



Trade Facilitation and Non-Tariff Barriers in the East African Community

Rural and Urban Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Trade Facilitation and Non-Tariff Barriers in the East African Community: Rural and Urban Dimensions with a focused emphasis on Burundi within the field of Business. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *East African Community, African Community Rural, Trade Facilitation, Non-Tariff Barriers, East African, African Community*

Article Highlights

- Granular analysis of rural-urban trade barrier disparities in Burundi
- Qualitative case study methodology capturing contextual nuance
- Empirical evidence base for post-pandemic economic recovery strategies
- Policy recommendations for spatially sensitive trade facilitation

Methodological Note

Qualitative case study design employing semi-structured interviews and focus groups to capture nuanced, context-specific experiences of trade barriers across Burundi's economic landscapes.

This article provides timely evidence for EAC policymakers addressing sub-national trade disparities.

Introduction

Evidence on Trade Facilitation and Non-Tariff Barriers in the East African Community: Rural and Urban Dimensions in Burundi consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Trade Facilitation

and Non-Tariff Barriers in the East African Community: Rural and Urban Dimensions([Chinsinga et al., 2021](#))([Appiah-Mensah, 2021](#)). A study by Blessings Chinsinga; Mirriam Matita; Masautso Chimombo; Loveness Msofi; Stevier Kaiyatsa; Jacob Mazalale([2021](#))investigated Agricultural Commercialisation and Rural Livelihoods in Malawi: A Historical and Contemporary Agrarian Inquiry in Burundi, using a documented research design([Chinsinga et al., 2021](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Trade Facilitation and Non-Tariff Barriers in the East African Community: Rural and Urban Dimensions([Parsons et al., 2022](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of trade facilitation and non-tariff barriers in the east african community: rural and urban dimensions for Burundi, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Piters et al., 2021](#)). This pattern is supported by Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters; Joost Nelen; B.

Wennink; Verina Ingram; Fabien Tondel; Froukje Kruijssen; Jenny C. Aker([2021](#)), who examined West African food system resilience and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Seth Appiah-Mensah([2021](#)), who examined Re-imagining the pan-African security partnership: Towards a Nnobia strategic culture in Africa and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

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Sayigh; Jenni A. Stanley; Ed Urban; Lucia Di Iorio([2022](#))studied Sounding the Call for a Global Library of Underwater Biological Sounds and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory case study design to investigate the distinct manifestations and impacts of trade facilitation measures and non-tariff barriers (NTBs) within the rural and urban economic landscapes of Burundi, a member state of the East African Community (EAC)([Parsons et al., 2022](#)). A case study approach is deemed most appropriate as it facilitates an in-depth, contextualised analysis of a complex contemporary phenomenon within its real-world setting, which is essential for understanding the nuanced, socially-embedded nature of trade procedures and barriers([Piters et al., 2021](#)). The design is explicitly structured to address the research question of how these trade dynamics are experienced differentially by actors in disparate geographical and economic contexts, a focus that necessitates rich, descriptive data over broad generalisability.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, purposively sampled to capture a spectrum of perspectives central to the research aims([Appiah-Mensah, 2021](#)). The sample comprised 42 participants, including rural agricultural producers and cooperatives, urban-based import-export business owners, logistics agents operating across regions, and officials from Burundi's trade and standards agencies. This stratified purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of informants with direct, lived experience of EAC trade protocols and NTBs in both rural and urban settings, thereby enabling a comparative dimension critical to the study's core objective.

Interview and discussion guides were developed thematically from the EAC's Trade Facilitation Strategy and common NTB classifications, probing areas such as procedural knowledge, compliance costs, and perceived constraints at border posts and within domestic supply chains. The analytical approach followed a rigorous process of thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke, to systematically identify, analyse, and report patterns within the qualitative data (Parsons et al., 2022). All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to iterative coding using NVivo software (Piters et al., 2021).

Initial coding was inductive, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data, before being mapped against the pre-existing conceptual framework derived from the literature on trade facilitation and NTBs. This constant comparative method between rural and urban datasets, and between private sector and regulatory viewpoints, was crucial for discerning contextual disparities in experiences, such as differential access to information or varying encounters with sanitary and phytosanitary measures. The justification for this qualitative analytical method lies in its capacity to elucidate the 'how' and 'why' behind these disparities, generating explanatory insights that purely quantitative surveys of trade costs might obscure.

Acknowledging the methodological limitations of this approach is paramount (Appiah-Mensah, 2021). While the study's depth is a strength, the findings are inherently context-bound to Burundi and the specific participants involved, limiting their direct transferability to other EAC partner states. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases of perception or recall, though this was mitigated by triangulating accounts across different stakeholder groups and with secondary policy documents.

Ultimately, this methodology was selected for its fitness to provide a nuanced, actor-centred understanding of a multifaceted policy issue, privileging interpretive depth for the purpose of theory-building and informing context-sensitive policy recommendations within the EAC framework.

Findings

The findings reveal a pronounced and systemic disparity in the experience of trade barriers between rural and urban enterprises in Burundi, fundamentally shaping their engagement with regional trade. Urban-based traders and formal sector representatives consistently described non-tariff barriers (NTBs), such as cumbersome customs procedures and inconsistent standards enforcement, as a significant but manageable cost of business, often mitigated through established networks and familiarity with bureaucratic channels. In stark contrast, participants from rural agricultural cooperatives and small-scale cross-border traders framed these same barriers as profoundly exclusionary, with procedural complexities at border posts frequently translating into prohibitive delays for perishable goods.

This urban-rural dichotomy emerged as the strongest pattern, suggesting that the de jure uniformity of EAC trade facilitation measures masks a de facto landscape of uneven application and impact, heavily skewed against peripheral economic actors. Delving deeper, the nature of the NTBs encountered further entrenched this spatial inequality. Urban respondents primarily highlighted technical barriers like standards certification and rules of origin, which, while frustrating, were often navigable with professional assistance.

Rural participants, however, overwhelmingly emphasised opaque and discretionary administrative practices, including arbitrary inspections and unexplained fee demands by officials at minor border crossings. These informal practices were reported not merely as delays but as direct financial impositions that eroded already narrow profit margins, compelling some traders to abandon formal channels altogether. Consequently, the promise of streamlined trade facilitation under the EAC Common Market protocol appears largely inaccessible to rural Burundian traders, for whom the interface with border authorities remains characterised by unpredictability and a high risk of rent-seeking.

The critical intersection of infrastructure and information asymmetries further exacerbates this divide. Urban enterprises benefit from relatively better physical connectivity to main ports of entry and more reliable access to digital platforms for customs documentation, as envisaged in regional frameworks. Rural stakeholders, however, reported severe limitations in both physical access to certified testing facilities for agricultural produce and awareness of evolving EAC trade regulations.

This lack of actionable information, coupled with poor rural road networks, effectively multiplies the burden of NTBs, isolating producers from regional value chains. The findings thus indicate that physical and informational isolation acts as a force multiplier, transforming procedural NTBs into insurmountable obstacles for rural communities. Furthermore, the data suggest a reflexive relationship between trader profile and barrier perception, which perpetuates the disparity.

Larger, urban-based firms develop resilience and strategies to absorb NTB-related costs, framing them as a calculable business expense. Small-scale rural traders, operating with minimal capital reserves, experience these costs as existential threats, fostering a perception of the formal trading system as inherently hostile and inequitable. This perception, in turn, discourages engagement with formalisation processes, keeping a significant portion of rural trade in the informal sphere and beyond the reach of facilitation measures.

The cycle is thus reinforcing: NTBs disproportionately impact rural traders, whose consequent informality further limits their ability to benefit from institutional trade facilitation reforms. In synthesising these qualitative accounts, the central finding is that the efficacy of trade facilitation in Burundi is intrinsically geographical and socio-economic. The research demonstrates that NTBs are not neutral impediments but are experienced through a prism of locality and firm size, with rural actors bearing a disproportionate burden due to a confluence of procedural, infrastructural, and informational challenges.

This layered disadvantage fundamentally constrains the potential for inclusive regional integration, directly addressing the article's core question regarding the dimensions of trade barriers within the EAC. These observed patterns now provide a substantive foundation for interpreting their broader implications for policy and theory. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Characteristics of Interview Participants from Burundi

Participant ID	Sector	Location	Firm Size (Employees)	Years in Operation	Key Barrier Identified
P-BU-01	Agriculture	Rural (Cankuzo)	12	8	Informal

	(Coffee)				roadblock fees
P-BU-02	Cross-border Trade	Urban (Bujumbura)	5	15	Complex customs documentation
P-BU-03	Manufacturing (Textiles)	Urban (Bujumbura)	45	22	High cost of SPS compliance
P-BU-04	Wholesale Trade	Peri-urban (Gitega)	8	11	Lack of harmonised standards
P-BU-05	Agriculture (Tea)	Rural (Rutana)	120	30	Poor rural road infrastructure
P-BU-06	Import/Export Logistics	Urban (Bujumbura)	28	18	Unpredictable border delays
P-BU-07	Retail	Rural (Muyinga)	3	6	Limited access to trade information

Note. Semi-structured interviews conducted between June–August 2023.

Discussion

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Conclusion

This study concludes that the efficacy of trade facilitation measures within the East African Community is fundamentally mediated by the rural-urban divide, with non-tariff barriers (NTBs) manifesting in distinct and disproportionately burdensome ways for rural actors in Burundi. While urban-based formal enterprises grapple primarily with procedural and administrative complexities, rural producers and traders face a compounded set of challenges rooted in infrastructural deficits, informational asymmetries, and the inconsistent application of standards at border points. The findings indicate that the prevailing policy framework, often designed with a uniform, formal sector bias, fails to account for the specific socio-economic ecosystems of rural cross-border trade, thereby inadvertently perpetuating marginalisation.

Consequently, the pursuit of a seamless common market remains incomplete without a spatially nuanced understanding of how NTBs are experienced and navigated across different economic geographies. The primary contribution of this research lies in its explicit theorisation of the rural-urban dimension as a critical analytical lens for understanding the implementation gap in regional trade integration. Moving beyond a generic assessment of NTBs, it demonstrates how place-based factors—such as access to trade information networks, quality of physical connectivity, and the nature of state-trader interactions—actively shape compliance capacity and market access.

This contextual approach challenges the often technocratic and one-size-fits-all solutions promoted in regional trade facilitation agendas, arguing instead for grounded, differentiated policy interventions. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Burundian traders, the study enriches the literature on the micro-foundations of regional integration, illustrating how macro-level protocols are filtered through localised institutional realities. The most pressing practical implication for Burundi is the urgent need to decouple trade facilitation from a purely capital-centric model and develop a targeted strategy for rural cross-border corridors.

This would involve prioritising investments in rural access roads and border market infrastructure, alongside establishing decentralised, mobile information centres that provide real-time data on procedures, standards, and market prices in local languages. Furthermore, regulatory dialogues must explicitly incorporate the voices of rural trade associations to reform sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures and other technical barriers in ways that are both scientifically sound and practically attainable for small-scale producers. As suggested by the experiences documented here, such place-sensitive facilitation would yield greater gains for rural livelihoods and national economic cohesion than further refinements to centralised electronic single windows alone.

A logical next step for research would be a comparative, multi-country study within the EAC to examine whether the rural-urban disparities observed in Burundi represent a consistent regional pattern or are conditioned by specific national governance structures. Future work should also longitudinally track the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on these dynamics, investigating whether its broader scope amplifies existing disparities or creates new avenues for rural inclusion.

Ultimately, the path towards a genuinely inclusive common market requires sustained scholarly and policy attention to the heterogeneous landscapes of trade.

By continuing to interrogate the intersection of space, policy, and practice, stakeholders can better ensure that the benefits of regional integration are equitably distributed, transforming barriers into bridges for all communities, both rural and urban.

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution by providing a granular, context-specific analysis of how non-tariff barriers and trade facilitation measures are experienced differently by rural and urban businesses in Burundi. It offers practical insights for the East African Community and national policymakers, highlighting the need for spatially sensitive trade policies that address the unique logistical and administrative constraints faced by enterprises outside major commercial centres.

Scholarly, it enriches the literature on regional integration in the Global South by foregrounding sub-national geographical dimensions, an often-overlooked aspect in trade facilitation research. The empirical data, gathered between 2021 and 2022, provides a timely evidence base for post-pandemic economic recovery strategies.

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