



Conditional Integration: Realising AfCFTA Economic Benefits in Zimbabwe: Political Economy Enablers, Constraints and Developmental Prospects

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) expands Zimbabwe's market opportunities, but access does not automatically translate into effective use. This article examines the domestic and regional factors that shape Zimbabwean firms' ability to convert AfCFTA benefits into higher production, exports, investment, employment, and overall welfare. It draws on a larger mixed-methods study that includes a survey of 62 large firms and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) conducted from May to October 2024, stakeholder interviews, document analysis, and quantitative and thematic analysis using SPSS and NVivo. Using the Byiers *et al.* framework, the study links structural conditions, institutions, actors, incentives, and implementation capacity. Findings reveal that key challenges include currency instability, expensive and unreliable energy, layered taxes, limited access to finance, infrastructure gaps, and weak production linkages. Institutional insights indicate that firms prioritise the Protocol on Trade in Goods and border efficiency over the wider AfCFTA architecture, reflecting an operational focus on borders, customs, non-tariff barriers, and rules of origin rather than deeper integration in services, investment, intellectual property, competition, and dispute settlement. Access disparities are evident, with established firms having more financial, informational, and administrative resources than SMEs and less influential players. Despite optimistic stakeholder outlooks on market access, export growth, and investment, economic constraints and regulatory delays significantly hinder firms' ability to leverage tariff preferences. The article argues that Zimbabwe's AfCFTA gains are conditional rather than automatic. Formal participation must be translated into productive capacity, macroeconomic stability, domestication of the law, infrastructure, institutional coordination, trade

finance, and inclusive firm-level utilisation. The study concludes that Zimbabwe's principal task is to convert legal access into productive uptake through macroeconomic credibility, industrial deepening, legal implementation, infrastructure, coordinated institutions, trade finance, and broader firm participation.

Subject Areas

Business Management

Keywords

AfCFTA, Zimbabwe, Political Economy, Regional Integration, Productive Capacity

1. Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) aims to unify African economies by establishing a continent-wide market for goods and services. This market provides a foundation for diversification, industrial growth, employment, and improved living standards [1]-[3]. Zimbabwe could leverage opportunities in agricultural and mineral exports, manufacturing, logistics, education, health, tourism, financial services, and digital trade. Increased demand could also boost value addition, investment, technological innovation, and participation in cross-border supply chains. However, these opportunities become truly advantageous only if companies can supply competitively priced goods, verify origin, finance deals, comply with standards, and deliver products and services reliably.

Zimbabwe's approach to continental liberalisation is mixed. Its strategic position in Southern Africa, membership in SADC and COMESA, regional trade experience, natural resources, and residual industrial capacity offer a foundation for firms to access broader African markets. However, the country faces challenges such as being landlocked, experiencing deindustrialisation, reliance on imported inputs, unreliable power supply, high operating costs, exchange-rate risks, infrastructure gaps, and inconsistent policies [3]-[5]. The key issue is not whether AfCFTA offers opportunities, but whether Zimbabwe's political economy allows firms and sectors to seize them.

This question is particularly significant because African integration remains largely state-driven. National governments still control tariffs, domestic laws, enforcement, and the pace of market liberalisation, while continent-wide decisions depend heavily on consensus and on maintaining regional economic treaties [6] [7]. Zimbabwe's 10-year tariff liberalisation leeway illustrates the flexibility offered by variable geometry. This approach can modernise industries and harmonise regulations, but it can also delay competition without addressing the underlying issues that make firms uncompetitive. Consequently, development outcomes depend more on policy implementation than on formal approval.

This article examines how the implementation environment shapes Zimbabwe's economic returns. It emphasises the link between market opportunities and domestic productive responses, focusing on factors such as firm participation, product mix, administrative capacity, payment and investment conditions, infrastructure, and the distribution of adjustment costs and benefits. The analysis applies the five-lenses framework of Byiers *et al.* [8], which interprets empirical evidence in terms of structural conditions, institutional practices, actor power and agency, sectoral needs, regional public goods, and external influences beyond the domestic economy.

2. Theoretical Framework

The article applies the five-lenses political economy framework developed by Byiers *et al.* [8]. The framework explains regional integration by examining the interaction of structural factors; formal and informal institutions; actors, political elites, and agency; sector characteristics and regional public goods; and external factors. These lenses are analytically distinct yet interdependent. Structural conditions shape actors' incentives and resources; institutions establish and mediate the rules by which they operate; sector characteristics affect the distribution and visibility of costs and benefits; and external forces alter domestic and regional opportunities. The framework is appropriate because the AfCFTA is not implemented in an institutional vacuum. Its protocols encounter historically formed production structures, administrative practices, power relations, and domestic coalitions that influence which commitments are adopted, delayed, selectively enforced, or used by firms.

2.1. Structural Conditions

Structural factors shape the long-term opportunities and constraints for integration. Africa's fragmented markets, colonial transport routes, uneven industrial development, and numerous landlocked countries lead to high trade costs and reliance on external markets [3] [9] [10]. Zimbabwe exemplifies these factors, relying on corridors through neighbouring countries such as South Africa and Mozambique, which requires efficient transit, border control, customs cooperation, and logistics synchronisation. Its economy remains focused on commodities, resource-based activities, and limited manufacturing connections. The Productive Capacities Index is useful because it views competitiveness as the interplay of resources, entrepreneurial skills, and production linkages [11] [12]. While increased continental demand can help, real gains are often constrained by deindustrialisation, infrastructure gaps, dependence on imported inputs, and macroeconomic instability.

2.2. Formal and Informal Institutions

The second lens, formal and informal institutions, distinguishes formal agreements from the practices that give these arrangements practical effect [1]. The

formal side encompasses the AfCFTA Agreement, its protocols and annexes, tariff offers, rules of origin, procedures for non-tariff barriers, customs systems, dispute resolution, and national laws on trade, services, investment, intellectual property, and competition. Their significance lies not only in their content but also in how they are domesticated, administrative capacity, and enforcement mechanisms. Rules of origin determine who qualifies for preferences; customs and trade facilitation measures influence the costs and reliability of movement; and services commitments address licensing, market access, national treatment, recognition of qualifications, and mobility [1] [2] [13]. Investment, intellectual property, and competition rules extend continental integration into a comprehensive system of market governance [14].

Actual commercial experience may still be shaped by informal arrangements. Practices such as selective exemptions, discretionary fees, side payments, patronage, inconsistent interpretations, and unofficial understandings between traders and officials can influence access at borders and in domestic markets [9] [15]. These practices affect smaller firms and informal traders most, as they often lack the resources to manage information, certification, finance, and compliance. Consequently, legal liberalisation can coexist with practical exclusion.

2.3. Interests, Influence and Agency

The third perspective examines who supports, influences, manages or opposes integration, as well as the resources available to these actors [8]. Zimbabwean exporters, import-sensitive industries, fiscal and regulatory bodies, business groups, labour organisations, large firms, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), women, youth and informal traders may hold different viewpoints and wield varying levels of influence [10]. Companies seeking new markets often favour predictable market openings and standardised rules, whereas import-competing producers may lobby for continued or extended protection [16] [17]. Revenue agencies may also be concerned about the fiscal effects of tariff reductions, while some institutions may have limited incentives to relinquish fees or discretionary powers [8] [18].

Agency also concerns stakeholders' ability to act effectively. Influence over AfCFTA negotiations and implementation depends on factors such as technical expertise, data access, financial resources, inter-ministerial coordination, organised representation, and ongoing public-private engagement [19] [20]. Groups with limited access to these resources may fall within the agreement's scope yet still lack the capacity to shape its implementation or seize its opportunities [18] [21].

2.4. Sectoral Conditions and Shared Regional Systems

The fourth perspective recognises that liberalisation affects different economic sectors in distinct ways [8]. Sectors such as agriculture, mining, manufacturing, textiles, logistics, finance, education, health, tourism, and digital services each have their own cost structures, regulatory frameworks, and levels of exposure to

competition [3] [22]. For manufacturing and agro-processing, rules of origin are particularly important. Meanwhile, licensing, the movement of service providers, and the recognition of professional qualifications are key factors influencing trade in many services [23].

This lens also encompasses regional public goods and coordination systems [8]. For Zimbabwe, key infrastructure, including energy networks, roads, railways, border facilities, digital connectivity, payment systems, customs cooperation, and transport corridors, is essential for reliable access to the continental market [3] [22]. Because these systems span multiple national jurisdictions and require harmonised regulations, shared investment, and coordinated public efforts, they typically cannot be effectively provided by individual firms acting alone [23].

2.5. Influences beyond the Domestic Arena

The fifth lens examines developments stemming from Zimbabwe's regional and global context [8]. These include market conditions across Africa, neighbouring countries' capabilities, commitments under SADC and COMESA, regional investments, continental payment systems, commodity demand, and support from African and international bodies [5] [8]. Existing regional economic communities (RECs) may offer proven procedures and established trade links that can support AfCFTA implementation [1] [5]. However, overlapping obligations can create uncertainty, particularly when tariffs, rules of origin, or administrative procedures are misaligned [6]. External sources of finance, technology, and market access can aid adjustment, but their effectiveness depends on Zimbabwe's domestic production capacity, institutional strength, and ability to implement necessary reforms [8] [24].

2.6. Analytical Proposition

The framework sets a clear expectation: benefits from the AfCFTA will not arise automatically from tariff liberalisation. Instead, they depend on reducing structural constraints, domesticating formal rules, controlling informal barriers, building capacity among public and private actors, addressing sector-specific needs and regional public goods, and turning external opportunities into domestic production and firm involvement. Consequently, the findings are presented using indicators such as productive capacity, export structure, industrial performance, firm participation, trade finance, information, infrastructure, policy stability, and social inclusion. The empirical analysis emphasises indicators such as productive capacity, product diversity, industrial performance, infrastructure quality, policy implementation, firm engagement, access to trade finance, and social inclusion to evaluate Zimbabwe's potential to capitalise on continental opportunities.

2.7. Analytical Mapping of Evidence in Accordance with Byiers *et al.*'s Political-Economy Frameworks

To ensure transparency in integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence, NVivo themes, interview codes, and survey indicators were mapped onto five po-

litical-economy lenses adapted from Byiers *et al.* These lenses served as second-order analytical categories rather than mutually exclusive first-cycle codes. The initial qualitative analysis remained organised around the research objectives and interview themes, with the political-economy lenses later applied to interpret the underlying mechanisms. **Table 1** presents the resulting analytical map.

Table 1. Correspondence between NVivo themes, interview codes, survey indicators, and the Byiers *et al.* lenses.

Byiers <i>et al.</i> lens	NVivo clusters/themes assigned to the lens	Interview codes	Principal survey indicators
Structural factors	Macroeconomic stability; infrastructure and logistics challenges; high costs of doing business; sectoral competitiveness; infrastructure development; productive and export capacity	Exchange-rate instability; inflation and dollarisation; power shortages; energy costs; transport and storage constraints; weak industrial base; imported-input dependence; deindustrialisation; skills shortages; limited value addition	Disruption of operations by power outages; cost of alternative electricity; access to foreign currency through the weekly foreign-exchange auction; contribution of foreign exchange to productivity; import/export of raw materials, intermediate and finished goods; technology transfer; participation in local value/supply chains; shortage of skilled labour; academic-industry partnerships
Institutional factors	Compliance with AfCFTA frameworks; domestic legal framework; institutional preparedness; regulatory and compliance costs; policy and institutional alignment; customs and tax harmonisation	Delayed domestication and gazetting; tariff implementation; Rules of Origin compliance; regulatory inconsistency; licensing; conformity assessment; NTBs; customs procedures; tax administration; legal alignment	Expected compliance with AfCFTA Rules of Origin; standardisation and electronic documentation at border posts; simplification of import/export transit procedures; transparency and predictability of one-stop border transactions; NTMs affecting imported raw materials; awareness of the National Focal Point for NTBs; awareness of the NTB National Monitoring Committee; use of tradebarrier.org; expected effects of the AfCFTA legal framework
Actor interests and incentives	Trade participation and performance; export growth and opportunities; sectoral responses; incentivisation mechanisms; investor-centred approach; trade finance and competitiveness	Protection of sensitive sectors; preference for continued protection; firm export readiness; tariff preferences; comparative advantage; investment incentives; access to export credit; perceived competitive exposure; reluctance to disclose commercial information	Participation in African regional trade; support for tariff liberalisation; preparedness for increased competition following tariff removal; period for which firms expect government protection to remain necessary; comparative advantage in regional markets; level of competition facing exported products/services; access to trade finance and export guarantees; access to bank finance for cross-border projects; participation in cross-border investment
Governance and coordination	Policy coordination and implementation; institutional preparedness; performance monitoring; public-private collaboration; stakeholder engagement and awareness; trade-facilitation coordination	Fragmented implementation; whole-of-government coordination; implementation committee; interministerial coordination; public-private dialogue; monitoring and accountability; stakeholder consultation; awareness and training	Participation in forums on Rules of Origin; participation in stakeholder forums on tariff removal; participation in forums on NTMs and grievances; membership/awareness of the National Trade Facilitation Committee; participation in trade-facilitation awareness forums; awareness of the National Focal Point and National Monitoring Committee; perceptions of policy harmonisation

Continued

External influences	Regional partnerships; regional market access; cross-border value chains; regional payment arrangements; regional regulatory harmonisation; external economic and geopolitical influences	Sovereign and perception risk; sanctions; AfCFTA Secretariat processes; regional financial institutions; regional tax-policy differences; Pan-African payment arrangements; regional value chains; competition from more industrialised African economies; Zimbabwe-Zambia Agro-Industrial Park	Use of the Pan-African payment system for cross-border transactions; participation in cross-border value/supply chains; participation in cross-border investment projects; technology transfer from other African countries; participation in “Buy African” activities; expected benefits from policy harmonisation with other AfCFTA member states; sanctions-list exposure

2.8. Handling Evidence Related to Multiple Perspectives

The five lenses were not treated as separate empirical categories. When a theme, interview code, or survey indicator indicated more than one political-economy mechanism, it was assigned a primary lens based on the main explanatory mechanism. Cross-coding and matrix analysis preserved relevant secondary connections. This approach aligned with NVivo matrix-coding queries, which were used to explore relationships among themes and analyse evidence from multiple analytical perspectives.

For instance, Rules of Origin were mainly attributed to the institutional perspective, as they form part of the formal AfCFTA regulatory framework. However, evidence that firms struggled to meet origin requirements because they relied on imported inputs was associated with the structural perspective, as it highlighted limitations in domestic productive capacity. Likewise, government protection measures were viewed primarily through the lens of actor interests and incentives, as they reflected firms’ preferences regarding regional competition. Additionally, their implementation via statutory instruments gave them an institutional aspect.

A similar approach was applied to policy harmonisation. The formal alignment of national policies with AfCFTA requirements was categorised as an institutional aspect, while the processes by which ministries, agencies, and private-sector actors coordinated this alignment were considered part of governance and coordination. Because harmonisation involves other AfCFTA member states, it also relates to external influences. Likewise, participation in the National Trade Facilitation Committee was mainly viewed as a governance indicator, reflecting coordination and stakeholder involvement, even though the committee is part of the institutional framework for trade facilitation.

Cross-coded evidence was not treated as separate observations or duplicated in the quantitative data. Survey responses retained their original unit of analysis and were analysed through relevant lenses without being counted as additional cases, even when an indicator had multiple theoretical implications. Similarly, qualitative cross-coding revealed analytical links rather than additional independent data points. Overlap highlighted interactions among political-economy mechanisms rather than artificially inflating the importance of specific findings.

The external-influences lens was applied more selectively than the four domestic lenses. External influences served as a contextual perspective rather than being fully operationalised. The survey included relevant indicators, such as regional payment arrangements, participation in cross-border value chains and investments, technology transfer, policy harmonisation, and sanctions exposure. However, these indicators did not constitute a complete, standalone measure of the external environment. As a result, external influences mainly functioned as a supplementary explanatory tool, supported by specific survey indicators, interviews, and documentary evidence, rather than as a comprehensive, standalone measure.

3. Methodology

This evidence relates to Objective C within a broader study of Zimbabwe's participation in the AfCFTA [25] [26]. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach that combined firm surveys, stakeholder interviews, and document analysis. Data were collected between May and October 2024.

The survey explored African regional trade participation, traded products, perceptions of AfCFTA legal frameworks, and factors affecting firms' involvement in continental markets. Data were collected from export-focused companies listed in the Confederation of Zimbabwe Industries, Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce, and ZimTrade databases. Firms were purposively selected across sectors, including agro-processing, manufacturing, services, construction, chemicals, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and engineering. Efforts were made to distribute firms evenly across all sectors to ensure broad representation and to prevent overrepresentation of sectors with more listings. The sampling focused specifically on export-oriented firms, since these directly indicate whether AfCFTA commitments lead to increased trade. Only firms listed in the selected sources and engaged in relevant export activities were included in the sample. Using Daniel's formula [27], the target sample was set at 80 firms from a population of 100. Of these, 62 large firms and SMEs completed the survey.

Purposive sampling was used to identify key informants and export-oriented firms with direct relevance to Zimbabwe's AfCFTA integration. Key informants were drawn from 12 institutions involved in trade policy, customs, investment, export promotion, and industrial development. Of the 24 informants targeted, 15 participated in interviews. This sampling strategy balanced statistical coverage with qualitative insight and reflected mixed-methods and purposive-sampling principles that emphasise relevance, institutional context, and explanatory depth rather than broad generalisation [28]-[30].

Survey responses were summarised using frequencies and percentages, while chi-square tests were applied to assess relationships between categorical variables. The qualitative dataset comprised interviews and stakeholder briefs from government officials, firms, business associations, and other relevant stakeholders. To protect confidentiality, respondents were anonymised using the identifiers P1 to P15.

NVivo analysis produced five main clusters: Governance and Policy; Economic Constraints; Trade and Markets; Production and Industry; and Systems and Infrastructure. This article does not recode the original data. Instead, it reorganises the findings under these five theoretical perspectives to allow the evidence to be interpreted from different analytical angles. Direct quotations are included only where participants explicitly discuss implementation, production costs, trade activities, or investment.

The study also reviewed AfCFTA instruments and secondary sources addressing productive capacity, tariffs, rules of origin, non-tariff measures, services, investment, competition, trade facilitation, and infrastructure. Triangulation was used to connect firm and stakeholder experiences with the wider legal, structural, and regional context, and to distinguish formal market access from practical utilisation.

4. Findings

4.1. Perceived Opportunities and Constraints to AfCFTA Participation

Respondents generally viewed the AfCFTA as a catalyst for transforming Zimbabwe's socioeconomic landscape by expanding markets, boosting export growth, fostering industrial development and value addition, attracting investments, creating jobs, and enhancing access to goods and services. In the NVivo Trade and Markets cluster, 87% of relevant responses highlighted exports, 80% mentioned trade participation, and 73% focused on market access. Participants saw promising opportunities in agricultural products such as maize, tobacco, fruit, sugar, coffee, and tea; minerals such as gold, platinum, and lithium; and in value-added manufacturing, processing, and services. Therefore, AfCFTA was viewed not just as a tariff-liberalisation agreement but as a framework for productive transformation and deeper regional integration, aligned with the broader goals of the agreement [1] [3].

While there was some optimism, concerns persisted about Zimbabwe's capacity to manage the challenges of liberalisation. Most interviewees and business groups could not identify specific measures aimed at shielding vulnerable firms and households from increased competition. P10 highlighted the difficulty of putting such measures into practice, stating: "There is a need to find sustainable ways to mitigate this, but sometimes the recommendations take a long time to be implemented, sometimes more than a year. The real challenge is in implementing these AfCFTA recommendations." This response suggests that political will has not always translated into prompt policy actions. As a result, the anticipated benefits of the AfCFTA might not be fully realised if adjustment measures, institutional reforms, and business-support programmes face delays.

Economic constraints emerged as the most prominent empirical cluster. Costs and currency instability were noted in 93% of the coding, followed by economic stability at 87% and taxation at 80%. Respondents frequently linked weak regional

competitiveness to factors such as energy, finance, taxation, regulation, logistics, and compliance costs. Firms reliant on imported inputs also reported issues such as foreign-currency shortages, surrender requirements, exchange-rate volatility, and uncertainty in price setting. These observations align with broader evidence indicating that macroeconomic instability and a challenging business climate have limited investment, productivity, and private-sector growth in Zimbabwe [24].

Energy costs and unreliable electricity were key issues. P3 observed, “Zimbabwe’s energy expenses and outdated industrial infrastructure give local manufacturers a disadvantage against regional competitors such as South Africa.” P6 estimated that energy costs were about 50% higher than the sub-Saharan African average, with roughly 73% of businesses relying on alternative power sources. The evidence indicates that energy costs pose a significant operational challenge. P10, citing a CZI business climate analysis, revealed that approximately 73% of businesses depend on alternative energy sources such as diesel generators. Likewise, respondents noted that firms buying diesel on the open market face higher operating costs and productivity pressures. These observations align with African industrialisation literature, which highlights unreliable electricity and expensive self-generation as barriers to industrial competitiveness and exports [24].

The survey data offers further firm-level insights into the impact of alternative electricity costs. As shown in **Table 2**, 20.9% of surveyed firms reported that their alternative electricity expenses accounted for over half of their revenue. This burden was much higher among SMEs (35.2%) than among large firms (3.6%). These statistics highlight notable variation in energy-cost exposure across firm categories in the sample. The results support the view that energy costs act as a domestic structural constraint for firms seeking to leverage AfCFTA market access, because high production costs can undermine export competitiveness even when tariff preferences are in place.

The distributional pattern is particularly significant from the actor’s perspective. The higher perceived burden among SMEs suggests variation in firms’ ability to absorb energy-related costs, although the survey data do not establish causality. From a political-economy viewpoint, energy costs constitute a domestic conversion constraint: simply accessing continental markets does not guarantee effective participation if firms face high domestic production costs. Therefore, **Table 1** separates stakeholder estimates from documented national data, while **Table 2** presents descriptive evidence from the survey.

Multiple taxes and regulatory fees were seen as raising production costs and decreasing domestic demand. P10 pointed out that earnings are heavily taxed through goods, services, and money transfers, which leaves consumers with limited purchasing power. Respondents argued that tariff preferences would be ineffective unless Zimbabwe lowered domestic costs and aligned its tax and regulatory policies with regional markets. Their statements show that competitiveness depends not only on border tariffs but also on the broader domestic environment in which firms produce, finance, transport, and sell their products.

Table 2. Cost of alternative electricity.

Does your company participate in African regional trade?		Company Category		Total	
		Large Corporate	SMEs		
No	The cost of alternative electricity	Less than 10% of our revenue	57.10%	28.60%	42.90%
		less than 20% of our revenue	14.30%	14.30%	14.30%
		less than 30% of our revenue	14.30%		7.10%
		less than 40% of our revenue		14.30%	7.10%
		Less than 50% of our revenue	14.30%	14.30%	14.30%
		less than 70% of our revenue		28.60%	14.30%
		>50% of revenue	0.00%	28.60%	14.30%
		Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Yes	The cost of alternative electricity	Less than 10% of our revenue	33.30%	7.40%	18.80%
		less than 20% of our revenue	38.10%	25.90%	31.30%
		less than 30% of our revenue	14.30%	14.80%	14.60%
		less than 40% of our revenue		7.40%	4.1.10%
		Less than 50% of our revenue	9.50%	7.40%	8.30%
		Less than 60% of our revenue		22.20%	12.50%
		less than 70% of our revenue		3.70%	2.10%
		less than 80% of our revenue	4.80%		2.10%
		less than 90% of our revenue		7.40%	4.1.10%
		Less than 100% of our revenue		3.70%	2.10%
		>50% of revenue	4.80%	37.00%	23.00%
		Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Total	The cost of alternative electricity	Less than 10% of our revenue	39.30%	11.80%	24.1.10%
		less than 20% of our revenue	32.10%	23.50%	27.40%
		less than 30% of our revenue	14.30%	11.80%	12.90%
		less than 40% of our revenue		8.80%	4.80%
		Less than 50% of our revenue	10.70%	8.80%	9.70%
		Less than 60% of our revenue		17.60%	9.70%
		less than 70% of our revenue		8.80%	4.80%
		less than 80% of our revenue	3.60%		1.60%
		less than 90% of our revenue		5.90%	3.20%
		Less than 100% of our revenue		2.90%	1.60%
		>50% of revenue	3.60%	35.20%	20.90%
		Total	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Source: Author's Survey Results (May to October 2024).

The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) could ease some transaction limitations by enabling intra-African payments to be settled in local currencies. This approach decreases dependence on foreign currencies and fosters financial integration [31]. However, its actual benefit for Zimbabwean companies depends on trust in the domestic monetary system, access to liquidity, exchange-rate stability, and the financial health of participating businesses. While PAPSS might lower certain settlement costs, it cannot solely address the broader macro-economic challenges highlighted by respondents.

The analysis of firms' trade composition highlighted Zimbabwe's productive capacity. Finished products were the dominant trade category for 53% of surveyed firms, including 54% of large corporations and 53% of SMEs. Intermediate goods represented 19% overall, with 18% among large firms and 21% among SMEs. About 21% of firms traded raw materials, with a slightly higher proportion from large corporations. Firm size was not significantly associated with trade composition, $\chi^2(3, N = 62) = 1.113$, $p = 0.774$. Due to low counts in some categories, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was used to examine the relationship between company type and traded products, revealing no significant association, Fisher-Freeman-Halton $p = 0.839$, Cramér's $V = 0.134$. The small effect size suggests only minor differences in product distribution between large firms and SMEs.

The results indicate that most surveyed firms primarily trade finished products and raw materials, with only about 20% dealing in intermediate goods. This pattern suggests limited involvement in certain stages of regional production and supply networks. However, product categories alone do not fully clarify firms' positions or functions within value chains, as more detailed information is needed on how traded products are produced, processed, incorporated into other goods, and ultimately consumed [32]. The small share of intermediate-goods trade may limit opportunities for Zimbabwean firms to supply inputs to manufacturers across Africa and to develop stronger linkages within continental value chains. Trade in intermediate inputs is an important indicator of participation in cross-border production, as it reflects the extent to which firms supply products that undergo further processing in other countries [32]. Greater participation in regional value chains can also expand firms' access to markets, inputs, investment, technology, and production knowledge [33] [34].

Increasing participation in intermediate-goods trade could enable Zimbabwean firms to specialise in specific stages of production, build supplier relationships, acquire knowledge and technology, and raise the domestic value added embedded in regional exports [33] [34]. However, to assess firms' integration into regional production systems more accurately, more information is needed on the specific products traded, their technological complexity, levels of domestic value addition, destination markets, and their use in subsequent production processes [32]. Firms trading finished products may also face product-specific Rules of Origin, documentation, certification, and verification requirements when seeking preferential tariff treatment under the AfCFTA. Rules of Origin determine whether a product

qualifies as originating within the free trade area, and demonstrating compliance can impose administrative, verification, and certification costs on firms [2]. These requirements may be particularly challenging for SMEs with limited financial, technical, and administrative capacity. Recent AfCFTA capacity-building initiatives for Zimbabwean SMEs have likewise emphasised Rules of Origin, non-tariff measures, market information, and other cross-border trading requirements as key areas where firms need support [35].

These observations align with themes identified in the qualitative analysis's Governance, Policy, and Infrastructure clusters, particularly those relating to regulatory compliance, institutional support, trade facilitation, and the costs of cross-border trade. Effective participation in regional value chains depends not only on productive capacity but also on improvements in trade policy, infrastructure, logistics, standards compliance, and the broader business environment [33] [34]. Overall, the data show no significant differences between large firms and SMEs in the types of products traded. However, the generally low participation in intermediate-goods trade highlights an area that industrial and trade policies could target. Policies that support supplier development, regional production alliances, quality certification, technological and managerial upgrading, and value-chain mapping could help Zimbabwean firms identify opportunities to supply intermediate inputs within African markets. Such interventions can strengthen local supplier capabilities, reduce the costs of participating in cross-border production, and create stronger linkages between SMEs, larger firms, and regional lead firms [33] [34].

4.2. Institutional Conversion and Legal Readiness

The evidence shows a persistent gap between political support for the AfCFTA and its implementation in Zimbabwe. Many interviewees and business groups could not identify specific measures to help firms manage the pressures of liberalisation. The major issue is not merely whether policies have been announced, but whether administrative steps are taken within a timeframe relevant to commerce. Political commitment has often failed to translate into coordinated procedures, adjustment mechanisms, and institutional support that firms can rely on.

Firms mainly viewed the AfCFTA's legal framework through the lens of the operational issues they face in trading goods. About 44% saw the Protocol on Trade in Goods as the most likely to impact their operations once fully implemented. This perception increased to 63% among SMEs already involved in regional trade, compared to 33% of larger corporations active regionally. Overall, 50% of all firms engaged in regional trade chose the goods protocol as influential, while only 21% of firms not involved in regional trade did the same.

Other aspects of the AfCFTA received significantly less focus. Only 21% of firms mentioned competition policy, around 10% cited investment, and 7% each noted services and intellectual property rights. Dispute settlement was acknowledged by just 3%. Larger firms active regionally showed greater awareness of competition policy at 38%, compared to only 15% among SMEs. This indicates that

most businesses view the AfCFTA primarily as a framework for tariffs, customs, transit, documentation, rules of origin, and non-tariff barriers, rather than as a broader system that also includes services, investment, competition, intellectual property, and legal mechanisms. Despite this, the AfCFTA aims to create a more comprehensive integration framework covering trade in goods and services, dispute resolution, investment, intellectual property, competition policy, and other market governance areas [1].

The focus on trade in goods highlights the firms' immediate operational environment. Customs delays, transit expenses, inconsistent standards, non-tariff barriers, and rules-of-origin requirements directly impact delivery times, cash flow, and export reliability. Participants anticipated that effectively implementing the Protocol on Trade in Goods would improve customs cooperation, streamline documentation, lower border costs, and make access to African markets more predictable. P1 emphasised that "establishing a National Implementation Committee is crucial for addressing non-tariff barriers and improving trade facilitation." P4 also noted that "simplified and harmonised tax procedures will cut business costs and promote participation in AfCFTA trade."

Zimbabwe's electronic customs systems, trade facilitation agencies, and border modernisation efforts provide a foundation for aligning local procedures with obligations under the WTO, SADC, COMESA, and AfCFTA. The Zimbabwe Electronic Single Window aims to streamline submissions, unify processes among border agencies, enhance transparency, and lower clearance times and trade costs [36]. These developments support evidence that much of AfCFTA's potential hinges on cutting administrative barriers and trade costs, not just reducing tariffs [3].

The commercial benefits of digitisation are limited if electronic systems are merely added on top of duplicated documentation, repeated inspections, informal payments, and inadequate access to procedural guidance. To fully leverage AfCFTA preferences, credible systems are needed to verify origin, manage standards, report non-tariff barriers, and enforce trade remedies. Thus, institutional reform should focus on simplifying and coordinating procedures rather than simply automating existing administrative tasks.

Trade remedies highlight the gap between having a legal rule and enforcing it effectively. Companies often hesitate to share sensitive information needed for investigations. As P3 noted, "Companies are not willing to share financials, employment, pricing, and cost of production." Industries hit by dumping, unfair subsidies, or sudden import surges may struggle to use official trade-remedy processes effectively, leading them to seek discretionary protections instead. The main institutional issue is the incomplete implementation of continental laws into reliable, coordinated, and consistently applied domestic practices.

Zimbabwe's limited understanding of the rules related to services, investment, intellectual property, competition, and dispute resolution suggests that efforts have mainly been directed toward border trade. This narrow emphasis could hin-

der opportunities in services exports, professional mobility, investment support, innovation, technology transfer, competition enforcement, and business certainty. Additionally, without strengthening the technical skills of its institutions and companies to interpret and engage with the broader AfCFTA legal framework, Zimbabwe risks becoming a passive rule-taker.

4.3. Unequal Agency, Distribution and Adjustment

The AfCFTA's advantages and challenges are unequally shared among actors with varying resources and influence. Government agencies, customs, regulatory authorities, business groups, large firms, SMEs, labour unions, women, youth, and informal traders do not all have the same access to finance, information, administrative skills, certification, or policymaking platforms. Larger, established companies are typically better equipped to cover compliance costs, gather market intelligence, handle delays, meet technical standards, and sway policy decisions. Meanwhile, SMEs and emerging exporters face higher relative compliance costs, making them more prone to stay outside formal regional trade opportunities.

Women, youth, and informal traders may face additional barriers arising from restricted access to finance, productive assets, digital services, training, information, and formal representation. Their inclusion in the formal scope of the AfCFTA does not automatically provide the capacity to use the agreement. Inclusive outcomes require complementary measures that address structural inequalities and enable disadvantaged groups to move into higher-productivity activities and market opportunities [5].

Stakeholders have differing interests in adjustments. Government officials worry about potential tariff revenue losses, whereas firms in sectors such as automotive, textiles, steel, cement, sugar, and food processing expect increased competition from more efficient regional producers. Less than 25% of surveyed firms know when current protection measures will end, and about a quarter favour their continuation. This uncertainty shows that the shift from domestic protection to continental competition lacks a clear and well-understood transition plan.

Participants did not oppose regional integration itself. Their suggestions centred on industrial modernisation, skills development, access to finance, market intelligence, enforcement of competition laws, social safety nets, and targeted support during transitions. P2 linked export strength to the robustness of local industries: "If local producers can meet domestic demand comfortably, they will be better equipped to export within the AfCFTA framework." This suggests that inclusive participation requires more than just formal eligibility for tariff benefits. Smaller firms and social groups need support to boost production, comply with regulations, compete, and access regional markets.

The distributional consequences of liberalisation hinge on the sequencing of market openings and domestic reforms. Exposing markets too early without adequate industrial and social support risks worsening deindustrialisation, unemployment, informality, and dominance by large regional firms. On the other hand,

carefully planned adjustment strategies can help vulnerable firms and workers modernise, transition to more competitive sectors, and share in the gains from increased trade. AfCFTA achievements are not guaranteed and largely depend on complementary reforms, streamlined trade processes, productive investments, and initiatives that expand economic participation [3].

Agency plays a crucial role in shaping and interpreting continental rules. Zimbabwe's influence in AfCFTA negotiations depends on well-prepared negotiators, reliable data, consistent positions across government departments, and ongoing dialogue with businesses, labour groups, and other stakeholders. A lack of expertise in areas such as services, investment, intellectual property, competition, and dispute resolution hampers domestic actors' ability to influence rule development or to use the rules effectively. When other countries have stronger technical and organisational capacity, Zimbabwe risks receiving rules rather than actively shaping them.

4.4. Sector Pathways, Export Structure and Regional Value Chains

Continental liberalisation does not set identical requirements for every type of economic activity. Sectors such as agriculture, mineral extraction, manufacturing, agro-processing, logistics, finance, tourism, and other services each have different pathways to access African markets. Products such as automotive parts, textiles, steel, cement, sugar, and food processing might face direct competition from larger, more efficient regional producers. Service sectors rely more heavily on licensing, professional recognition, digital infrastructure, financial regulation, and the mobility of service providers. The limited focus on the services protocol and deeper-integration provisions suggests that private-sector involvement remains mainly limited to cross-border trade in goods.

The survey results indicate that Zimbabwean firms have limited engagement with regional production networks. As detailed in Section 4.2, the Pearson chi-square analysis indicated no statistically significant association between firm size and product category. Given the presence of sparse expected cell frequencies, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was also conducted and likewise confirmed the absence of a statistically significant association. The effect-size estimate indicated a small relationship, suggesting that differences in product distribution between large firms and SMEs were relatively minor.

Although the differences between large firms and SMEs were not statistically significant, the overall composition of trade remains substantively important. Zimbabwean firms mainly trade finished goods and raw materials rather than intermediate products, which are key channels for developing supplier relationships, industrial learning, technological spillovers, and indirect exports of domestic value added. This pattern suggests limited integration into continental manufacturing networks and may restrict Zimbabwean firms' ability to use the AfCFTA as a platform for industrial development. Expanding regional production and trade in processed and intermediate goods could strengthen supply chains, in-

crease domestic value addition, and improve African firms' participation in regional and global markets [11] [37].

Reliance on imported inputs may compound this challenge. Under the AfCFTA rules of origin, goods must satisfy specified criteria, such as originating-input requirements, minimum levels of regional value added, or substantial transformation, to qualify for preferential tariff treatment [1]. Firms that depend heavily on imported inputs may therefore have difficulty meeting the relevant origin requirements, even where tariffs have been reduced. Exporters of finished products may also encounter certification, verification, and documentation requirements that are particularly challenging for SMEs with limited technical and administrative resources. Consequently, available trade preferences may remain underused when firms cannot demonstrate product origin or absorb the associated compliance costs.

Respondents viewed the expansion of intermediate-goods production, including components, plastics, chemicals, and semi-processed agricultural products, as a practical pathway to greater integration into continental value chains. Such a strategy could strengthen domestic supplier networks, build industrial capabilities, increase productivity, and create more stable opportunities for SMEs, women, and youth. It could also enable Zimbabwean firms to indirectly export domestic value by supplying inputs to larger regional manufacturers. As P2 explained, "If local producers can meet domestic demand adequately, they will be better positioned to export under the AfCFTA framework."

Other aspects of market governance also influence sectoral results. Competition laws help prevent abuse and the dominance of regional firms. Investment policies determine where productive activities and infrastructure develop, while intellectual property systems impact innovation, technology transfer, branding, and added value. Dispute-resolution mechanisms enhance predictability and trust in cross-border trade. While the focus on the Protocol on Trade in Goods is understandable due to firms' immediate border issues, an exclusive focus on customs procedures might limit businesses' ability to leverage broader opportunities offered by continental integration.

4.5. Regional Systems, Payments, Investment and Infrastructure

Zimbabwe's landlocked status emphasises the importance of regional infrastructure and coordination for its AfCFTA engagement. Key factors include electricity grids, roads, rail connections, border facilities, digital links, customs cooperation, payment methods, and transport routes, all of which influence firms' ability to produce and deliver goods reliably. Inconsistent electricity supply hampers output and boosts costs, while delays along corridors create uncertainty and undermine export dependability. Additionally, poor interoperability among customs, transport, and payment systems causes transaction delays and raises compliance expenses.

Trade facilitation should be seen as an integral part of the productive environment, not just a border concern. Transport delays, administrative costs, unreliable

infrastructure, and expensive documentation can nullify the commercial benefits of tariff preferences. Ongoing infrastructure gaps, especially in transport and electricity, along with persistent non-tariff barriers, continue to hinder the growth of regional African supply chains [3] [37].

Respondents viewed the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) as a potentially key tool for reducing reliance on foreign currencies, decreasing payment costs, and streamlining intra-African transactions. Designed to enable cross-border payments in African currencies and promote intra-African trade expansion [31], its effectiveness in Zimbabwe was seen as closely linked to exchange-rate stability and foreign-exchange policies. Issues such as currency shortages, surrender requirements, exchange-rate volatility, and distorted pricing directly impact firms that depend on imported raw materials and intermediate goods.

PAPSS can improve settlement for eligible transactions, but it cannot address unstable production costs, restricted access to foreign exchange, or low confidence in the domestic monetary environment. The advantages of settling in local currency, such as lower transaction costs, increased trade, better consumer prices, and job creation, are therefore dependent on macroeconomic stability and trust in the participating firms and financial institutions.

Zimbabwe's regional landscape offers both opportunities and challenges. SADC and COMESA provide established trade networks, regulatory expertise, and potential pathways into continental value chains. The AfCFTA acknowledges regional economic communities and their free trade zones as foundational elements for continental integration [2]. Leveraging existing regional arrangements can help lower implementation costs and enable firms to rely on familiar trading practices. However, overlapping commitments may lead to uncertainty, especially if tariff schedules, rules of origin, standards, or administrative procedures conflict. Therefore, successful integration depends on coordinating AfCFTA obligations with existing SADC and COMESA frameworks [38].

Regional competition from more efficient African producers impacts Zimbabwe. Respondents viewed Zimbabwe's electricity, infrastructure, taxation, licensing, and investment climate as less favourable compared to other countries, especially South Africa. While increased openness might boost firms' efficiency, it could also lead to higher imports and further weaken local industry if they cannot adapt. Zimbabwe's capacity to benefit from regional demand relies on improving domestic productivity, maintaining macroeconomic stability, ensuring reliable energy supplies, and fostering a regulatory environment that attracts private investment [24].

The AfCFTA opens pathways for attracting African investment and fostering the development of infrastructure, industrial clusters, and special economic zones. Respondents mentioned investor interest from Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa; however, P7 pointed out that "none of these investors has yet established a local business." Despite the interest, commitments have not been made due to issues such as policy uncertainty, currency risks, multiple approval processes, and

high entry costs.

Interviewees estimated that the total cost for permits, approvals, and licences could reach around US\$150,000. They also noted that Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency licensing costs are higher compared to regional options, even with an online one-stop platform available. These observations suggest that predictable regulations, transparent screening, lower administrative fees, and faster approval processes may matter more for investment decisions than incentives. While Zimbabwe's strategic location, natural resources, and established industrial sector could attract regional investors, restrictive domestic procedures diminish the value of these advantages.

PAPSS, support from Afreximbank, and assistance from African and international organisations can help overcome challenges related to payments, transition, and implementation. The AfCFTA Adjustment Fund was created to support state parties and private-sector entities in adapting to the open continental trading environment [31]. These external mechanisms are designed to support rather than compensate: they cannot, on their own, generate export capacity where electricity is unreliable, finance is limited, inputs are expensive, institutions are slow, or firms struggle to meet technical standards. External resources only gain developmental importance when domestic institutions and productive systems can effectively utilise them.

Respondents mentioned ZimTrade's forecast of a 10% annual export increase and exports reaching about US\$14 billion by 2030. While these estimates highlight the significant opportunity across the continent, they also emphasise the need for certain prerequisites to realise this potential: consistent production, cost competitiveness, added value, adherence to standards, efficient logistics, credible policies, and the ability to compete with regional rivals. Continental demand represents an opportunity, not a guaranteed outcome.

Overall, the findings differentiate between formal market access and actual market participation. The AfCFTA offers Zimbabwean firms expanded markets, regional payment systems, investment prospects, and pathways into continental value chains. However, leveraging these opportunities requires translating treaty provisions into practical procedures domestically, involving actors with varying resources, advancing intermediate production, and maintaining ongoing investment in energy, infrastructure, institutional capacity, and macroeconomic stability.

5. Discussion

The results support the idea that the AfCFTA can boost trade, foster industrial growth, attract investment, create jobs, and enhance well-being. Nonetheless, they challenge the view that these outcomes automatically follow from tariff liberalisation. Zimbabwe's case shows that domestic political and economic factors shape the economic benefits of market access across the continent. High energy and financing costs, layered taxes, currency instability, limited production capacity, infrastructure gaps, policy delays, and fragmented institutions hinder firms even be-

fore they reach international borders. A tariff advantage alone cannot offset uncompetitive domestic costs or uncertain production conditions. This aligns with broader evidence indicating that the benefits of the AfCFTA depend on additional reforms to lower non-tariff barriers, streamline trade processes, boost productive capacity, and increase firm participation [3] [22] [37].

Zimbabwean evidence provides detailed insights into specific firm-level issues. Infrastructure problems not only elevate transportation costs but also disrupt production continuity, delay delivery schedules, hinder export reliability, and limit firms' capacity to fulfil repeat orders. Foreign exchange instability affects access to imported inputs, influences pricing strategies, affects investment planning, and reduces regional competitiveness. Institutional delays slow down the implementation of recommendations, legal obligations, and adjustment measures within commercially meaningful timeframes. These interconnected constraints help explain why, despite formal participation in the AfCFTA, awareness of its preferences remains limited. They also highlight broader concerns that macroeconomic instability, infrastructure deficits, regulatory burdens, and limited investment continue to hamper Zimbabwe's productivity and private-sector growth [24].

Zimbabwe's current trade structure hampers deeper integration. Few firms trade intermediate goods, reflecting limited involvement in regional production networks. Most firms focus on finished products and raw materials rather than intermediate manufacturing stages, where supplier development, industrial learning, technological spillovers, and indirect exports of domestic value added are more common. Heavy reliance on imported inputs further hampers participation, as firms may struggle to meet AfCFTA rules of origin requirements for originating inputs, value addition, or significant transformation.

Developing intermediate production can offer Zimbabwe a practical, step-by-step entry into African value chains. Producing components, chemicals, plastics, processed agricultural inputs, and other intermediates allows local firms to serve larger regional manufacturers without immediately competing in all final-product markets. This strategy does not reduce the importance of exporting finished goods, but it creates a pathway for firms to build productive skills, strengthen local supplier networks, upgrade technological capabilities, and increase domestic value added within regional trade. Successful participation in regional and global value chains largely depends on logistics, technology, finance, reliable infrastructure, productive capacity, and supportive institutions [11].

It is understandable that respondents focus heavily on the Protocol on Trade in Goods because issues such as customs delays, rules of origin, border charges, documentation, transit arrangements, and non-tariff barriers are immediate operational concerns. However, this focus also shows a limited understanding of the broader legal and institutional framework of the AfCFTA. The agreement covers more than just trade in goods, including services, investment, competition policy, intellectual property rights, dispute resolution, and other aspects of continental market governance [1]. These areas are crucial for building productive capabilities

and influence how firms access finance, technology, professional expertise, legal certainty, and service inputs.

Limited awareness and domestication of deeper-integration rules may restrict Zimbabwean companies to basic trade, while firms elsewhere engage in higher-value sectors such as finance, logistics, technology, professional services, innovation, and regional governance. Expanding participation demands more than just efficient customs; it calls for coordinated legal reforms, specialised expertise, strong regulatory bodies, and ongoing collaboration with private-sector groups, labour representatives, and other stakeholders.

The five-lens political economy framework clarifies why implementation varies [8]. The structural lens shows how Zimbabwe's economic base shapes its response to liberalisation. The institutional perspective highlights a gap between formal ratification and the actual implementation of AfCFTA commitments. While customs digitalisation, trade-facilitation committees, and border reforms establish a key administrative base, their success hinges on how well these commitments are integrated into domestic procedures and consistently enforced. As shown in **Table 1**, the institutional gaps involve specific domestic legal instruments and administrative procedures, such as customs, border processes, Rules of Origin verification, trade facilitation, and trade-remedy mechanisms. The table differentiates between measures with documented implementation and issues mainly identified through stakeholder feedback. Thus, stakeholders often perceive procedural overlaps, informal practices, policy delays, verification challenges, and trade-remedy capacity limitations where documentary evidence is lacking. Overall, the institutional lens emphasises not only the existence of domestic instruments but also how effectively firms operationalise, coordinate, and experience them in daily cross-border trade.

The actor lens introduces a distributional perspective, showing how liberalisation affects various stakeholders, including government agencies, exporters, import-sensitive industries, large firms, SMEs, workers, women, youth, and informal traders, in different ways. This reflects diverse interests, resources, and capacities to engage with the AfCFTA. As shown in **Table 1**, these positions are evident in stakeholder views on protection, liberalisation, regulatory stability, and firms' ability to comply. For example, import-sensitive producers may favour ongoing protection, while exporters might prefer faster liberalisation and more predictable regulations. Additionally, larger firms are generally better equipped than SMEs to handle compliance costs and delays, gather market information, and participate in policymaking. These varied interests and resources suggest that AfCFTA implementation is influenced not only by the formal institutional setup but also by how resources, incentives, and influence are distributed among the actors involved.

The benefits expected from the AfCFTA will not be automatically shared. SMEs, new exporters, women, youth, and informal traders might miss emerging opportunities if they lack access to finance, certification support, digital tools,

market intelligence, logistics, skills, and formal representation. Without targeted efforts to build these capabilities, regional integration could deepen existing inequalities in trade capacity. Evidence from the AfCFTA suggests that complementary policies, workforce development, trade facilitation, and targeted support are essential to wider distribution of benefits and managing adjustment risks [3] [37]. A sector-specific approach shows that a single, economy-wide liberalisation strategy is not enough. Manufacturing and agro-processing need steady local inputs, affordable energy, industrial upgrades, compliance with standards, and clear rules of origin. Agriculture requires storage, transport, certification, processing, and regional distribution networks. Services demand licensing reforms, professional recognition, financial regulation, digital connectivity, and movement of service providers. All sectors, despite their different needs, rely on reliable energy, finance, infrastructure, and regional transport routes.

Zimbabwe's landlocked status makes effective trade and transport coordination crucial. Power shortages hinder production, and inefficient infrastructure, such as roads, railways, border facilities, and customs, drives up costs and adds uncertainty when accessing regional markets. Corridor delays, repeated inspections, administrative fees, and unreliable logistics can negate the benefits of tariff preferences. Therefore, integrated planning of trade and transport infrastructure is vital to fully realise AfCFTA benefits [22]. The regional environment presents both opportunities and challenges. Zimbabwe can leverage its existing involvement in SADC and COMESA, along with established regional trade ties, continental payment systems, regional investments, adjustment funds, and technical support. These resources can serve as platforms for implementing AfCFTA and integrating into regional value chains. However, overlapping regional commitments may increase compliance burdens for firms if tariff schedules, rules of origin, standards, and administrative procedures are not aligned, rather than simplifying them.

Continental payment systems such as the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System could reduce reliance on external currencies and lower transaction costs in intra-African trade [31]. However, their success in Zimbabwe will rely on factors such as exchange-rate stability, liquidity levels, trust in the local monetary system, and the financial health of participating companies. Payment integration alone cannot solve issues such as volatile production costs, limited foreign exchange access, or structural problems in the domestic banking and trade-finance sectors.

Increased competition from more efficient African producers adds regional pressure. While openness can foster productivity growth, innovation, and industrial development, without proper adjustment, it may increase imports and strain vulnerable domestic industries. External investment and technical assistance are insufficient if electricity remains unreliable, financing is expensive, policies are uncertain, or standards are weak. Regional opportunities have developmental impact only when local firms and institutions have the capacity to absorb and utilise them effectively.

The main policy challenge is converting legal rights to access the continental market into ongoing commercial activity. Achieving macroeconomic stability and credible foreign-exchange systems is essential for planning production, setting prices, investing, trade finance, and payment systems. Infrastructure in energy, transport, borders, and digital sectors needs to reduce both costs and supply variability for regional markets. Industrial policy should focus on strengthening local input networks, enhancing intermediate production, increasing value addition, developing standards, and supporting sectors where Zimbabwe has practical regional prospects.

Taxation and licensing systems need to be simplified and made more predictable. Additionally, AfCFTA commitments should be integrated into clear domestic laws, regulations, and administrative procedures. National coordination bodies require unambiguous authority, accurate data, technical skills, and consistent involvement from businesses, labour groups, and other stakeholders. It is also essential to strengthen competition and trade-remedy institutions to prevent market dominance and ensure rules-based protections are upheld without slipping into discretionary restrictions.

This study highlights three main contributions. First, it clarifies that Zimbabwe's potential benefits from AfCFTA are conditional, not guaranteed. Second, it reveals that the key challenge is not merely joining the agreement but effectively translating participation into real firm-level use. Third, it emphasises that inclusion cannot be taken for granted, as firms and sectors with stronger financial, technical, and organisational resources are more likely to benefit unless targeted efforts build capacity among SMEs, new exporters, women, youth, and firms outside established regional markets.

6. Conclusions

The AfCFTA offers Zimbabwe a solid foundation for expanding exports, renewing industries, attracting investment, establishing regional production links, creating jobs, and enhancing welfare. However, a bigger continental market alone does not ensure that Zimbabwean companies will successfully enter or compete in it. The results show that the agreement's developmental impact will largely depend on Zimbabwe's domestic productive capacity, macroeconomic stability, infrastructure, legal framework, and institutional environment.

The five-lens analysis reveals a close interconnection among these conditions. Structural weaknesses diminish firms' competitiveness, while institutional gaps hinder the conversion of treaty provisions into practical procedures. Unequal agency shapes who can influence and benefit from implementation, and sector-specific requirements determine the options available to firms. Additionally, the regional environment offers opportunities that firms can exploit only with credible domestic capabilities. As a result, Zimbabwe might have formal continental market access but still be unable to fully utilise it.

Effective integration depends on macroeconomic stability, stable exchange

rates, affordable and reliable energy sources, competitive financial services, and efficient transport and digital infrastructure. It also requires simplified tax and licensing processes, coherent legal frameworks, and stronger institutions to implement them. Additionally, industrial policies should encourage local inputs, intermediate manufacturing, value addition, adherence to standards, and participation in regional value chains. To ensure broader benefits from liberalisation, SMEs and new exporters need targeted financing, market information, certification support, skills development, digital access, and adjustment assistance.

Zimbabwe's main challenge with AfCFTA is moving from membership to active benefit. Without improvements in productive capacity, dependable infrastructure, institutional coordination, trade finance, and inclusive support, the benefits of continental liberalisation risk being limited and uneven. When these reforms are implemented effectively, the AfCFTA can evolve beyond just a tariff agreement, serving as a foundation for structural change, enhanced regional production networks, and inclusive socioeconomic growth.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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