United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

Concept Note for Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting on Advancing Intra-Regional Trade in Southern Africa Through Addressing Tariff and Non-Tariff Barriers.

29th October 2025

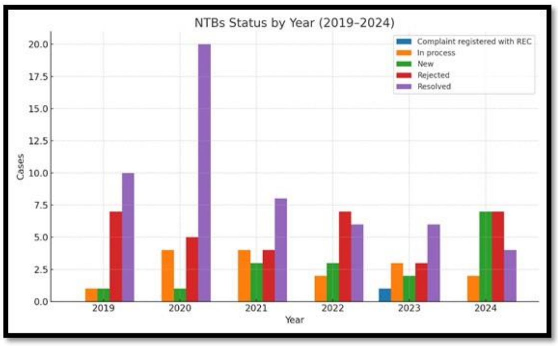
Ezulwini, Eswatini and Virtual

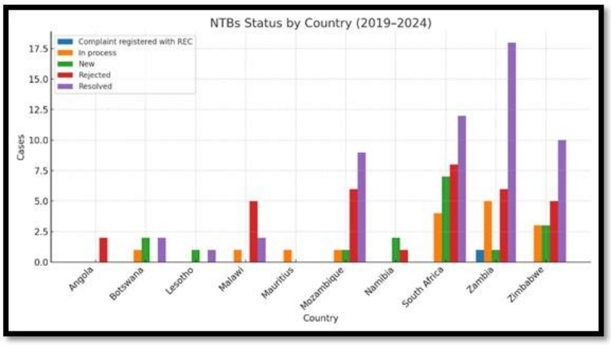
Background

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a transformative initiative, establishing a continental market with over 1.4 billion consumers and a combined GDP of approximately US$3.4 trillion. The Agreement has potential to increase intra-African trade by 52 percent by eliminating non-tariff barriers (NTBs) which increase trade costs by an estimated 15-30 percent within the region, negating the benefits of tariff liberalization aspired for by the trade protocol (World Bank, 2022). To benefit from the AfCFTA, countries need to develop national strategies to domesticate and support the implementation of the agreement. In this regard, Southern African member States are currently seized with developing national AfCFCA implementation plans and strategies to facilitate access to the larger African market in line with both regional and continental protocols. However, intra-regional trade by Southern African member States remains constrained by non-tariff barriers. Intra-SADC trade accounted for approximately $44 billion in 2022, representing just 21 percent of the region's total trade, making reliance on external markets a key part of trade for the region (SADC Secretariat, 2023). Intra-regional trade in Southern Africa rose to 23 percent of total trade in 2022 from 19 percent in 2021 being attributed to the ongoing implementation of the SADC Trade Protocol and other related initiatives such as simplified trading arrangements which have boosted informal cross-border trade. Despite the aspirations of the SADC Protocol on Trade which aims to liberalize intra-regional trade in goods and services, enhance economic efficiency, and foster development through the progressive elimination of NTBs, the trade barriers remain prevalent and contentious. Figures 1A and 1B, constructed from the COMESA trade database illustrate the situation with respect to NTBs for regional member States. Within COMESA alone, it is estimated that 70 percent of the reported NTBs are constituted by Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) such as complex conformity assessment systems, laboratory testing, certification, and inspection and sanitary and phyto sanitary measures (SPS). This pattern is similar to the global trend where TBTs and sanitary and phyto sanitary measures account for 89 percent of the non-tariff measures.[1] Furthermore, the NTBs are often the result of government regulations, policies, and specific requirements aimed at infant industries and protecting national health, safety, or environmental standards, as well as other commercial interests.

[1] World Trade Organization. 2019. A practical guide to the economic analysis on non-tariff measures.

Figure 1A:NTB Status by Country (2019-2024) Figure 1B: NTB Status by Country (2019-2024)





Source: COMESA

Although significant progress has been made under AfCFTA and SADC, COMESA and EAC Trade protocols to reduce NTBs, these still persist and continue to undermine market integration. For example, Zambia and Zimbabwe are currently discussing resolving an NTB related to customs documentations procedures' whereby, Zambian customs authorities are issuing COMESA certificate of Origin on farming equipment parts exported into Zimbabwe, when these products are said to have been imported from elsewhere (NTB-001-237 under the Tripartite NTB reporting, Monitoring and Eliminating Mechanism).[2] Similarly, Lesotho recently reported technical barriers regarding herbal and medicinal samples (for example cannabis) not being allowed through road-freight to South Africa for testing in accredited laboratories but only air.[3] The AfCFTA online reporting mechanism identifies the most recurring NTBs faced by African countries to include; ever-changing regulations, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, export and import prohibitions/bans, export and import quotas, export and import licensing related issues. The existence of such impediments severely undermines trade competitiveness and the ability of member States to leverage the AfCFTA for industrialization and value-chains development.

Given the above and as part of the process of supporting intra-regional trade and industrialization in Southern Africa, the ECA sub regional office for Southern Africa (SRO-SA) will organize an expert group meeting (AEGM) for policymakers, trade and industry experts, academics, and other stakeholders to:

i. Examine the levels and diversity of intra-regional trade within Southern Africa,
ii. Discuss the nature, diversity, and impact of NTBs on regional trade and integration,
iii. Review the work of the region's task force on NTBs and their elimination,
iv. Discuss the effectiveness of the implementation of the AfCFTA NTBs Online Reporting, Monitoring and Elimination programme including the effectiveness of national frameworks to support free trade processes,
v. Discuss strategic policy and regulatory measures required to enhance regional competitiveness, trade, customs reforms and digitization and value chains development, and

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[2] www. tradebarriers.org

[3] Africa Barriers in Trade. Non-Tariff Barriers: Complaints. https://tradebarriers.africa/complaint/AfCFTA-000-087

vi. Recommend strategies to reduce NTBs including through the mutual recognition of standards and certifications for seamless regional trade, integration and the facilitation of regional value chains and green technologies development.

AEGM Objectives

The overall objective of this AEGM will be to discuss the nature and impact of non-tariff barriers undermining intra-regional trade in Southern Africa. The reduction or elimination of NTBs will unlock the full potential of industrialization and free trade in Southern Africa through the AfCFTA, the SADC Protocol on Trade, the Tripartite FTA and other trade-related initiatives. Eliminating and non-tariff barriers will enhance export competitiveness, foster economic diversification and industrialization, and anchor economic resilience in Southern Africa.

The AEGM will:

i. Review the level of intra-regional trade and the manifestation and nature of non-tariff barriers to trade within Southern Africa,
ii. Assess the impact of non-tariff barriers on intra-regional trade flows, particularly highlighting their implications for competitiveness and export performance in key sectors, such as automotives, textiles, agro-processing, and mining-related manufacturing,
iii. Identify the critical non-tariff barriers affecting Southern African firms, especially MSMEs, in accessing regional markets under the regional trade protocols and the AfCFTA,
iv. Discuss avenues for enhancing the mechanisms for identifying, reporting, and monitoring NTBs through the AfCFTA NTB Reporting, Monitoring and Eliminating Mechanism platform for reporting NTBs,
v. Assess the effectiveness of the COMESA, EAC and SADC mechanisms for NTBs reporting, monitoring and elimination,
vi. Discuss avenues for members States to contribute towards the improvement of the environment for cross-border investment,
vii. Discuss how NTBs undermine the objective of a seamlessly integrated regional market, and
viii. Discuss best practices and lessons learned from within the region and globally on reducing barriers to trade, addressing non-tariff barriers, streamlining regulatory procedures, and enhancing cross-border trade facilitation.

Format

The AEGM, to be organized back-to-back with the 31st Session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials and Experts (ICSOE) of Southern Africa, will be in hybrid format, combining both face to face and virtual participation. It will feature plenary presentations and interactive discussions on the findings and recommendations from a study commissioned by SRO-SA complemented by discussant and plenary interventions. The focus will be on enhancing competitiveness and addressing barriers to exports/imports; trade policy and regulatory harmonization and alignment; trade engagement to facilitate smooth trade in Southern Africa.

Participation

The AEGM will be attended by regional and international trade and regional integration experts, representatives of regional governments and their institutions, private sector representatives, academic and research institutions, regional economic communities, other development partners and the United Nations family.

Venue and Dates

The face-to-face session of the AEGM will be organized at Ezulwini, Eswatini on 29th October 2025. The virtual meeting link will be shared with confirmed participants to facilitate participation.

Expected Outcomes

i. Enhanced understanding of the extent of intra-regional trade in Southern Africa and the nature of non-tariff barriers undermining competitiveness and intra-regional trade,
ii. Identification of priority regulatory and policy reforms necessary to effectively address export/import barriers and optimize benefits under AfCFTA and regional free trade protocols,
iii. Actionable strategies to streamline trade facilitation, reduce cross-border transaction costs, and boost competitiveness of regional value chains,
iv. Enhanced networking among stakeholders involved in intra-regional trade.

Expected Outputs

i. Recommendations towards addressing the non-tariff barriers to intra-regional trade in Southern Africa,
ii. Recommendations aimed at guiding the research for the full study report that will follow the AEGM,
iii. A set of targeted and practical policy recommendations for immediate action to address competitiveness challenges and remove barriers to smooth trade, and
iv. Media products and communication materials highlighting key findings and recommendations from the AEGM.

Contact Persons

For additional information on the AEGM, kindly contact

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