Symposium: Assessing the First Years of Implementation of the AFCFTA: Challenges and Opportunities — The Guided Trade Initiative: An Appraisal of AfCFTA National Implementation Vehicles

By:

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Background

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the world's largest free trade area in terms of the participating countries since the formation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The AfCFTA Agreement brings together 55 African Countries who are contracting member states to the 8 existing Regional Economic Communities in Africa, including the newly formed Alliance of Sahel States (former members of ECOWAS).[1] As of September 2024, 54 of the 55

AU member states have signed the AfCFTA Agreement and 47 have ratified the Agreement.[2] The AfCFTA aims to create a single market for trade in goods and services and allow free access to tradeable commodities across the continent. Although the AfCFTA is not fully operational, meaningful commercial trading has been envisioned through the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI). The GTI is a pilot project that tests the operational, institutional, legal and trade policy environment of the AfCFTA.[3]

In order to resolve the slow ratification status of the AfCFTA, on 7th October 2022, the AfCFTA Secretariat launched the AfCFTA's GTI in Accra, Ghana. The first phase of GTI allowed 8 selected countries from 5 regions in Africa, with negotiated schedules of tariff concessions, ready and willing to trade, to participate in trading under the AfCFTA. The countries included Cameroon (Central), Egypt (North), Ghana (West), Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania (East), Mauritius (South) and Tunisia (North) joined shortly after the launch of the Initiative.[4] With the goal to accelerate the implementation of the AfCFTA, the AfCFTA Secretariat in the 9th Meeting of the Council of Ministers held in July 2022, described the GTI as a "solution-based approach"[5] with an objective to initiate significant export and import of goods and services between the AfCFTA state parties.[6]

GTI's phase one of trading under the AfCFTA saw the engagement of over 100 investors that could potentially trade under the AfCFTA preferences regime in GTI selected goods such as coffee, ceramic tiles, tea, processed meat, dried fruits and electric components.[7] The GTI reached 35 countries, including the islands states,[8] that resulted in an expandable list of products including; mushrooms, flowers, bio pesticides, powdered milk, fish oil, frozen tuna, mineral and chemical fertilizers, essential oils, packaged moringa, fortified maize, porridge honey, nut butters, fruit jams, tea, coffee, meat products, beverages, milling (flour and maize meal), pasta and fabric material.[9]

As of 2025, AfCFTA's GTI is applauded for stimulating trading across African nations and encouraging foreign (non-African) and African investors in Africa. Additionally, more African states are strongly expressing interest to join the GTI; either through their active participation in negotiations of tariff concessions or/and publication of schedules of commitments. It is without a single doubt that trading under the AfCFTA is no longer a dream, but a reality.

AfCFTA-GTI's Implementation Vehicles: National Implementation & Coordination Offices

The implementation of the AfCFTA under the GTI has encouraged countries to develop key national institutions that expedite the processes for the facilitation of trade in goods and services at national levels, among AfCFTA state parties. In 2024, Konrad- Adenaueer-Stiffung (KAS) and the African Trade Policy Center (ATPC) of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), jointly prepared a report that analyzed key institutional arrangements in selected phase one AfCFTA-GTI countries.[10] These countries have established national implementation committees and coordination offices that have played very critical roles by acting as one-stop-shops in terms of providing information on trading to AfCFTA trade actors and conducting trade facilitation processes, among others.[11]

The KAS-ATPC-UNECA Report applauds state parties that have put in place implementation and coordination institutions to support smooth AfCFTA-GTI trading. Practically speaking, the AfCFTA Secretariat collaborates with ministries of trade in Host countries to ensure proper implementation of AfCFTA's trade strategy. For instance, Kenya has established a National Implementation Committee (NIC) within the Ministry of Trade (MIT) to coordinate and ensure effective implementation of the AfCFTA. In collaboration with the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) through the Customs & Border Control Department, the National Ad Hoc Committee is in charge of issuing the AfCFTA certificates of origin, printing all necessary AfCFTA trade documents compulsory in trading under GTI, including custom declarations, transit forms among others.[12]

With a vibrant trade relationship with Ghana, Kenya has a trade Attaché at the Kenya High Commission in Ghana working in conjunction with the Ghana National AfCFTA Coordination Office and the AfCFTA Secretariat. The Trade Attaché plays an important role in coordination, including providing information on market trends, identifying potential trade opportunities and matching companies in Kenya with counterparts in Ghana.[13] In the spirit of cooperation, Ghana has established a National AfCFTA Coordination Office (NCO) in liaison with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MOTI) that aids in

customs activities. The NCO acts as the focal point for coordinating Ghana's policy and strategic response to the AfCFTA Agreement. The NCO also functions as an information centre by providing the private sector with information necessary for effective decision making and their participation in trade. The NCO coordinates with the Ghana Revenue Authority (GRA) Customs Department, the Ghana National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Ghana Foods and Drugs Authority, the Ghana Standards Authority, and the Ghana Export Promotion Authority.[14]

Cameroon's National Implementation Committee was established by a Prime Ministerial Decree No. 039/PM of 29 March 2021. The Committee is comprised of both public and private sector representatives who are involved in monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the AfCFTA. Additionally, the Committee conducts trade facilitation processes including; standards, food and agricultural inspection, revenue collection, ministries and government agencies, logistics and distribution. In Cameroon, the Ministry of Commerce and Chamber of Commerce play the coordination role and chairing the NIC committee.

Rwanda's AfCFTA National Implementation Strategy is based on the existing National Trade Facilitation Committee (NTFC). The Report describes Rwanda's AfCFTA's strategy as "the blueprint for identifying key products, services and markets to be prioritized". The NTFC is responsible for technical coordination and reports to the high-level Industrial Development and Export Council chaired by the Minister of Trade and Industry. It is important to point out that the Rwandan High Commission in Accra played a significant role in identifying business opportunities, facilitating business matchmaking and encouraging the private sector to participate in the GTI.

Nigeria, a phase 2 GTI entrant, has established a buzzing a Nigerian AfCFTA Coordination Office (ACO) that is supported by the Ministry of Trade to enhance Nigeria's participation in the continental free trade area to maximize the benefits of the Agreement for economic development. The Office's enthusiasm in fostering intra- African trade and economic integration was made manifest in a very recent successful transaction with Kenya. The Nigerian ACO coordinated the country's first shipment under the AfCFTA that arrived at Mombasa Port, Kenya. The shipment consisted of synthetic filaments from Lucky Fibres Limited

(Lush) produced by a subsidiary of the Tolaram Group, a Singapore based Group.[15] This first consignment was not only a testament to AfCFTA's trading potential for African investors, but also for foreign investors and investments. In October 2022, Keda Ceramics, a Chinese-owned company, benefited from the AfCFTA agreement to export ceramic tiles from Ghana to Cameroun. According to AfCFTA Rules of Origin, a foreign company operating in an African country that has signed the AfCFTA, qualifies to participate in the trading if the raw materials for its production are sourced locally.

Lessons to Learn for AfCFTA-GTI's Future Trading

The KAS-ATPC-UNECA Report succinctly notes the establishment and presence of national institutional frameworks to support the implementation of the AfCFTA and coordination of AfCFTA trading, as very significant towards positioning the host state for economic development and integration. According to the AfCFTA Secretary General, His Excellency Wamkele Mene, as of September 2024, the GTI has expanded participation from 7 to 39 countries. As evidenced by the rising levels of trade in the continent, there is need for every AfCFTA state party to establish a national institution that collaborates with relevant ministries, to support the progress of the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement, as well as encourage and support opportunities for intra-African trade under the AfCFTA.

Finally, as the AfCFTA Secretariat and other stakeholders including the African Development Bank (AfDB) and Afreximbank encourage AfCFTA trading through development financing, national implementation and coordination offices should play the role of identifying trade actors that need trade finance. Additionally, these offices should endeavor to assist in developing trade policies that are encompassing of marginalized trade actors; Small-Medium sized enterprises, women and youth-led businesses. In this way, AfCFTA national institutions will ensure that it is privy to the challenges faced by trade players, the needs of specific industries and make pragmatic recommendations for responsive policies.[16]

FOOTNOTES

[1] African Union- Regional Economic Communities. The AU recognises eight RECs namely: Arab Maghreb Union (UMA), Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), Community of Sahel–Saharan States (CEN– SAD), East African Community (EAC, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and Southern African Development Community (SADC).Available at https://au.int/en/recs.

[2] African Union- Pan African Parliament, 'Significant Progress on AfCFTA Implementation Highlighted at the Conference of Speakers of Parliaments' (19 September 2024). Available at https://pap.au.int/en/news/press- releases/2024-09-19/significant-progress-afcfta-implementation-highlighted-conference-s

[3] R Pavithra 'AfCFTA's Guided Trade Initiative takes off, set to ease and boost intra- African trade' (12 October 2022). Available at https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/october-2022/afcfta%E2%80%99s-guided-trade- initiative-takes-set-ease-and-boost-intra-african-trade

[4] 'WCO Secretary General addresses the AfCFTA Ministerial Meeting in Ghana' (July 2022). Available at https://www.wcoomd.org/es-es/media/newsroom/2022/july/wco-secretary-general-addresses-the-afcfta-ministerial-meeting-in-ghana.aspx

[5] CE Bama 'What have we learned from the AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative?' (29 June 2022). Available at https://www.tralac.org/publications/article/16035-what-have-we-learned-from-the-afcfta-guided-trade-initiative.html#:~:text=The%20GTI%20is%20designed%20to,start%20of%20commercial%

[6] African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat, 'Key Announcements: The AfCFTA Initiative on Guided Trade'. Available at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/african-continental-free-trade-area-afcfta-secretariat_intraafricatrade-activity-6957399250821373952-B0Ev/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

[7] African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat: Report of the Secretary General of the AfCFTA on the AU Theme of the Year 2023, "Accelerating the Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area" February 2023 to February 2024. Available at https://au-afcfta.org/wp-

content/uploads/2024/02/EN-Report- on-the-AfCFTA-implmentation-Theme-of-the-year-2023.docx

[8] Report of the AfCFTA Secretariat General (n 6) pg.5. Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda from East African Region; Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Gabon, the Republic of Congo, Chad, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea from the Central Africa Region; Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from the North Africa Region; Angola, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Lesotho and Eswatini from the Southern Africa Region; Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo from the West Africa Region; and Mauritius, Cape Verde, Comoros, Madagascar and Seychelles from the Island States.

[9] Report of the AfCFTA Secretary General (n 6) pg.6.

[10] United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, The Guided Trade Initiative: Documenting and Assessing the Early Experiences of Trading under the AfCFTA (23 May 2024). Available at https://repository.uneca.org/handle/10855/50169

[11] F Chelangat 'Nations Speak- Cities Build: The AfCFTA C National Implementation Committees (NICs) in State Parties' (9 December 2024). Available at https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/nations-speak-cities-build- afcfta-national-nics-state-chelangat-o2o8f/?trackingId=6e755QQLsZk0SM5ZR5hJDg%3D%3D

[12] (n 10).

[13] (n 9).

[14] (n 9).

[15] Nigerian AfCFTA Coordination Office, 'Nigeria's first AfCFTA Export arrives in Kenya'. Available at https://ngrafcfta.gov.ng/blog/post/Nigeria-s-first-AfCFTA-export-arrives-in-Kenya

[16] F Chelangat 'Boosting Trade in Africa: Inclusion of Marginalized Trade Actors in Development Financing' (16 February 2025). Available at https://www.afronomicslaw.org/category/analysis/boosting-trade-africa-inclusion-marginalized-trade-actors-development-financing

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