancement, and export diversification.

Macroeconomic instability further hampers Zimbabwe's readiness for the AfCFTA. Research on trade and macroeconomic management shows that low inflation, stable exchange rates, sustainable fiscal balances, and financial stability are crucial for attracting investment, boosting exports, and enhancing competitiveness [18]-[21]. Zimbabwe's chronic inflation, exchange-rate volatility, episodes of multiple currencies, low investment, high informality, and limited structural change have undermined its competitiveness and reduced firms' capacity to capitalise on regional market opportunities [21]. These issues affect several BIAT clusters, especially productive capacity, trade finance, factor market integration, and trade facilitation.

The digital economy is a key aspect of integration. Zimbabwe has seen growth in digital financial services, with digital payment platforms becoming essential for domestic transactions [22]. Nonetheless, challenges persist in digital skills, ICT infrastructure, entrepreneurship, e-government systems, inter-ministerial coordination, and regulatory capacity [22] [23]. Since BIAT focuses on trade information, cross-border transactions, and the smooth movement of trade data, Zimbabwe's digital infrastructure and regulatory readiness are crucial for assessing its integration into the AfCFTA.

2.2. Formal and Informal Institutions in BIAT Implementation

Formal and informal institutions shape Zimbabwe's capacity to implement

AfCFTA commitments at the domestic level. Within BIAT, institutions play crucial roles across trade policy, trade facilitation, trade finance, trade information, and sector governance. This includes trade laws, tariff policies, customs procedures, licensing systems, regulatory enforcement, standards management, property rights, the rule of law, and the history of enforcement of regional trade commitments.

Zimbabwe's policy history since independence reveals an enduring tension between liberalisation and government-led intervention. In the first decade, economic strategies focused primarily on state-led, redistributive approaches aimed at correcting colonial inequalities through initiatives such as the Growth with Equity Policy, the Transitional National Development Plan, and the First Five Year National Development Plan [24]-[27]. While these policies achieved some social improvements, they relied heavily on subsidies to state enterprises and failed to generate sustained productive growth, straining public finances and weakening industrial competitiveness [28].

The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme was Zimbabwe's initial major attempt at economic liberalisation, involving trade reforms, price deregulation, foreign-exchange liberalisation, and public-sector restructuring [29]-[31]. However, the reform efforts were hindered by poor policy sequencing and inconsistent implementation [32], as well as inadequate stakeholder engagement and limited social dialogue [30]. The severe drought of 1991-1992 further weakened agricultural output, exports, government revenue, and demand [32]. Continuous fiscal indiscipline led to increased government borrowing and higher interest rates, undermining macroeconomic stability and private-sector investment [32]. Meanwhile, rapid trade liberalisation exposed an under-competitive manufacturing sector to foreign competition, causing industrial decline and job losses [30] [32]. Additionally, cuts in public spending, employment, wages, and access to social services sparked widespread social and labour resistance to the austerity measures [24] [30]. This history is relevant to AfCFTA implementation because it demonstrates that opening markets without adequate productive capacity, social consensus, infrastructure, and institutional readiness can leave domestic firms exposed to competition before they are prepared.

Later policy frameworks, including ZIMPREST, Vision 2020, STERP, the Medium Term Plan, ZIMASSET, the Transitional Stabilisation Programme, and the National Development Strategy 1, reveal a persistent gap between policy formulation and implementation [33]. These frameworks repeatedly emphasise macroeconomic stability, export-driven growth, value addition, infrastructure, investment, and industrial upgrading, yet implementation is often hindered by policy inconsistencies, fiscal constraints, governance issues, and macroeconomic instability [12] [34]-[40]. Regarding AfCFTA integration, this pattern raises a key question: can Zimbabwe move beyond policy formulation to achieve coordinated, measurable implementation across the seven BIAT clusters?

This literature is particularly relevant to the trade policy and trade facilitation

groups.

Zimbabwe's history of shifting policies, discretionary actions, tariff distortions, non-tariff barriers, and intricate licensing systems indicates that effective rules-based integration requires stronger institutional stability and regulatory consistency. The World Trade Organisation [7] reports that Zimbabwe often kept MFN tariff rates above bound levels for certain products, imposed surtaxes, and used complex non-automatic licensing procedures. These practices can limit the country's ability to meet AfCFTA commitments and to provide firms with the certainty they need for regional trade.

2.3. Incentives, Actors, and Agency in AfCFTA Integration

The incentives, actors, and agency perspective analyse how political leaders, state institutions, private-sector participants, civil society, and other stakeholders influence integration results. Within the BIAT framework, this perspective is crucial because effectively implementing measures such as trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity development, trade finance, trade information, infrastructure, and factor market integration requires coordinated efforts among various actors.

Research indicates that countries pursue regional integration to access larger markets, enhance political influence, increase collective bargaining power, secure infrastructure funding, improve welfare, and strengthen their geopolitical position [8] [41]-[43]. For Zimbabwe, the AfCFTA offers advantages, including entry into a single continental market, opportunities for export growth, price convergence, participation in value chains, expansion of manufacturing, development of the services sector, digital trade prospects, and reduced reliance on imports. Nonetheless, these benefits are not guaranteed and depend on Zimbabwe's ability to overcome structural and institutional challenges that impede competitiveness.

Zimbabwe's incentives to integrate carry notable adjustment risks. While the AfCFTA can boost sectors such as agro-processing, mineral beneficiation, pharmaceuticals, light manufacturing, services trade, and digital growth, these benefits depend on coordinated industrial policies, robust infrastructure, access to trade finance, compliance with standards, stable exchange rates, and effective trade information systems [2] [3] [21] [44] [45]. Without these conditions, Zimbabwe may remain focused on primary exports and continue to import higher-value manufactured goods from more competitive African countries.

The private-sector agency also plays a key role in AfCFTA integration. Zimbabwe has several official platforms for public-private engagement, including the Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency, the National Economic Consultative Forum, the Tripartite Negotiating Forum, the National Competitiveness Commission, the Monetary Policy Committee, and university councils. However, the literature indicates that these institutions are often more representative than effective. Chatham House [46] notes that private-sector interests are fragmented across numerous business associations, and formal public-private dialogue re-

mains weak. This hampers the unification of private-sector interests and limits their influence on trade and industrial policies. Regarding BIAT implementation, this weakness affects trade finance, trade information, productive capacity building, and firms' ability to leverage AfCFTA preferences.

The importance of political leadership cannot be overstated. Vanheukelom *et al.* [47] note that African leaders often sign regional agreements to signal solidarity and legitimacy, even when implementation is not a domestic priority. In Zimbabwe, a long-standing rhetorical commitment to regional integration has often failed to translate into consistent action. The post2017 government's "Zimbabwe is Open for Business" policy aimed to attract investment, foster re-engagement, and boost regional trade. Soon after coming to power, the government ratified the AfCFTA. Yet ongoing governance issues, currency instability, negative perceptions of the country, and limited reform credibility have continued to hinder the policy's effectiveness [39] [40] [48].

2.4. Sector Governance and the BIAT Clusters

Sector governance serves as the link between the IPE framework and the BIAT clusters. It encompasses how sectors are managed, policies are coordinated, institutions collaborate, and implementation responsibilities are allocated. Within the AfCFTA integration context, sector governance influences Zimbabwe's ability to translate commitments into practical results across areas such as trade policy, trade facilitation, infrastructure, productive capacity, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration.

The literature highlights that successful AfCFTA implementation goes beyond tariff removal. It also requires complementary investments in areas such as industrial capacity, infrastructure, customs modernisation, standards compliance, regulatory quality, trade finance, and macroeconomic stability [3] [49] [50]. Zimbabwe's past experience shows that weak coordination, poor sequencing, policy inconsistency, and insufficient monitoring have consistently hindered ambitious development strategies. This is particularly relevant to BIAT, as each cluster requires not only policy commitments but also coordinated execution and measurable results.

Effective governance of productive capacity is crucial. Zimbabwe's strategies have focused on export-led growth, emphasising industrialisation, value addition, beneficiation, SME support, export financing, and integration into value chains. Yet export performance remains weak and unpredictable, largely due to de-industrialisation, exchange-rate fluctuations, policy shifts, high production costs, and limited firm competitiveness [51]-[53]. Within the AfCFTA framework, this hampers Zimbabwe's ability to translate market access into actual export growth.

Trade finance governance remains a challenge. While export incentives such as subsidies, rebates, insurance, and access to foreign currency are crucial for boosting exports, Zimbabwe's current approach relies primarily on foreign-currency allocation mechanisms. Direct export financing and sector-focused support are

limited. Without transparent, well-funded export support systems, re-industrialisation is hindered, and firms struggle to seize opportunities under the AfCFTA [21] [54].

Trade infrastructure and facilitation remain key governance issues. Studies on Zimbabwe's integration highlight obstacles such as power shortages, logistical shortcomings, transport inefficiencies, border congestion, regulatory uncertainty, and complex customs procedures that hamper regional competitiveness [7] [55] [56]. These factors diminish the effectiveness of tariff preferences and constrain Zimbabwe's engagement in regional value chains.

Trade data and digital preparedness shape sector governance within BIAT. Zimbabwe's expansion of digital financial services lays the groundwork for digital trade and cross-border payments, yet challenges such as poor digital infrastructure, skills gaps, unreliable power, and limited regulatory cooperation persist [22] [23]. These issues hinder companies' ability to access market intelligence, understand AfCFTA regulations, meet RoO, and identify regional export opportunities.

2.5. Analytical Framework

This article's analytical framework integrates the seven BIAT clusters with the four IPE lenses from Byiers *et al.* [13]. The BIAT clusters serve as operational categories for evaluating Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration, while the IPE lenses elucidate the political economy factors that influence performance within each cluster.

Trade policy is analysed through formal and informal institutions, with a focus on tariffs, statutory tools, trade regulations, and policy consistency. Trade facilitation is evaluated through customs and border procedures, non-tariff barriers, licensing, and institutional coordination. Productive capacities are examined by looking at manufacturing performance, export diversification, industrial upgrading, value addition, and firm competitiveness. Trade-related infrastructure assessment includes transport, energy, logistics, border systems, ICT infrastructure, and digital connectivity. Trade finance is reviewed by considering access to export funding, foreign currency, investment flows, credit systems, and financial support for exporters. Trade information is analysed through digital platforms, market intelligence, rules-of-origin awareness, standards information, and institutional communication. Factor market integration is examined by looking at the movement and utilisation of labour, skills, capital, entrepreneurship, and productive capabilities that support regional trade.

This framework enables the study to move beyond formal ratification and to measure Zimbabwe's actual integration into the AfCFTA. It emphasises that integration depends not only on legal commitments but also on aligning domestic systems, institutions, actors, incentives, and sector governance with the practical demands of continental trade. Therefore, Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration is assessed by examining how well its trade ecosystem is prepared, coordinated, and functional across the seven BIAT clusters.

3. Methodology

To assess Zimbabwe's current level of integration with the AfCFTA, data collection focused on both formal commitments and practical implementation across the seven BIAT clusters. The study used documentary analysis, in-depth interviews, and a structured firm-level questionnaire to gather comprehensive evidence on Zimbabwe's alignment of trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity, infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration. This methodology aligned with the mixed-methods approach and the four-lens political economy framework of Byiers, Vanheukelom, and Kingombe [13], which links integration outcomes to structural conditions, institutions, actor incentives, and sector governance.

The documentary evidence established the empirical baseline for assessing Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration. Secondary data from sources such as World Integrated Trade Solutions, the World Bank, UNCTAD, AfCFTA Secretariat reports, and the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries were used to construct indicators covering tariffs, non-tariff measures, trade facilitation, export structure, and productive capacity. Regarding trade policy, the study analysed applied MFN tariff averages, tariff dispersion, effective protection, tariff escalation, duty-free lines, and non-automatic licensing. For trade facilitation, measures such as tradingacross-borders indicators and the AfCFTA Country Business Index were used to assess customs efficiency, documentation harmonisation, transit procedures, and the predictability of cross-border trade. Productive capacity was evaluated using export structure, capacity utilisation, and sectoral readiness for intra-African trade.

In-depth interviews complemented the documentary evidence by capturing institutional perspectives on Zimbabwe's practical implementation of its AfCFTA commitments. Officials from key institutions involved in trade policy, customs, investment promotion, export development, monetary policy, industrial development, and international trade negotiations were interviewed. These included the Tariff and Competition Commission, ZIMRA, ZimTrade, ZIDA, RBZ, CZI, ZNCC, the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. The interviews focused on progress in tariff liberalisation, implementation of the tariff offer, management of non-tariff barriers, RoO, customs harmonisation, trade infrastructure, trade finance facilities, trade information systems, and the movement of people, capital, and skills.

The study used purposive sampling within a pragmatic mixed-methods framework to select key informants and export-focused firms relevant to Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration. Key informants were drawn from 12 strategically selected institutions involved in trade policy, customs, investment, export promotion, and industrial development. Of the 24 targeted informants, 15 were interviewed. Firm-level data were collected from export-focused companies listed in the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI), Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce

(ZNCC), and ZimTrade (ZIMTRADE) databases. The firm-level sampling frame purposively targeted export-focused companies, as these firms directly indicate whether AfCFTA commitments lead to trade growth. Only firms listed in these sources and engaged in export activities relevant to the study were included. This yielded a sample of 100 firms across eight sectors: agro-processing, manufacturing, services, construction, chemicals, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and engineering. Firms were distributed as evenly as possible across sectors to ensure comprehensive coverage and to prevent sectors with more listings from skewing the sample.

Daniel's sample-size formula provided a practical guide for determining the target number of firms to approach within the defined sampling frame. The calculation assumed a finite population of 100 firms, a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, an estimated population proportion of 50%, and a z-value of 1.96, yielding a target sample of approximately 80 firms [57]. These parameters informed sample planning and fieldwork adequacy rather than claiming probability-based statistical representativeness, as the firms were selected purposively. The survey was distributed to 81 firms, and 62 valid responses were retained after data cleaning, representing approximately 76.5% of those approached.

The final sample comprised eligible export-focused firms across key sectors, including agro-processing, manufacturing, services, construction, chemicals, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and engineering. This sectoral spread reflects Zimbabwe's economic structure and the challenges of trade diversification and industrial upgrading within the AfCFTA context [2]. While the results are applicable mainly to this institutional sample, they should not be viewed as statistically representative of all firms or exporters in Zimbabwe. This aligns with the study's mixed-methods approach and purposive sampling principles, which prioritise selecting information-rich cases, institutional relevance, and detailed insights over population-wide statistical generalisation [58]-[60]. The structured questionnaire captured firms' perceptions of Zimbabwe's engagement with the AfCFTA. It covered topics such as market access, trade barriers, regulatory requirements, export competitiveness, customs processes, border delays, access to trade finance, market intelligence, and firms' readiness to engage in regional trade. Collecting firm-level data was crucial because Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA cannot be fully understood through policy commitments alone; it must also reflect the actual experiences of firms intended to utilise AfCFTA preferences.

Overall, data collection focused on the seven BIAT clusters to assess whether Zimbabwe's AfCFTA involvement is meaningful or merely superficial. Documentary data identified measurable indicators of integration, interviews revealed the institutional and governance processes underpinning them, and the questionnaire gathered firm-level insights into implementation experiences. This triangulated approach enabled the study to assess Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration status using observable policy, institutional, operational, and private-sector indicators.

Reliability in this study was strengthened through methodological triangulation across diverse data sources, including UN Comtrade, WITS, the World Bank, and

UNCTAD databases. The use of standardised questionnaire items and a uniform semi-structured interview guide also enhanced replicability and procedural reliability [61] [62]. This strategy was well suited to political economy research, where multiple data sources help validate findings in complex institutional settings [63].

Validity was strengthened by closely aligning the research objectives, data collection tools, and analytical framework. Additionally, the seven-point Likert scale enhanced construct validity by capturing detailed firm-level perceptions [64] [65]. Pre-testing refined the instruments' clarity, usability, and reliability. Interview guides were provided to participants in advance to familiarise them with the study's scope and to enable more thoughtful responses.

The study recognised the limitations of qualitative methods, including response bias, the potential influence of recording on participants' openness, and the interpretive nature of interview data. It acknowledged that interviewees may rely on familiar frameworks shaped by prior cultural understandings, partial perspectives, and contextual factors [61] [66]-[68]. To address these issues, the researcher focused on building rapport, establishing trust, practising active listening, and fostering effective communication. Iterative validation was also employed to enhance credibility [61] [67] [69].

Ethical considerations guided the collection and analysis of statistical data, interviews, and questionnaires. These measures ensured credible knowledge generation, prevented data misrepresentation, and upheld intellectual property rights by properly citing sources such as the World Bank, WTO, UNCTAD, TRAINS, IDB, CTS, and UN Comtrade. Participation in interviews and surveys was voluntary, with informed consent obtained beforehand. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and additional consent was obtained for audio recordings. Participants' identities were anonymised, and discussions about institutions were limited to their public roles. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Interview guides and consent forms were provided in advance to support informed participation. Recorded data was stored securely with password protection and deleted once no longer needed.

4. Findings

The study initially targeted 80 firm-level survey responses and received 81. After data cleaning, the number of valid cases for the quantitative analysis ranged from 62 to 65, reflecting item-level non-response and the exclusion of unusable responses for specific variables. Responses were retained if they provided usable data for the variables included in each analysis. The handling and reporting of missing survey data followed the TARMOS framework [70]. In line with its transparency principles, the study details the amount of missing data, the methods used to address it, the valid sample size for each analysis, and the impact of missing data on result interpretation. Item-level missing data is shown in the valid N next to each result, not in a separate missing-data column. For example, an analysis with N = 62 had 19 responses missing or unusable, while N = 65 had 16 missing responses,

corresponding to approximately 23.5% and 19.8% missingness, respectively. Consequently, the study employed available-case analysis, with each descriptive statistic, cross-tabulation, and chi-square test based on the valid cases available for the variables included in that analysis. Although the goal was to include 24 respondents from 12 institutions, the final sample comprised 15 respondents from 10 institutions.

Quantitative data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22, applying analysis-specific available-case procedures. Frequencies, valid percentages, and descriptive statistics were derived from usable responses for each item. When conducting cross-tabulations and chi-square tests, cases with missing data for any involved variables were excluded only from those analyses. As a result, the reported N indicates the number of firms with complete data for each relevant variable. No imputation of missing values was performed.

This available-case approach aligned with the exploratory mixed-methods political economy framework, as the quantitative analysis aimed to detect indicative patterns among purposively selected export-oriented firms rather than produce nationally representative or causally conclusive findings. Valid responses were retained to preserve information across variables. The quantitative findings were integrated with insights from interviews and documents, allowing for methodological triangulation.

Following the TARMOS framework [70], the study recognises the challenges posed by item non-response. Missing data was identified using variable-specific valid sample sizes and categories such as blank responses or no responses. In inferential tests, blank responses were generally treated as missing and excluded, whereas substantive responses such as No comment/never tried were considered valid. No separate missingness indicators were created to assess whether non-response differed by company category or trade participation in Africa, nor was there an analysis of missing-data patterns or a sensitivity analysis to test different assumptions. This means differential non-response effects cannot be ruled out, and the results should be interpreted carefully. The study employed expected-cell checks, Fisher's exact tests where appropriate, and effect-size measures to improve the validity of group comparisons. However, these methods did not analyse the underlying missing-data mechanism, providing some transparent reporting in line with TARMOS recommendations but not the full framework.

Qualitative data from interviews and documentary sources were processed in NVivo to identify the key themes shaping Zimbabwe's level of integration with the AfCFTA. The analysis combined manual thematic coding with NVivo-supported auto-coding, yielding five preliminary clusters: Governance and Policy, Economic Constraints, Trade and Markets, Production and Industry, and Systems and Infrastructure.

The NVivo word tree in **Figure 1** visually depicts the main themes of the integration discourse. Words such as trade, Special Economic Zone (SEZ), policy, institutional alignment, legal compliance, trade protocols, preparedness, negotia-

tion participation, and trade performance indicate that respondents viewed AfCFTA integration as a multifaceted process. This process involves legal, institutional, productive, and market-related aspects, not just ratification.



Figure 1. NVivo word frequency on AfCFTA integration discourse. Source: Author's NVivo analysis (May to October 2024).

The NVivo coding identified five main thematic clusters that summarise respondents' views on Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA. This pattern was confirmed by the thematic analysis as detailed in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Reconstructed NVivo coding five thematic clusters.

Cluster	Average respondent frequency	Dominant themes and frequency	Relevance to AfCFTA integration
Economic constraints	13.0	Currency: 14 respondents (93%) Cost: 14 (93%) Stability: 13 (87%) Taxation: 12 (80%) Finance: 11 (73%)	Shows that macroeconomic instability, cost pressures, taxation, and trade finance gaps remain major constraints on Zimbabwe's operational readiness for AfCFTA participation.
Systems and infrastructure	12.3	Infrastructure: 13 respondents (87%) Logistics: 12 (80%) Systems: 12 (80%) Capacity: 12 (80%)	Highlights the importance of infrastructure, logistics, customs/payment systems, and institutional capacity in enabling effective cross-border trade.
Trade and markets	11.8	Market: 13 respondents (87%) Export: 13 (87%) Trade: 12 (80%) Access: 11 (73%) Participation: 10 (67%)	Indicates awareness of AfCFTA market opportunities, while also pointing to constraints affecting export participation and regional market access.

Continued

Production and industry	11.4	Industry: 13 respondents (87%) Competitiveness: 12 (80%) Production: 11 (73%) Sectors: 11 (73%) Value chains: 10 (67%)	Shows that productive capacity, industrial competitiveness, and value-chain readiness are central to Zimbabwe's ability to benefit from AfCFTA preferences.
Governance and policy	11.2	Policy: 13 respondents (87%) Implementation: 12 (80%) Coordination: 11 (73%) Regulation: 10 (67%) Compliance: 10 (67%)	Reflects the role of policy coherence, institutional coordination, regulatory alignment, and implementation capacity in translating AfCFTA commitments into practice.

Source: Author's NVivo analysis (May to October 2024).

The most frequently mentioned cluster was Economic Constraints, cited by an average of 13 respondents, highlighting issues such as currency instability, costs, taxation, macroeconomic stability, and trade finance. Currency and cost issues were each raised by 14 respondents (93%), while macroeconomic stability was noted by 13 respondents (87%). Systems and Infrastructure also played a key role, with infrastructure mentioned by 13 respondents (87%) and logistics, systems, and capacity each raised by 12 respondents (80%). These results suggest that respondents view Zimbabwe's AfCFTA readiness as involving both policy alignment and the implementation of practical systems to facilitate cross-border trade.

Trade and market-related issues received significant attention. Market and export concerns were highlighted by 13 respondents each (87%), while trade was mentioned by 12 respondents (80%). This indicates that respondents view the AfCFTA as a chance to expand markets, but believe this depends on export competitiveness, market access, and firm-level readiness. Likewise, Production and Industry emerged as vital themes, with industry mentioned by 13 respondents (87%) and competitiveness by 12 respondents (80%). These results emphasise that productive capacity remains crucial for Zimbabwe to turn AfCFTA preferences into tangible trade gains.

The Governance and Policy category had an average of 11.2 respondents. Within this group, 13 respondents (87%) mentioned policy, 12 (80%) discussed implementation, 11 (73%) referenced coordination, and 10 (67%) discussed regulation and compliance. Although not the largest group, this cluster is vital because it highlights the institutional conditions required to translate AfCFTA commitments into tangible results. The focus on policy, implementation, coordination, and compliance indicates that Zimbabwe's main integration challenge partly stems from the gap between formal commitments and limited domestic institutional capacity.

The NVivo findings indicate that Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA is uneven. Respondents emphasised policy alignment, participation in negotiations, adherence to AfCFTA frameworks, and regional market opportunities as key indicators of integration. However, frequent references to currency instability, cost pressures, infrastructure challenges, trade finance gaps, capacity limitations, and coordination issues suggest that operational readiness remains limited. These insights provide a basis for assessing Zimbabwe's integration into the BIAT clusters, particularly in trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity, trade infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration.

Figure 2 shows uneven progress in Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation. Coding linked to ZimTrade and CZI was concentrated around compliance, negotiations, export skills, and private-sector engagement, while coding linked to the Ministry of Industry and Commerce and the RBZ was more closely associated with trade participation, industrial output, monetary stability, and the financial environment affecting firms. Overall, the data indicate that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA implementation remains at an early operational stage, with policy alignment still underway and responsibilities distributed across several institutions. The relatively limited coding around domestic legal frameworks and SEZs suggests that legal domestication, investment facilitation, and industrial-policy coordination are still developing within the integration process.

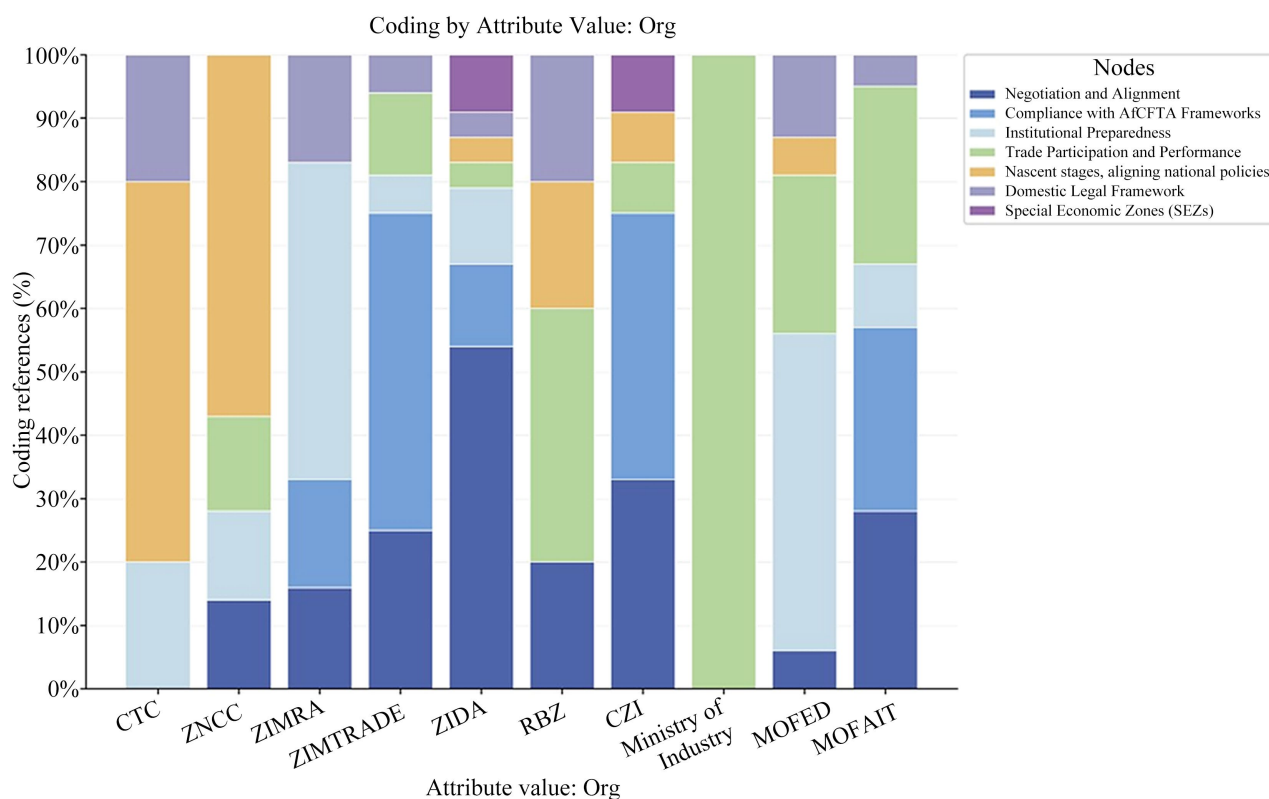


Figure 2. Coding by organisation: AfCFTA institutional readiness and implementation dynamics. Source: Author's NVivo analysis (May to October 2024). Note: **Figure 2** presents aggregated organisational coding patterns and does not attribute statements to individual respondents.

4.1. Trade Policy Indicators and AfCFTA Integration

This subsection summarises findings from documentary reviews, surveys, and interviews on Zimbabwe's alignment of its trade policy with the AfCFTA. The documentary indicators contextualise the main results and help evaluate Zimbabwe's level of integration based on tariff openness, duty-free coverage, non-tariff measures, the business environment, and trade facilitation.

Based on available data, **Table 2** shows that Zimbabwe maintained relatively high applied Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) tariffs at the start of AfCFTA implementation, averaging 18.8% in 2021. This contrasts with Zambia's projected 14.6% in 2025 and with Botswana and South Africa's 7.8% in 2025. Zimbabwe also had the smallest share of MFN duty-free tariff lines at 10.2%, compared with 24.4% for Zambia and 60.3% for both Botswana and South Africa. In the business environment, Zimbabwe ranked 140th out of 190 economies, with a Doing Business score of 54.5, while Zambia was 85th, Botswana 87th, and South Africa 84th. These indicators show that Zimbabwe's trade regime is generally more restrictive than those of some regional comparators. Data also indicate that certain final consumer products are protected at 40% - 60%, whereas some industrial inputs face neutral or even negative protection. About 40% - 45% of Zimbabwe's tariff lines exceed 15%, indicating widespread protection rather than targeted support for export competitiveness. Additionally, the WTO [71] notes extensive use of non-tariff measures, including licensing, permits, and administrative controls, with approximately 80% of imports in some sectors subject to multiple NTMs.

Table 2. Quantitative comparison Zimbabwe, Zambia, Botswana and South Africa between 2021-2025.

Indicator	Zimbabwe	Zambia	Botswana	South Africa	Main data source
Simple average MFN applied tariff, all products	18.8% (2021)	14.6% (2025)	7.8% (2025)	7.8% (2025)	WTO Integrated Database/WTO Tariff & Trade Data Member profiles (MFN simple average, all products)
Share of MFN duty-free tariff lines (all products, % of tariff lines at 0%)	10.2% (2021)	24.4% (2025)	60.3% (2025)	60.3% (2025)	WTO Tariff & Trade Data Member profiles (share of MFN dutyfree lines)
Country business index (Ease of Doing Business, DB 2020-overall rank & score)	Rank 140/190, score 54.5	Rank 85/190, score 66.9	Rank 87/190, score 66.2	Rank 84/190, score 67.0	World Bank <i>Doing Business</i> 2020 country profiles and global rankings (used here as a country business index proxy)

NVivo findings reinforce these conclusions. Within the Governance and Policy cluster, 87% of interviewees mentioned policy, 80% discussed implementation, 73% referred to coordination, and 67% cited regulation and compliance with AfCFTA frameworks. These results indicate that respondents frequently linked Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration to policy alignment, regulatory coordination, and effective implementation.

Interview evidence further indicated that Zimbabwe had made formal progress towards participating in the AfCFTA, including ratifying it in 2019, commencing AfCFTA trading in 2021, and submitting tariff schedules in 2022. However, respondents noted that operational integration remained incomplete because the tariff offer had not yet been fully finalised, gazetted, or domesticated at the time of data collection.

4.2. Compliance with AfCFTA Frameworks

The findings indicate partial compliance with the AfCFTA frameworks. Zimbabwe had ratified the AfCFTA Agreement, participated in negotiations, and submitted tariff schedules for technical consideration. However, interview data indicated delays in the full operationalisation of the tariff offer, particularly regarding Categories B and C, gazetting, and domestic legal enforcement.

Based on the interview evidence, Zimbabwe's tariff offer covered 6606 tariff lines. About 90% of these lines, categorised as Category A, were scheduled for duty elimination, whereas 7% under Category B were subject to a longer phase-out. Category C included sensitive goods that were excluded from full liberalisation. The findings indicate that the Category A offer had advanced to the technical verification or adoption stage, while other parts of the tariff offer process remained unfinished.

Respondents reported that Zimbabwe's participation in the Guided Trade Initiative remains pending because the market-access offer is incomplete and the AfCFTA National Implementation Strategy needs updating. The results highlight a gap between formal commitments and their implementation, particularly in tariff liberalisation, domestication, and legal enforceability.

4.3. Domestic Legal Framework

The interview results suggest that about 10 of 15 interviewees believe Zimbabwe's national policies, particularly those in NDS 1, largely align with AfCFTA goals. However, they also highlighted that real integration is hindered by the lack of a comprehensive market-access offer and the limited range of domestic products that meet AfCFTA RoO.

Respondents emphasised the need to amend current laws, particularly customs regulations, to align with AfCFTA provisions. Some acknowledged partial progress in institutional coordination, notably through ZIDA in the investment sector, while others called for a specific AfCFTA Act or comprehensive harmonisation laws to fully domesticate AfCFTA commitments across sectors.

Overall, the findings suggest that Zimbabwe's legal and policy framework partially aligns with AfCFTA objectives. However, full implementation is hindered by incomplete domestication, fragmented regulatory alignment, and limited enforceability of AfCFTA-related instruments.

4.4. Requirement for Government Protection under Statutory Instrument 122 of 2017

Survey results on whether firms anticipate ongoing government protection under Statutory Instrument 122 of 2017 (SI 122 of 2017) and related policies. Only 23.1% of firms could specify a definite timeframe for phasing out such support. In contrast, 38.5% believed the government should always shield them from regional competition, while another 38.5% either found the question not applicable or chose not to respond.

The findings varied by firms' involvement in regional trade. Among those not engaged in African regional trade, 25.0% favoured permanent protection, 18.8% indicated a specific timeframe, and 56.3% chose not applicable or did not reply. Conversely, among firms active in African regional trade, 42.9% supported permanent protection, 24.5% provided a known timeframe, and 32.7% selected not applicable or did not respond.

The findings highlight differences between large corporations and SMEs regarding their ongoing need for government protection. Specifically, 44.8% of large corporations believe the government should always shield them from regional competition, compared with 33.3% of SMEs. However, the overall association between company type and protection preference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 65) = 4.782, p = 0.092$, Cramér's $V = 0.271$.

Among firms participating in African regional trade, 52.4% of large corporations and 35.7% of SMEs reported support for continued government protection. A Pearson chi-square test showed a statistically significant association between company category and protection preference within this subgroup, $\chi^2(2, N = 49) = 7.790, p = 0.020$, Cramér's $V = 0.399$. All expected cell counts exceeded five, with a minimum expected count of 5.14, indicating that the assumptions of the Pearson chi-square test were satisfied. The findings therefore suggest that, among firms engaged in regional trade, large corporations and SMEs differed meaningfully in their perceptions of the continued necessity of government protection measures.

For firms not involved in regional trade, as shown in **Table 3** and **Table 4**, the expected counts are low, so the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test should be used instead of Pearson's chi-square. According to the reconstructed frequencies below, the two-sided exact p-value is 1.000, suggesting no evidence of an association in this subgroup.

Table 3. Reconstructed frequencies.

Response	Large corporations	SMEs	Total
Government should always protect us	11	10	21

Continued

Protection required for a known time	1	11	12
N/A or no response	9	7	16
Total	21	28	49

Table 4. The expected cell counts.

Response	Large corporations	SMEs
Permanent protection	9.00	12.00
Known time	5.14	6.86
N/A or no response	6.86	9.14

NVivo findings align with this outcome. Within the Governance and Policy cluster, respondents frequently cited policy uncertainty, implementation gaps, co-ordination issues, and regulatory and compliance challenges. Approximately 12 of the 15 interviewees noted that statutory instruments, such as SI 122 of 2017, lacked credible exit strategies and clear implementation timelines. Several respondents also suggested that protectionist measures should include sunset clauses to ensure a predictable transition towards greater competitiveness and trade liberalisation.

4.5. Comparative Import-Control Regimes

Table 5 presents a comparative analysis of import control regimes in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and South Africa.

Table 5. Comparative analysis of import control regimes in Zimbabwe, Nigeria and South Africa.

Category	Zimbabwe	Nigeria	South Africa
Key instrument	SI 122 of 2017 (Import licensing)	Import prohibition list (CBN, customs, trade act)	Tariff-based regime with trade remedies
Import licensing coverage	Broad: food, beverages, cosmetics, cement, etc.	Broad (over 40 products, including rice, textiles)	Minimal; mostly liberal with few targeted controls
Policy objective	Protect local industries, manage forex, and control prices	Support local industry, manage foreign exchange reserves	Promote competitiveness in an open trade regime
Reform status	Partial reforms (suspensions in 2018), still active	Gradual reduction, still active, especially in the agricultural/textile sectors	Stable liberal trade regime, few non-tariff barriers
Alignment with AfCFTA	Misaligned due to active licensing and NTBs	Partially aligned; inconsistencies with liberalisation	High alignment; adheres to trade facilitation norms

Continued

Rules of origin impact	Risk of non-compliance due to limited input access	Similar risks in sectors needing imported inputs	Mostly compliant; clear customs classifications
Institutional capacity	Moderate; fragmented coordination among agencies	Moderate; overlapping mandates (CBN, Customs, Trade)	High; coordinated via DTIC, SARS, ITAC
Private sector impact	High costs, delays, input shortages	Significant strain on manufacturers and food processors	Predictable environment for exporters and importers
Transition mechanisms	Weak; limited sunset clauses or reform roadmaps	Some WTO-compliant reforms underway	Transparent mechanisms; active trade remedies process
AfCFTA readiness	Low to moderate	Moderate	High
Lesson for Zimbabwe	Needs legal harmonisation and phased decontrol	Sequenced liberalisation + industrial competitiveness	Institutional clarity, stakeholder engagement, and capacity strengthening are essential

Sources: Conference on Zimbabwe's economic development (2025, September) [72]; WTO trade policy reviews; Debrah *et al.* (2024) [73] Nigeria CBN import prohibition documentation; SARS/DTIC South Africa frameworks [74].

Table 5 compares import-control regimes in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and South Africa. The results indicate that Zimbabwe's import-control system remains broad and licensing-based, with products such as food, beverages, cosmetics, and cement covered under SI 122 of 2017. Nigeria also maintains broad import restrictions, particularly through its import-prohibition framework, while South Africa relies mainly on a tariff-based regime supported by trade remedies.

Regarding AfCFTA readiness, Zimbabwe was rated low to moderate, Nigeria moderate, and South Africa high. Zimbabwe's lower score was linked to active licensing measures, non-tariff barriers, fragmented institutional coordination, weak transition mechanisms, and potential RoO compliance risks stemming from limited access to imported inputs. By contrast, South Africa's higher score was attributed to clearer customs classifications, more cohesive institutional coordination, and a more predictable framework for trade remedies.

The comparative analysis indicates that Zimbabwe's trade governance remains more discretionary and protectionist than South Africa's, and is less systematically phased than Nigeria's gradual reform strategy.

4.6. Special Economic Zones

The findings indicate that Zimbabwe's SEZs and Export Processing Zones (EPZs) are only partially effective as tools for AfCFTA integration. NVivo analysis of the

Systems and Infrastructure group's responses revealed that infrastructure was mentioned in about 87% of responses, while logistics, systems, and capacity each appeared in roughly 80%. These results suggest that respondents view infrastructure, logistics, institutional systems, and implementation capacity as key obstacles to Zimbabwe's full leverage of SEZs and EPZs for continental trade.

Interview findings revealed that despite the existence of a master plan for SEZ development, investor interest in greenfield projects remained limited. Respondents cited uncertainty about the relationship between EPZs and SEZs, inconsistent tax policies, unclear incentive structures, and weak infrastructure links. Some firms reportedly found it difficult to meet the Export Processing Zone requirement to export 100% of their output.

The findings therefore indicate that SEZs and EPZs have not yet become fully effective platforms for production focused on the AfCFTA, export expansion, or regional value-chain integration.

4.7. Reliance on Comparative Advantage in Regional Markets

Figure 3 presents survey findings on whether firms relied on comparative advantage in regional markets. Overall, approximately 32% of surveyed firms indicated that their export products were based on perceived comparative advantage, while the majority did not identify it as a significant basis for participation in these markets.

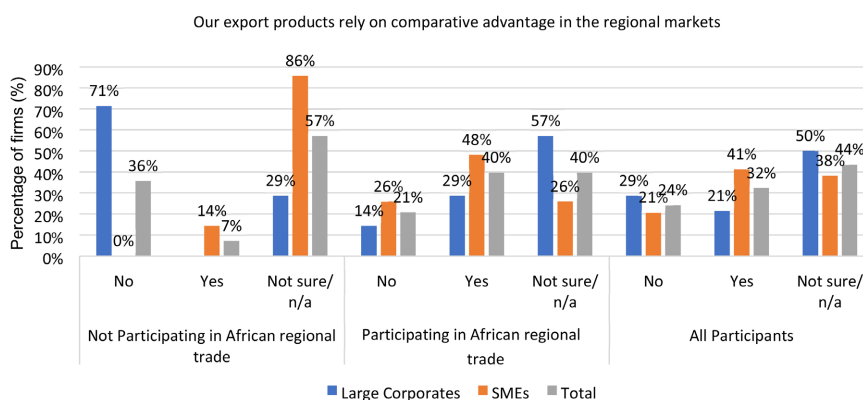


Figure 3. Comparative advantage in regional markets. Source: Author's SPSS survey results (May to October 2024).

The results varied by firm category, with SMEs showing greater reliance on comparative advantage at approximately 41%, compared with 21% of large corporations. Among firms already engaged in regional trade, about 40% indicated that their export products were based on comparative advantage, with SMEs again more likely to report this than large firms. For firms not involved in regional trade, only a small minority reported that their products depended on comparative advantage, and these were SMEs. Conversely, a majority of non-participating large corporations dismissed the view that their products were regionally competitive.

NVivo results align with the survey findings. In the Trade and Markets cluster, 87% of respondents mentioned market and export themes, followed by trade participation (80%), market access (73%), and African business participation (67%). In the Production and Industry cluster, industry was highlighted by 87%, competitiveness by 80%, and production by 73%. Overall, these results indicate that respondents link AfCFTA participation to export competitiveness, productive capacity, market intelligence, and value chain readiness.

Overall, the findings indicate that Zimbabwean firms have not fully converted domestic resources and productive capabilities into a strong competitive advantage in African markets. This limits their ability to leverage AfCFTA preferences, meet RoO criteria, and compete effectively in regional value chains.

4.8. Exports to Intra-African Markets and Competition

Survey results on competition and complementarity in intra-African export markets indicate that only about 6% of firms reported minimal or no competition in regional markets.

Conversely, approximately 62.6% reported offering complementary products or services regionally. Larger firms reported higher levels of complementarity, at 72.2%, compared with 54.4% of SMEs. Among firms already engaged in African regional trade, 75.0% provided complementary products, with the proportion higher among large corporations at 90.5%, compared with 62.9% among SMEs. These findings suggest that Zimbabwean firms are better positioned as participants in complementarity-driven regional production and supply chains than as dominant, low-competition exporters.

4.9. Compliance with AfCFTA Rules of Origin

The results on firm readiness to comply with the AfCFTA RoO indicate that firm-level readiness to comply varies, with 43.8% of firms aware of their expected compliance timeline. SMEs show greater preparedness (48.5%) than large firms (37.9%). Among firms already engaged in African regional trade, 54.3% know when they will achieve compliance, with SMEs again more prepared (59.2%) than large firms (47.6%). Conversely, only 12.5% of firms not involved in regional trade are aware of their compliance timeline.

The results highlight significant gaps in RoO readiness. Overall, 18.8% of firms have no plans to meet AfCFTA RoO standards, with larger firms (31%) more likely to be unprepared than SMEs (8.6%). Additionally, 31.3% of firms are unaware of RoO requirements; this awareness gap is present in both large corporations (27.6%) and SMEs (34.3%). Moreover, 6.3% of firms do not intend to export to African markets. These findings reveal uneven levels of firm preparedness for advantageous trade under the AfCFTA.

4.10. Capacity Building for AfCFTA Readiness

NVivo results indicate that capacity building is most prominent in the Systems and Infrastructure cluster, where the theme appeared in about 80% of responses.

It also overlaps with Trade and Markets, particularly in relation to market access, trade participation, and export support. Current efforts include training on standards, tariffs, RoO, market intelligence, and sector-specific export readiness. However, respondents noted that these initiatives remain fragmented, sector-specific, and inconsistently applied. The data suggests that while capacity building is acknowledged as vital for AfCFTA readiness, firm-level support systems are only partially in place.

4.11. Trade Facilitation

The findings indicate that Zimbabwe has put in place trade-facilitation structures such as the National Trade Facilitation Committee and uses ASYCUDA World. However, respondents noted that the AfCFTA-specific trade facilitation mechanisms have not yet been fully implemented. Interview evidence also revealed gaps in customs harmonisation, limited digital systems integration, and inconsistencies in tariff classifications across WTO, SADC, COMESA, and bilateral agreements. While ASYCUDA World allows electronic submission of customs documents, full interoperability and system integration are still incomplete. 4.13 Membership in the National Trade Facilitation Committee.

Figure 4 shows that roughly 13% of valid respondent firms were members of the National Trade Facilitation Committee. A similar proportion, approximately 13%, were unaware of its existence, while the majority were not members. The wider survey results further show that about 40% of firms had participated in trade-facilitation awareness forums, 44% were aware of the National Focal Point mechanism for non-tariff barriers, and 52% had participated in forums on AfCFTA RoO compliance. These findings suggest that private-sector involvement in trade-facilitation governance structures remains limited and uneven. 4.14 Use of the tradebarrier.org tool.

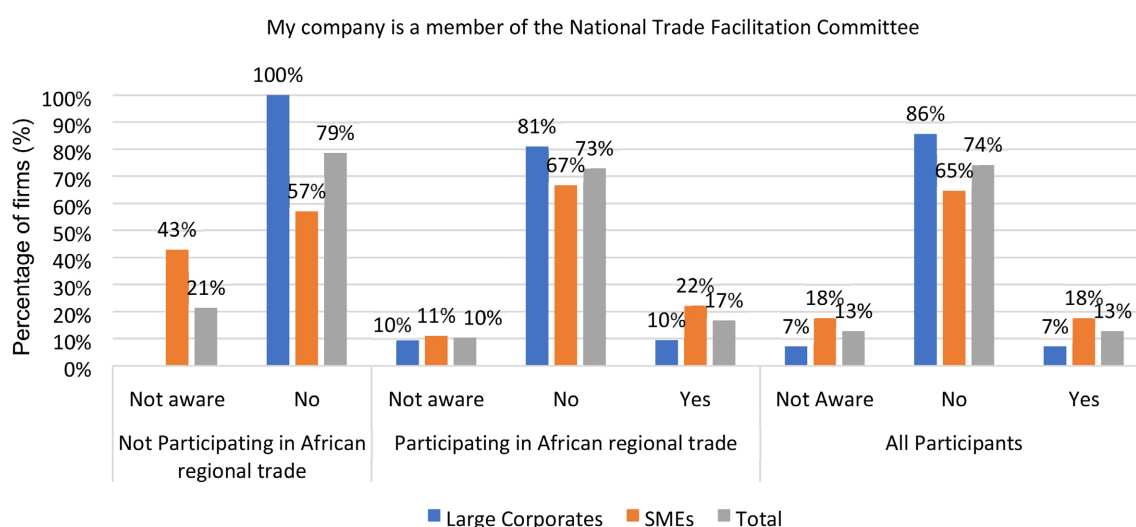


Figure 4. Membership in the national trade facilitation committee. Source: Author's survey results (May to October 2024).

The study examined how Zimbabwean firms utilised the Tradebarriers.org platform, an online tool developed under the COMESA-EAC-SADC Tripartite framework to facilitate the reporting, monitoring, and resolution of non-tariff barriers. The platform provides firms and stakeholders with a formal channel to report trade barriers and to ensure they are addressed through appropriate national and regional institutions.

As shown in **Figure 5**, only 35.5% of surveyed firms reported using the Tradebarriers.org tool. Usage varied considerably by firm size. About 53.6% of large corporations used the platform, compared with just 20.6% of SMEs. A Pearson chi-square test revealed a significant association between firm category and platform usage, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 7.297$, $p = 0.007$, $\phi = 0.343$. All expected cell counts exceeded five, confirming the test's assumptions. The moderate effect size indicates a substantial difference in the adoption of the digital non-tariff-barrier reporting mechanism by firm size.

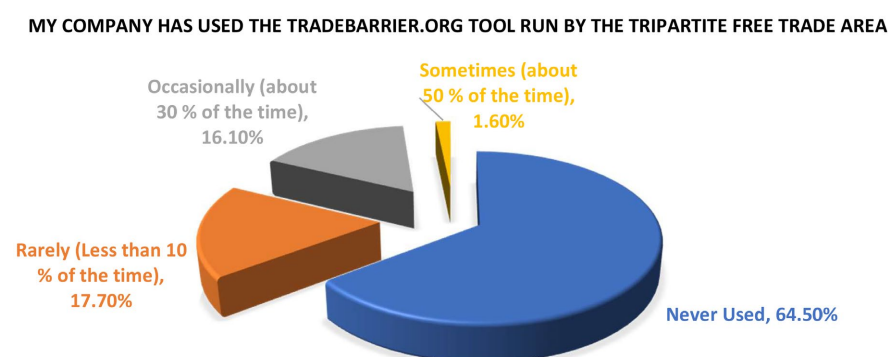


Figure 5. Use of the tradebarrier.org tool. Source: Author's SPSS survey results (May to October 2024).

Among firms participating in African regional trade, 41.7% had used the platform. Usage was substantially higher among large corporations (61.9%) than among SMEs (25.9%). This difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 6.291$, $p = 0.012$, $\phi = 0.362$. The moderate effect size indicates that company category was meaningfully associated with platform use among firms already engaged in regional markets.

Use of the platform was significantly lower among firms not involved in African regional trade, with only 14.3% having used it. Usage was reported by 28.6% of non-participating large corporations, while none of the non-participating SMEs did so. However, this subgroup comprised only 14 firms, with two cells having expected counts below five. Consequently, Fisher's exact test was chosen over the Pearson chi-square test. The test result was not statistically significant (Fisher's exact $p = 0.462$, two-sided, $\phi = 0.408$). Although the effect-size estimate suggests a potentially meaningful difference, caution is warranted given the small subgroup size and the zero-frequency cell.

A separate analysis found that firms engaged in African regional trade used the platform at a rate of 41.7%, compared with 14.3% among firms not engaged in

regional trade. However, because one cell's expected count was slightly below five, Fisher's exact test was conducted. The test showed no statistically significant association, with a two-sided p-value of 0.110 and a ϕ coefficient of 0.239. Consequently, the evidence does not support a systematic link between regional trade participation and platform use.

Overall, the results highlight a notable difference in how firms of varying sizes utilise digital trade-governance tools. Larger companies, especially those involved in regional trade, are more likely than SMEs to engage with the Tradebarriers.org platform. This could indicate disparities in institutional awareness, administrative capacity, access to trade information, or involvement with business associations and government bodies. However, these potential reasons were not directly examined and should be treated as speculative rather than confirmed causes.

Low SME usage of the platform may hinder their ability to formally report non-tariff barriers, track complaint progress, and access institutional support in regional markets. Enhancing awareness through targeted campaigns, providing practical training, simplifying reporting procedures, and increasing engagement via chambers of commerce and SME associations could expand its use.

4.12. Alignment of Customs Documents and Systems

Findings on customs systems indicate that Zimbabwe employs ASYCUDA World, although respondents noted that customs interoperability with key regional partners remains incomplete. In addition to Zambia, which also uses ASYCUDA, regional partners such as South Africa and Mozambique operate different customs-related platforms. Respondents reported that this lack of system compatibility increases training demands for customs officers and adds administrative complexity for traders. The survey further shows that around 50% of valid respondent firms viewed customs harmonisation as a key factor for boosting regional trade. About 47% reported that cross-border procedures were often unpredictable or involved new requirements, whereas 53% found these procedures more predictable. Additionally, approximately 65% of large corporations and 68% of SMEs reported that police roadblocks and interventions by other agencies interrupted trade routes roughly half of the time.

4.13. Trade-Related Infrastructure

The findings reveal mixed progress in trade-related infrastructure. Respondents noted improvements at certain border posts, including upgraded roads, consolidated inspection facilities, improved signage, enhanced security systems, non-intrusive inspection devices, facilities for perishables, and queue-management systems. However, they also highlighted slow development of regional corridors, weak prioritisation of Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa projects, limited operational cross-border agro-industrial initiatives, and declining rail infrastructure quality. Overall, Zimbabwe has made progress in border modernisation, but regional infrastructure integration remains incomplete.

4.14. Participation in Cross-Border Investment Projects

Table 6 indicates that engagement in cross-border investment projects remains limited. Overall, 62.9% of valid respondent firms had never participated in such projects, while 37.1% reported some level of involvement. SMEs showed slightly higher participation at 38.2%, compared with 35.7% among large corporations. Among firms not involved in African regional trade, a large majority, 85.7%, reported never engaging in cross-border investment projects. Conversely, among firms active in regional trade, participation rose to 43.8%, although 56.3% still reported no involvement. These results suggest that Zimbabwean firms are more involved in trade activities than in establishing deeper cross-border investment links.

Table 6. Participation in cross-border investment projects.

Participate in African regional trade	My company participates in cross-border investment projects	Company category		Total
		Large corporate	SMEs	
No	Never	85.70%	85.70%	85.70%
	Rarely (Less than 10% of the time)		14.30%	7.10%
	Sometimes (about 50% of the time)	14.30%		7.10%
	Participated	14.30%	14.30%	14.10%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Yes	Never	57.10%	55.60%	56.30%
	Rarely (Less than 10% of the time)	9.50%	3.70%	6.30%
	Occasionally (about 30% of the time)		25.90%	14.60%
	Sometimes (about 50% of the time)	19.00%	11.10%	14.60%
	Frequently (about 70% of the time)	4.80%	3.70%	4.1.10%
	Usually (about 90% of the time)	4.80%		2.10%
	Every time	4.80%		2.10%
	Participated	42.90%	44.40%	43.90%
Total	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
	Never	64.30%	61.80%	62.90%
	Rarely (Less than 10% of the time)	7.10%	5.90%	6.50%
	Occasionally (about 30% of the time)		20.60%	11.30%
	Sometimes (about 50% of the time)	17.90%	8.80%	12.90%
	Frequently (about 70% of the time)	3.60%	2.90%	3.20%
	Usually (about 90% of the time)	3.60%		1.60%
	Every time	3.60%		1.60%
Total	Participated	35.80%	38.20%	37.10%
	Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: Author's survey results (May to October 2024).

4.15. Access to Trade Finance and Export Guarantees to Meet the Competitive Demands of IntraAfrican Trade

Trade finance and export guarantees are key mechanisms through which firms can secure working capital, expand production, upgrade technology, and manage the commercial and payment risks associated with cross-border trade. The findings in **Figure 6** indicate that access to these financial instruments remains limited among surveyed firms. This result aligns with the NVivo Economic Constraints Cluster, particularly the themes relating to finance, costs, economic stability, and currency, as well as the Production and Industry Cluster, where competitiveness, productive capacity, and value-chain participation emerged as prominent themes.



Figure 6. Access to trade finance and export guarantees. Source: Author's survey results (May to October 2024).

Only 18.5% of surveyed firms had previously accessed trade finance or export guarantees from banks or other financial institutions to improve productivity and support their participation in intra-African trade. Access was reported by 20.7% of large corporations and 16.7% of SMEs. However, the association between firm category and access to trade finance was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 65) = 0.173$, $p = 0.678$, $\phi = 0.052$. All expected cell counts exceeded five, indicating that the assumptions of the Pearson chi-square test were met. The very small effect size further suggests that firm size had little relationship with access to these financial instruments.

Among firms participating in African regional trade, 24.5% had accessed trade finance or export guarantees. Access was somewhat higher among large corporations (28.6%) than among SMEs (21.4%). Nevertheless, this difference was not

statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 0.331$, $p = 0.565$, $\phi = 0.082$. The effect size was small, providing little evidence that access among regional traders differed systematically by firm size.

A separate comparison found that none of the 16 firms not involved in African regional trade had access to trade finance or export guarantees, whereas 24.5% of firms engaged in regional trade did. Given the sparse data in the expected cells of the contingency table, Fisher's exact test was used. The test showed a significant association between regional trade participation and access to trade finance, with Fisher's exact $p = 0.029$ and $\phi = 0.272$. In summary, firms participating in regional markets are more likely to access trade finance.

This association should not be taken as evidence of causality. Because the data are cross-sectional, they cannot clarify whether access to finance helped firms enter regional markets or whether firms already engaged in regional trade were more likely to seek financial support. Nonetheless, the results suggest a potential financing gap for firms outside regional markets. Those without existing export activities might struggle to demonstrate transaction histories, provide sufficient security, or meet institutional lending criteria, which could hinder their ability to initiate regional trading.

4.16. Access to Finance from Zimbabwe's Banks to Invest in Cross-Border Projects

Figure 7 shows that only 32.3% of surveyed firms secured funding from Zimbabwean banks for cross-border projects. Larger firms had slightly better access at 37.9%, compared to 27.8% for SMEs. However, the link between company size and financing access was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 65) = 0.757$, $p = 0.384$, $\phi = 0.108$. All expected cell counts were above five, with the lowest at 9.37, confirming the assumptions of the Pearson chi-square test. The small effect size indicates that firm size has only a minimal impact on access to domestic financing for cross-border investments.

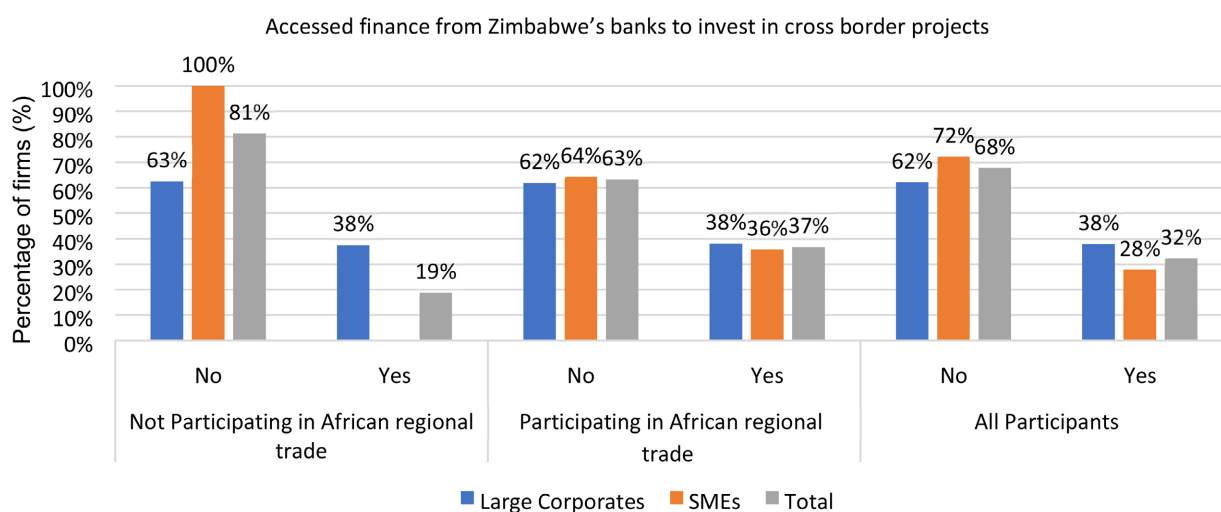


Figure 7. Access to finance to invest in cross-border trade. Source: Author's survey results (May to October 2024).

Among firms not involved in African regional trade, 37.5% of large corporations secured financing for cross-border investments, while no SMEs did. Despite this noticeable difference, the subgroup included only 16 firms, with two expected cells under five, so Fisher's exact test was used instead of the Pearson chi-square test. The results were not statistically significant, with Fisher's exact $p = 0.200$, two-sided, and $\phi = 0.480$. Although the effect size hints at a potentially meaningful difference, caution is advised in interpretation due to the small sample size and the zero-frequency cell.

Among firms already engaged in African regional trade, access rates to finance were similar across different company types. About 38.1% of large firms and 35.7% of SMEs secured funding from Zimbabwean banks for cross-border projects. The link between company type and financial access was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 49) = 0.029$, $p = 0.864$, $\phi = 0.024$. The very small effect size suggests that firm size does not meaningfully influence access to cross-border investment finance for firms involved in regional trade.

Overall, the findings show that access to finance for cross-border projects was limited for both large corporations and SMEs. The results do not provide statistically reliable evidence of systematic differences in access based on firm size. Consequently, the financing constraint seems to affect all company categories, although the small number of non-participating firms restricts the strength of conclusions from subgroup analyses.

4.17. Trade Information

The findings highlight that restricted access to market information remains a significant barrier. About 81.3% of surveyed firms cited limited market information as a hurdle to entering new regional markets. NVivo analysis showed high coding density for topics such as market access (87%), exports (87%), trade participation (80%), and facilitation of market access (73%). Interviews indicated that institutions such as ZIMRA, ZimTrade, MOFAIT, and the Tariff and Competition Commission conduct trade information activities, but these efforts are seen as fragmented, reactive, and sector-specific. Overall, the study indicates that trade information systems are still insufficiently coordinated to enable full market participation under the AfCFTA.

4.18. Participation in Buy African Promotion Activities with Other Regional States

As shown in **Figure 8**, 43.5% of surveyed firms participated in Buy African promotional activities. Participation varied markedly by company type, with about 64.3% of large corporations involved compared with only 26.5% of SMEs. A Pearson chi-square test indicated a significant association between company category and participation, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 8.932$, $p = 0.003$, $\phi = 0.380$. All expected cell counts exceeded five, confirming the test's assumptions. The effect size suggests a moderate association, indicating that large corporations are much more likely than SMEs to engage in these activities.

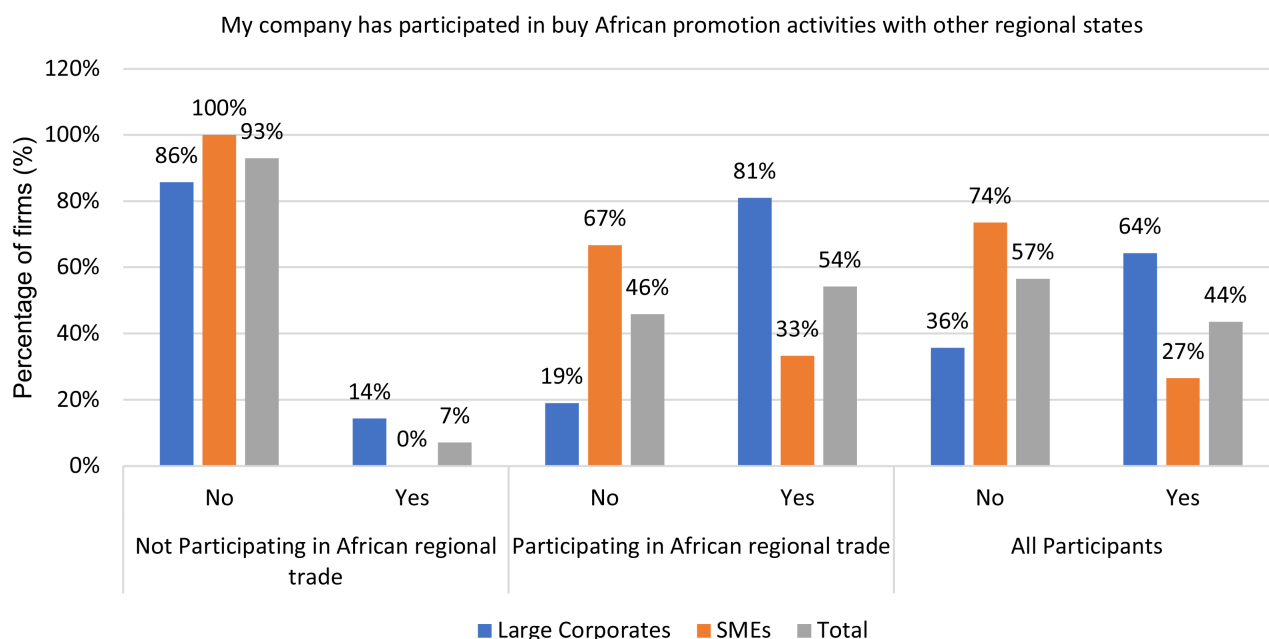


Figure 8. Participation in buy African promotion activities with other regional states. Source: Author's survey results (May to October 2024).

The gap was more pronounced among firms engaged in African regional trade. In this group, 81.0% of large companies participated in Buy African promotions, compared with only 33.3% of SMEs. The association between company size and participation was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 48) = 10.789$, $p = 0.001$, $\phi = 0.474$. This strong effect size underscores a substantial difference in participation between large and small firms already active in regional markets.

Firms not engaged in African regional trade showed markedly lower participation. Only 7.1% of this group participated in Buy African activities. Among large corporations, 14.3% reported participation, whereas none of the SMEs did. Given the small sample size—only 14 firms—and two expected cell counts below five, Fisher's exact test was used. The test yielded no significant result ($p = 1.000$, two-sided, $\phi = 0.277$). This finding should be treated with caution because of the limited observations.

A separate analysis found that firms engaged in African regional trade are much more likely to participate in Buy African promotional activities than those not involved in regional trade. Specifically, 54.2% of regional traders reported participation, compared with only 7.1% of non-traders, $\chi^2(1, N = 62) = 9.749$, $p = 0.002$, $\phi = 0.397$. This suggests a moderate association between regional trade involvement and participation in promotional campaigns.

Overall, the results reveal significant variation in participation by firm size and current regional trade engagement. Large corporations and well-established regional traders are much more likely to engage in Buy African promotional activities than SMEs and firms outside regional markets. However, the cross-sectional data does not clarify whether participation in these promotions helped firms enter

regional trade, or whether firms already active in regional markets were simply more aware of and attended these events.

4.19. Factor Market Integration

The findings indicate that factor market integration remains inconsistent. NVivo analysis linked factor mobility primarily to governance and policy, with policy (87%), implementation (80%), coordination (73%), and compliance (67%) cited as key drivers. Respondents highlighted issues with investment infrastructure, business entry processes, institutional capacity, labour mobility, and the transfer of business capital. Although policy alignment with free movement goals was recognised, implementation was hindered by economic instability, weak institutional capacity, and inadequate support systems for labour and capital mobility.

4.20. Movement of Business Capital in Zimbabwe

Table 7 presents firms' perceptions of the ease of moving business capital in Zimbabwe.

Table 7. Movement of business capital in Zimbabwe.

Does your company participate in African regional trade.			Company category		Total
			Large corporate	SMEs	
No	Movement of business capital in Zimbabwe is simplified.	Agree	14.3%	28.6%	21.4%
		Disagree	42.9%	28.6%	35.7%
		Neutral	42.9%	42.9%	42.9%
	Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Yes	Movement of business capital in Zimbabwe is simplified.	Agree	42.9%	22.2%	31.3%
		Disagree	47.6%	37.0%	41.7%
		Neutral	9.5%	40.7%	27.1%
	Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total	Movement of business capital in Zimbabwe is simplified.	Agree	35.7%	23.5%	29.0%
		Disagree	46.4%	35.3%	40.3%
		Neutral	17.9%	41.2%	30.6%
	Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Author's survey results (May to October 2024).

Overall, 29% of firms agreed that it was simplified, 40.3% disagreed, and 30.6% were neutral. Large corporations reported 35.7% agreement and 46.4% disagreement, while SMEs showed 23.5% agreement and 35.3% disagreement. Among firms already engaged in regional trade, 31.3% believed capital movement was simplified, whereas 41.7% disagreed and 27.1% were neutral. These findings indi-

cate that firms are divided on the ease of transferring business capital, with disagreement outweighing agreement in the overall sample.

5. Discussion

5.1. Formal Commitment versus Substantive Integration

The results indicate that Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA remains partial and uneven, with progress more evident in formal commitments than in practice. Although Zimbabwe has ratified the agreement, engaged in negotiations, initiated continental trade activities, and submitted tariff schedules, real integration is constrained by incomplete tariff domestication, high levels of protection, pervasive non-tariff measures, weak institutional coordination, and limited readiness at the firm level. This highlights the difference between formal participation, which involves legal and diplomatic commitments, and substantive integration, which requires enforceable domestic policies, institutional alignment, productive capacity, trade facilitation, access to finance, market information, and firm compliance with AfCFTA rules.

5.2. Trade Policy Alignment and Tariff Liberalisation

Zimbabwe's integration within the BIAT trade policy cluster is constrained by its relatively restrictive trade regime. Data indicate that Zimbabwe's average MFN applied tariff is 18.8%, higher than Zambia's 14.6% and significantly above Botswana and South Africa's 7.8%. Additionally, only 10.2% of Zimbabwe's MFN duty lines are duty-free, compared with 24.4% for Zambia and 60.3% for Botswana and South Africa. These figures indicate that Zimbabwe entered the AfCFTA with a more protectionist trade stance than some regional peers. This is further supported by the continued use of non-tariff measures, such as licensing, permits, and administrative controls, which affect a large share of imports. Sustained effective protection rates of 40% - 60% on certain final consumer goods, coupled with neutral or negative protection for some industrial inputs, suggest that Zimbabwe's tariff structure may create an anti-export bias by increasing production costs and weakening firm competitiveness. This aligns with research emphasising the need for stable and coherent trade policies to foster regional integration [3] [7].

5.3. Tariff Offers, Domestication and Legal Enforceability

The results also indicate that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA tariff-offer process remains incomplete. Although the tariff offer reportedly covers 6606 tariff lines, with around 90% (Category A) designated for duty elimination and about 7% (Category B), evidence shows that full implementation is still pending. This is because, at the time of data collection, gazetting, domestic legal enforcement, and the finalisation of relevant categories had not been completed. This implementation gap is critical, since tariff schedules are not merely technical documents; they are the operational tools through which preferential market access is made enforceable.

Consequently, this delay hampers Zimbabwe's ability to translate AfCFTA ratification into predictable trade rights and obligations. This situation supports institutional views that ratification alone is insufficient without domestication, enforceability, and effective implementation [13] [75] [76].

5.4. Protectionist Instruments and Firm-Level Preferences

The survey results on SI 122 of 2017 highlight the tension between protection and liberalisation in Zimbabwe's AfCFTA journey. Many firms still favour government protection against regional competition, while only a few can specify a clear timeline for moving beyond such protections. This suggests that many businesses remain uncertain about their ability to compete in a liberalised regional market. Interestingly, larger companies and those already engaged in regional trade tend to favour protection more, indicating that exposure to regional markets doesn't automatically mean they are ready for liberalisation. Instead, it may heighten awareness of competitiveness gaps, cost pressures, and import pressures. This pattern aligns with the incentive and actor-agency dynamics described by Byiers *et al.* [13], in which domestic actors support regional integration in theory but seek regulatory protections in practice. It also relates to political economy research on rent-seeking, in which established firms favour protective measures that secure their market position and limit exposure to competition [77] [78].

5.5. Productive Capacity, Comparative Advantage and Regional Value Chains

The findings in the BIAT productive capacity cluster indicate that Zimbabwe's ability to leverage AfCFTA preferences is constrained by weak industrial competitiveness, limited use of comparative advantage, and limited preparedness for regional value-chain engagement. Only about 32% of firms report that their export products depend on comparative advantage in regional markets, with SMEs more likely than large firms to do so. This suggests that most firms do not yet view their products as rooted in domestic resource advantages or productive strengths. In the context of the AfCFTA, this is significant because tariff liberalisation will only boost exports if firms can produce competitively, meet quality standards, and comply with RoO. Consequently, this supports Balassa's [79] assertion that export competitiveness hinges on relative productive strengths rather than tariff preferences alone.

The findings on product complementarity reveal a significant opportunity. About 62.6% of firms offer complementary products or services in regional markets, yet only around 6% face little or no competition. This suggests that Zimbabwean firms may not yet be dominant exporters in African markets, but they could participate in regional value chains through task-specific specialisation, intermediate goods, supplier relationships, and production partnerships.

This aligns with the World Bank's [3] view that regional value chains can help fragmented African markets overcome scale issues, reduce unit costs, and enable

integrated production. However, realising this potential depends on strengthening domestic value chains, improving logistics, boosting compliance with standards, and increasing market intelligence.

5.6. Rules of Origin and Firm-Level Compliance Readiness

Rules of Origin compliance emerged as a critical test and a key measure of Zimbabwe's effective integration into the AfCFTA. While 43.8% of firms know when they will meet the RoO requirements, 31.3% are unaware of the requirements, and 18.8% have no compliance strategies. These results highlight a gap in compliance capacity. Although firms see opportunities under the AfCFTA, many are not yet ready, either institutionally or operationally, to meet the sourcing, documentation, certification, and value-adding standards required to access tariff benefits. This is especially important because the RoO determine whether tariff preferences are actually usable. Firms that rely heavily on imported inputs or lack local supplier networks may underutilise AfCFTA preferences. Consequently, the findings suggest that preparing for RoO should be viewed as part of broader industrial upgrading, not just a customs issue [2] [7] [45].

5.7. Trade Facilitation and Institutional Participation

The BIAT trade facilitation cluster shows partial but incomplete integration. Zimbabwe has developed trade facilitation structures, including the National Trade Facilitation Committee, and uses ASYCUDA World for customs procedures. However, the findings indicate that AfCFTA-specific trade facilitation mechanisms are not yet fully operational. Only about 13% of surveyed firms reported membership of the Committee, while another 13% were unaware of its existence. Although some firms had attended awareness forums on trade facilitation, non-tariff barriers, and RoO, the evidence suggests limited outreach of these structures within the wider business community. This suggests that institutional presence alone does not guarantee effective stakeholder engagement or operational capability.

5.8. Digital Trade-Support Systems and NTB Reporting

Limited use of trade-support platforms deepens the trade facilitation gap. Only about 35% of firms report using tradebarrier.org, with higher adoption among large corporations than among SMEs. Chi-square results indicate that firm type influences platform use, pointing to unequal access to digital trade governance tools. This is critical because NTB-reporting systems rely on widespread participation to identify and address trade barriers. If SMEs and non-exporters rarely use these platforms, the system may overlook issues faced by smaller firms, limiting the AfCFTA's inclusiveness and weakening feedback for trade facilitation. Additionally, the 11% reported use of PAPSS should be viewed cautiously, as interviews suggest the system isn't yet fully operational in Zimbabwe, highlighting a gap between awareness and actual use of continental payment infrastructure.

5.9. Trade-Related Infrastructure and Corridor Integration

Trade-related infrastructure remains a significant challenge. While progress has been made in some areas, such as border modernisation, including improved roads, inspection facilities, signage, security systems, non-intrusive inspection devices, facilities for perishable goods, and queue-management systems, other areas lag behind. Respondents noted slow development of regional corridors, weak rail infrastructure, limited cross-border industrial projects, and unclear priorities for PIDA-related infrastructure. These findings suggest that Zimbabwe's infrastructure integration is inconsistent. Modernising borders alone is insufficient if rail systems, logistics corridors, energy reliability, and cross-border industrial zones remain underdeveloped. This situation aligns with African regional integration studies, which highlight infrastructure gaps as key barriers to increasing intra-African trade [45] [80].

5.10. Special Economic Zones and Export-Oriented Industrial Platforms

The data on SEZs and EPZs indicate that industrial infrastructure remains an inadequate platform for AfCFTA integration. Despite Zimbabwe's existing zones and a master plan for SEZ development, respondents noted limited interest from greenfield investors, unclear regulatory frameworks, and inconsistent use of fiscal incentives. Some companies reportedly find it difficult to meet the requirement to export 100% of their output under EPZ arrangements. This suggests that SEZs and EPZs are not yet fully functioning as integrated export platforms that support AfCFTA-oriented manufacturing. This aligns with Farole's [81] view that SEZ performance should be evaluated based on infrastructure quality, investor confidence, domestic linkages, export capability, and integration into broader value chains, rather than legal designation alone.

5.11. Trade Finance and Export Guarantees

The BIAT trade finance cluster highlights a significant operational challenge: only about 19% of firms reported using trade finance or export guarantees for regional trade. Although larger firms had slightly higher access than SMEs, the difference was not statistically significant. Notably, firms not engaged in African regional trade had not accessed trade finance or export guarantees at all. This indicates a strong link between trade finance and export activity, creating a cycle in which firms already in regional markets are more likely to secure financing, leaving others excluded. Similarly, only around 32% of firms obtained finance from Zimbabwean banks for cross-border projects or regional expansion. Among non-participating firms, no SMEs accessed such finance, suggesting a bankability barrier for smaller firms seeking to enter regional markets. These findings align with broader research highlighting limited access to working capital, export guarantees, and risk-management tools as major obstacles to SME involvement in intra-African trade [3] [80] [82].

5.12. Trade Information and Market Intelligence

Trade information also emerged as a major constraint under the BIAT framework. Approximately 81.3% of surveyed firms cited limited access to market information as a barrier to entering new regional markets. This is significant because AfCFTA opportunities are not self-executing. Firms require information on market demand, standards, tariffs, RoO, logistics routes, buyer networks, cultural preferences, and payment systems. Interview evidence indicated that institutions such as ZIMRA, ZimTrade, MOFAIT, and the Tariff and Competition Commission are carrying out awareness and training activities, but these remain fragmented, reactive, and sector-specific. The findings therefore suggest that Zimbabwe lacks a coordinated national trade information system capable of linking domestic producers to continental market opportunities.

5.13. Trade Promotion and SME Participation

Buy African promotional activities highlight a persistent trade information gap. Larger companies are notably more engaged in regional promotions than SMEs, with 64% of large firms participating versus only 27% of SMEs. Among firms already involved in regional trade, the gap widens, with 81% of large companies participating compared to 33% of SMEs. These significant differences indicate that larger firms have better access to market development tools, buyer networks, and regional promotional events. For SMEs, limited involvement in these activities may reduce their visibility, weaken buyer connections, and deepen their exclusion from AfCFTA opportunities. This aligns with the broader view that effective market access depends on trade promotion, business matchmaking, and institutional support to convert access into actual transactions [45] [80].

5.14. Factor Market Integration and Cross-Border Investment

Factor market integration remains weak and uneven. The results indicate limited progress in streamlining the movement of capital, cross-border investment, labour mobility, and business entry procedures. Overall, only 37.1% of firms reported engaging in cross-border investment projects, while 62.9% had never participated. Even among firms involved in regional trade, 56.3% did not participate in cross-border investment activities. This suggests that Zimbabwe's integration is more transactional than transformative. Firms may conduct cross-border trade but are less integrated into regional production systems, ownership networks, joint ventures, and investment partnerships. This restricts opportunities for technology transfer, learning spillovers, industrial upgrading, and deeper value-chain integration. Therefore, the findings support the view that AfCFTA implementation should focus not only on trade liberalisation but also on investment facilitation and regional production networks [3] [45].

5.15. Overall Assessment through the BIAT and IPE Frameworks

Overall, Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration is moderate in formal commitment but

remains partial and incomplete in substantive implementation. Integration was classified as moderate where formal commitments, institutions, and implementation initiatives were in place; partial where implementation was limited or uneven; and incomplete where essential legal, productive, financial, infrastructural, and market-support mechanisms were absent or inadequate. Zimbabwe has progressed through ratification, participation in continental negotiations, preparation of tariff offers, institutional engagement, border infrastructure improvements, and awareness-raising activities. However, evidence across the seven BIAT clusters indicates that these advances have not yet translated into effective domestic implementation.

In the trade-policy cluster, delayed tariff gazetting, incomplete domestication of legal frameworks, high tariffs, non-tariff measures, and protectionist regulations continue to limit liberalisation and legal enforceability [3] [13] [75] [76]. Productive-capacity constraints include weak industrial competitiveness, limited use of comparative advantage, uneven preparedness for Rules of Origin compliance, and underdeveloped participation in regional value chains [2] [7] [45] [79]. Trade facilitation and infrastructure integration are similarly constrained by inconsistent customs alignment, limited firm participation in institutional structures, low use of digital trade-support platforms, weak transport corridors, inadequate rail systems, and underperforming special economic zones [45] [80] [81]. Trade-finance and market-information gaps further restrict firms' ability to enter and expand within regional markets, particularly among SMEs, which have limited access to finance, export guarantees, market intelligence, promotional activities, and buyer networks [3] [45] [80] [82]. Factor-market integration also remains weak, as limited cross-border investment and regional production partnerships restrict technology transfer, industrial upgrading, and deeper value-chain integration [3] [45].

Firm-level evidence further shows that many businesses support expanded regional market access while continuing to favour protection from regional competition, reflecting competitiveness concerns and the influence of domestic actor incentives [13] [77] [78]. The findings therefore suggest that Zimbabwe's principal challenge is not a lack of political commitment or market-access opportunities, but the limited conversion of formal commitments into enforceable domestic instruments, coordinated institutions, and competitive productive capacity. The IPE framework reinforces this conclusion by showing that integration is shaped by structural weaknesses in productivity, infrastructure, finance, and export competitiveness; institutional gaps in tariff enforcement, policy coordination, and trade facilitation; actor incentives that affect firms' support for protection and regional trade; and uneven sector-level governance. Moving from formal compliance to effective integration will require coordinated action across all BIAT clusters, including legal harmonisation, phased reform of protectionist measures, practical support for Rules of Origin compliance, industrial upgrading, improved trade finance and market intelligence, stronger infrastructure and customs systems, and

more inclusive trade-facilitation arrangements.

6. Conclusions

This article evaluated Zimbabwe's integration into the AfCFTA across seven BIAT clusters: trade policy, trade facilitation, productive capacity, trade-related infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration. The results indicate that Zimbabwe's progress is stronger in formal commitment than in practical implementation. While the country has ratified the AfCFTA, engaged in negotiations, submitted tariff plans, and established some trade-related institutions, real integration remains constrained by incomplete domestication, slow tariff operationalisation, high protectionism, non-tariff barriers, weak firm-level readiness, and fragmented institutional coordination.

The evidence across the BIAT clusters shows uneven progress in integration. In trade policy, Zimbabwe's relatively high MFN tariff rates, low shares of tariff lines duty-free, ongoing reliance on import licensing, and delays in publishing tariff commitments indicate that market liberalisation remains incomplete. Regarding trade facilitation, while the presence of customs systems and a National Trade Facilitation Committee indicates institutional development, low firm engagement, minimal use of NTB reporting platforms, and fragmented interoperability among customs systems highlight weak operational capacity. Additionally, productive capacity remains a significant challenge, with many firms not yet effectively leveraging comparative advantage, and awareness of and compliance with RoO remain inconsistent. These observations suggest that tariff preferences alone are unlikely to yield substantial benefits unless Zimbabwe enhances productive competitiveness, domestic value chains, and firm-level compliance systems.

The results indicate that key components of Zimbabwe's AfCFTA readiness, such as trade-related infrastructure, trade finance, trade information, and factor market integration, remain underdeveloped. While some progress has been made in border modernisation, systems related to rail, corridors, logistics, SEZs, and cross-border investment remain weak. Access to trade finance and export guarantees remains scarce, particularly for companies outside regional trade networks, and over 80% of surveyed firms face market information gaps. Additionally, participation in Buy African promotional activities is largely limited to large corporations, suggesting that SMEs remain poorly integrated into continent-wide market development initiatives. Factor market integration is also constrained, with low levels of cross-border investment and many firms viewing capital mobility as challenging.

The study finds that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration is officially in place yet limited in practice. The main issue isn't merely membership but whether the domestic trade environment aligns with continental trade needs. The results highlight the importance of the IPE framework, which holds that regional integration outcomes depend on the interplay among structural factors, formal and informal institutions, actors' incentives, and sector governance. Zimbabwe's progress is therefore influenced not only by treaty commitments but also by the capacity of

domestic institutions, businesses, financial systems, infrastructure, and policy actors to translate AfCFTA obligations into enforceable, commercially viable mechanisms.

The article emphasises that for Zimbabwe to move beyond formal participation to meaningful AfCFTA integration, a coordinated effort across all seven BIAT clusters is essential. Key actions include finalising and standardising tariff commitments, implementing clear transition mechanisms to rationalise the use of protectionist tools, enforcing RoO compliance, boosting trade finance, enhancing trade information systems, encouraging SME involvement, upgrading infrastructure corridors, and aligning SEZs with regional value chains. Without this comprehensive approach, Zimbabwe risks remaining a superficial participant in the AfCFTA rather than becoming a competitive and developmentally integrated player in the continental market.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] African Union (2018) Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area. African Union.
- [2] 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.
- [3] World Bank (2020) The African Continental Free Trade Area: Economic and Distributional Effects. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1559-1>
- [4] African Union Commission (2012) Action Plan for Boosting Intra-African Trade. African Union.
- [5] Mureverwi, B. (2017) Import Controls in Zimbabwe: Statutory Instrument 64 of 2016 and More. <https://www.tralac.org/publications/article/11689-import-controls-in-zimbabwe-statutory-instrument-64-of-2016-and-more.html>
- [6] Veritas Zimbabwe (2017) Statutory Instrument 122 of 2017: Control of Goods (Open General Import Licence) (Amendment) Notice, 2017 (No. 6). Veritas Zimbabwe.
- [7] World Trade Organization (2020) Trade Policy Review: Zimbabwe 2020. World Trade Organization. <https://doi.org/10.30875/efb9ad7f-en>
- [8] World Trade Organization (2023) World Tariff Profiles 2023. World Trade Organization, International Trade Centre, and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.
- [9] 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.
- [10] Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries (CZI) (2023) The CZI Annual Manufacturing Sector Survey Report 2022. *Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries*, Harare.
- [11] African Development Bank (2019) African Economic Outlook 2019: Macroeconomic Performance and Prospects; Jobs, Growth, and Firm Dynamism; Integration for Af-

- rica's Economic Prosperity. Abidjan. link
- [12] Government of Zimbabwe (2020) National Development Strategy 1: January 2021-December 2025. Government of Zimbabwe.
 - [13] Byiers, B., Vanheukelom, J. and Kingombe, C.K.M. (2015) A Five Lenses Framework for Analysing the Political Economy in Regional Integration (ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 178). European Centre for Development Policy Management.
 - [14] United Nations Statistics Division (n.d.) SDG Country Profile: Zimbabwe. United Nations. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/countryprofiles/zwe>
 - [15] United Nations Industrial Development Organization (2025) Factsheet: Africa. Highlights from the International Yearbook of Industrial Statistics 2025. https://stat.unido.org/portal/storage/file/publications/yb/2025/UNIDO_IndustrialStatistics_Factsheet_Africa_2025.pdf
 - [16] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (2022) Economic Development in Africa Report 2022: Rethinking the Foundations of Export Diversification in Africa: The Catalytic Role of Business and Financial Services. United Nations. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aldcafrica2022_en.pdf
 - [17] Newfarmer, R. and Pierola, M.D. (2015) Trade in Zimbabwe: Changing Incentives to Enhance Competitiveness. World Bank.
 - [18] Davoodi, H., Montiel, P. and Ter-Martirosyan, A. (2021) Macroeconomic Stability and Inclusive Growth. IMF Working Papers. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513574363.001>
 - [19] Fischer, S. (1993) The Role of Macroeconomic Factors in Growth. *Journal of Monetary Economics*, **32**, 485-512. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-3932\(93\)90027-d](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-3932(93)90027-d)
 - [20] Krugman, P.R., Obstfeld, M. and Melitz, M.J. (2018) International Economics: Theory and Policy. 11th Edition, Pearson.
 - [21] World Bank (2022) Zimbabwe Country Economic Memorandum: Boosting Productivity and Quality Jobs. World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099151010132227870/pdf/P1776070fe5e0c073087e00e3c04ec11f6e.pdf>
 - [22] World Bank (2021) Digital Economy for Zimbabwe: Country Diagnostic Report. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/35712>
 - [23] Paradigm Initiative (2020) Zimbabwe Digital Rights and Inclusion 2020 Report. Paradigm Initiative. <https://paradigmhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/lr-Zimbabwe-Digital-Rights-Inclusion-2020-Report.pdf>
 - [24] Bond, P. and Manyanya, M. (2002) Zimbabwe's Plunge: Exhausted Nationalism, Neoliberalism and the Search for Social Justice. University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
 - [25] Makochekanwa, A. (2012) Zimbabwe's Experience with Trade Liberalization (AERC Research Paper No. 238). African Economic Research Consortium.
 - [26] Raftopoulos, B. and Mlambo, A.S. (2009) Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-Colonial Period to 2008. Weaver Press.
 - [27] Zhou, G. and Zvoushe, H. (2012) Public Policy Making in Zimbabwe: A Three-Decade Perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, **2**, 212-222.
 - [28] Zhou, G. and Masunungure, E.V. (2006) An Analysis of the Objectives and Effects of Privatisation on the Public Sector and the Role of the State in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development, Southern Africa People's Solidarity Network, & African Institute for Agrarian Studies.

- [29] Government of Zimbabwe (1991) Zimbabwe: A Framework for Economic Reform, 1991-1995. Government Printer.
- [30] 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. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk3gmdw>
- [31] International Monetary Fund (2001) Zimbabwe: 2000 Article IV Consultation-Staff Report; Staff Statement; Public Information Notice Following Consultation; and Statement by the Authorities of Zimbabwe (IMF Country Report No. 01/5). International Monetary Fund. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2001/cr0105.pdf>
- [32] World Bank (1995) Zimbabwe: Achieving Shared Growth-Country Economic Memorandum (Report No. 13540-ZIM). World Bank.
- [33] Chigudu, D. (2015) Navigating Policy Implementation Gaps in Africa: The Case of Zimbabwe. *Risk Governance and Control: Financial Markets and Institutions*, 5, 7-14. <https://doi.org/10.22495/rgcv5i3art1>
- [34] Government of Zimbabwe (1998) Zimbabwe Programme for Economic and Social Transformation (ZIMPREST): Policy Framework. Government Printer.
- [35] Government of Zimbabwe (2013) Zimbabwe Agenda for Sustainable Socio-Economic Transformation (ZIMASSET): Towards an Empowered Society and a Growing Economy, October 2013-December 2018. Government of Zimbabwe.
- [36] Government of Zimbabwe (2018) Zimbabwe Vision 2030: Towards a Prosperous and Empowered Upper-Middle-Income Society by 2030. Government of Zimbabwe. <https://www.zim.gov.zw/index.php/government-documents/category/1-vision-2030?download=1:vision-2030>
- [37] Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (2018) Zimbabwe Transitional Stabilisation Programme: Reforms Agenda, October 2018-December 2020: Towards a Prosperous and Empowered Upper-Middle-Income Society by 2030. Harare, Zimbabwe: Government of Zimbabwe.
- [38] Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (2020) National Development Strategy 1: January 2021-December 2025. Government of Zimbabwe. https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/National-Development-Strategy1-2021-2025_compressed.pdf
- [39] 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>
- [40] Noyes, A.H. (2020) A New Zimbabwe? Assessing Continuity and Change after Mugabe. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4367.html
- [41] Baldwin, R. (2016) The Great Convergence: Information Technology and the New Globalization. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv24w655w>
- [42] 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.
- [43] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2023) Economic Development in Africa Report 2023: The Potential of Africa to Capture Technology-Intensive Global Supply Chains. Geneva: United Nations. UNCTAD/ALDC/AFRICA/2023.
- [44] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2020) Designing Trade Liberalization in Africa: Modalities for Tariff Negotiations towards an Af-

- frican Continental Free Trade Area. Geneva: United Nations. UNCTAD/DITC/TNCD/2019/4.
- [45] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2023) Economic Report on Africa 2023: Building Africa's Resilience to Global Economic Shocks. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.
 - [46] Chatham House (2019) Forging Inclusive Economic Growth in Zimbabwe [Research Paper]. Chatham House.
 - [47] Vanheukelom, J., Byiers, B., Bilal, S. and Woolfrey, S. (2016) The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Africa: What Drives and Constrains Regional Organisations? Synthesis Report. European Centre for Development Policy Management. <http://ecdpm.org/peria/synthesis>
 - [48] U.S. Department of State (2024) 2024 Investment Climate Statements: Zimbabwe. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-investment-climate-statements/zimbabwe/>
 - [49] Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2020) The Future of Production in Africa: The Case for Regional Integration. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/97191230-en>
 - [50] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and Trade Mark East Africa (2020) Creating a Unified Regional Market: Towards the Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area in East Africa. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. https://archive.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/tmea_afcfta_report_5_june_2020.pdf
 - [51] Chimhore, M. and Chivasa, S. (2021) The Effects of Exchange Rates on Zimbabwe's Exports. *Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies*, **13**, 8-16. [https://doi.org/10.22610/jebbs.v13i4\(j\).3211](https://doi.org/10.22610/jebbs.v13i4(j).3211)
 - [52] United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.(2018) World Investment Report 2018: Investment and New Industrial Policies. United Nations.
 - [53] World Bank (2016) World Development Indicators 2016. World Bank.
 - [54] Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (2022) Weekly Review: 08 March 2022. Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development. <https://zimcodd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ZIMCodd-Weekly-Review-08.03.2022.pdf>
 - [55] African Development Bank Group (2025) Zimbabwe: Emergency Power Infrastructure Rehabilitation Programme Phase II Stage II: Implementation Progress Report, September 2025. African Development Bank Group. <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/zimbabwe-emergency-power-infrastructure-rehabilitation-programme-phase-ii-stage-ii-ipr-september-2025>
 - [56] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2025) Economic Report on Africa 2025: Advancing the Implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area: Proposing Transformative Strategic Actions. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. https://www.uneca.org/eca-events/sites/default/files/resources/documents/com/2025/era2025/era2025_revmay16.pdf
 - [57] Daniel, W.W. (1999) Biostatistics: A Foundation for Analysis in the Health Sciences. 7th Edition, John Wiley & Sons.
 - [58] Patton, M.Q. (2002) Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods. 3rd Edition, SAGE Publications.
 - [59] Creswell, J.W. and Plano Clark, V.L. (2018) Designing and Conducting Mixed Meth-

- ods Research. 3rd Edition, SAGE Publications.
- [60] Yin, R.K. (2018) Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods. 6th Edition, SAGE Publications.
 - [61] Silverman, D. (2001) Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction. 2nd Edition, SAGE Publications.
 - [62] Milner, H.R. and Glassner, B. (2010) Qualitative Interviewing. In: Silverman, D., Ed., *Qualitative Research (3rd Edition)*, SAGE Publications, 131-148.
 - [63] Jerven, M. (2013) Poor Numbers: How We Are Misled by African Development Statistics and What to Do about It. Cornell University Press.
 - [64] Sauro, J. and Dumas, J.S. (2010) 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.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/1518701.1518946>
 - [65] Babbie, E. (2020) The Practice of Social Research. 15th Edition, Cengage Learning.
 - [66] Charmaz, K. (1995) Grounded Theory. In: Smith, J.A., Harré, R. and Van Langenhove, L., Eds., *Rethinking Methods in Psychology*, SAGE Publications Ltd, 27-49.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221792.n3>
 - [67] Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1994) Handbook of Qualitative Research. SAGE Publications.
 - [68] Riessman, C.K. (1993) Narrative Analysis. SAGE Publications.
 - [69] Oakley, A. (1981) Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms. In: Roberts, H., Ed., *Doing Feminist Research*, Routledge, 30-61.
 - [70] Lee, K.J., Tilling, K.M., Cornish, R.P., Little, R.J.A., Bell, M.L., Goetghebeur, E., *et al.* (2021) Framework for the Treatment and Reporting of Missing Data in Observational Studies: The Treatment and Reporting of Missing Data in Observational Studies Framework. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, **134**, 79-88.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2021.01.008>
 - [71] World Trade Organization (2021) Trade Policy Review: Zimbabwe. World Trade Organization.
 - [72] Conference on Zimbabwe's Economic Development (2025) Proceedings of the 2025 Zimbabwe Economic Development Conference. Zimbabwe Economic Development Conference.
 - [73] Debrah, Y.A., Olabode, O.E., Olan, F. and Nyuur, R.B. (2024) The African Continental Free Trade Area (AFCFTA): Taking Stock and Looking Ahead for International Business Research. *Journal of International Management*, **30**, Article ID: 101120.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2024.101120>
 - [74] Central Bank of Nigeria (2022) Foreign Exchange Manual and Import Prohibition Documentation. Central Bank of Nigeria.
 - [75] North, D.C. (1990) Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511808678>
 - [76] Andrews, M. (2013) The Limits of Institutional Reform in Development: Changing Rules for Realistic Solutions. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139060974>
 - [77] Krueger, A.O. (1974) The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society. *The American Economic Review*, **64**, 291-303.
 - [78] Acemoglu, D. and Robinson, J.A. (2012) Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty. Crown Business.

- [79] Balassa, B. (1965) Trade Liberalisation and “Revealed” Comparative Advantage. *The Manchester School*, **33**, 99-123. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9957.1965.tb00050.x>
- [80] African Development Bank (2023) African Economic Outlook 2023: Mobilizing Private Sector Financing for Climate and Green Growth in Africa. African Development Bank Group.
- [81] Farole, T. (2011) Special Economic Zones in Africa: Comparing Performance and Learning from Global Experience. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-0-8213-8638-5>
- [82] African Export-Import Bank (2023) African Trade Report 2023: Export Manufacturing and Regional Value Chains in Africa under a New World Order. African Export-Import Bank.