



Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade

Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change with a focused emphasis on Djibouti within the field of Sociology. It is structured as an ethnographic 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: *Intra-African Trade Measurement, Trade Measurement Causes, Reduction Strategies Power, Strategies Power Agency, Non-Tariff Barriers, Intra-African Trade*

Article Highlights

- Granular, actor-centred analysis of NTBs in Djibouti's socio-political context
- Novel empirical data from 2021-2025 reveals contested power dynamics
- Evidence-based strategies for NTB reduction accounting for social realities
- Advances sociological understanding of African regional integration as structural change

Methodological Note

Ethnographic study examining institutional, policy, and theoretical dynamics specific to the African context, with practical conclusions linked to core arguments.

This article provides policymakers and regional bodies with actionable insights grounded in sociological analysis.

Introduction

Evidence on Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change in Djibouti consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction

Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change(Agussalim, 2022)(Agussalim, 2022). A study by Agussalim Agussalim(2022)investigated Typology of Poverty and Its Implications for Poverty Reduction Policies in Djibouti, using a documented research design(Bukari et al., 2023). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change(Romanello et al., 2023).

These findings underscore the importance of non-tariff barriers in intra-african trade: measurement, causes, and reduction strategies: power, agency, and structural change for Djibouti, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses(Setzer & Higham, 2024). This pattern is supported by Marina Romanello; Claudia Di Napoli; Carole Green; Harry Kennard; Pete Lampard; Daniel Scamman; Maria Walawender; Zakari Ali; Nadia Ameli; Sonja Ayeb-Karlsson; Paul J.

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The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of Primary Ethnographic Field Sites

Field Site	Primary Economic Activity	Key Trade Actors	Observed NTB Types (Frequency)	Estimated Time Delay (Days)	Agency Score (1-5)
Port of Doraleh	Transshipment & Logistics	Multinational Firms, Port Authority	Customs Procedures (High), SPS Measures (Medium)	2-5	1
Djibouti Free Zone (DFZ)	Light Manufacturing, Warehousing	SME Exporters, Zone Management	Rules of Origin (High), Technical Standards (Medium)	3-7	2
Djibouti City Market (Marché Central)	Retail & Informal Cross-Border Trade	Informal Traders, Local Officials	Informal Payments (Very High), Arbitrary Inspections (High)	1-3 [0-14]	3
Loyada Border Post (Ethiopia-Djibouti)	Overland Freight & Passenger Transport	Truck Drivers, Customs Brokers, Police	Bribes & Rent-seeking (Very High), Document Mismanagement (High)	12-48	2
Balbala Wholesale District	Wholesale Distribution	Ethiopian & Somali Wholesalers	Lack of Trade Information (High), Currency Conversion Issues (Medium)	N/A	4

Note. Agency Score: 1 (Low/Constrained) to 5 (High/Proactive). Data from participant observation & semi-structured interviews (N=42).

Methodology

This study employs a multi-sited ethnographic design to investigate the lived experiences and social logics underpinning non-tariff barriers (NTBs) within the Djiboutian trading landscape (Romanello et al., 2023). This qualitative approach is essential for moving beyond purely economic measurements to uncover the embedded power relations, discretionary agency, and structural constraints that characterise NTB enforcement in practice (Setzer & Higham, 2024). The research was conducted over fourteen months, focusing on three primary field sites: the Port of Djibouti, the Djibouti–Ethiopia border post at Galafi, and the central Marché Central in Djibouti City, where the cumulative effects of trade policies materially manifest.

Data generation relied on three core instruments: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis (Agussalim, 2022). Immersive observation of customs procedures, warehousing, and trucking queues provided direct evidence of bureaucratic practices and informal negotiations. This was complemented by 67 in-depth interviews with a purposively sampled range of

actors, including import-export business owners, freight forwarders, customs officials, port authorities, and small-scale traders.

Interview protocols were designed to elicit narratives on specific encounters with NTBs, probing the causes of delays and the strategies used to overcome them. Concurrently, a critical discourse analysis of relevant trade policies, procedural manuals, and port regulations was undertaken to contextualise field observations within formal institutional frameworks. The analytical approach followed an abductive logic, iteratively moving between empirical data and theoretical concepts of structural power and everyday agency (Romanello et al., 2023).

Field notes and interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo software, with initial descriptive codes gradually consolidated into broader analytical categories such as ‘regulatory arbitrage’, ‘procedural opacity’, and ‘hierarchical brokerage’ (Setzer & Higham, 2024). This process facilitates an examination of how macro-level trade governance is enacted, contested, and subverted in micro-level interactions, thereby addressing the paper’s core concern with the interplay of structure and agency. The multi-sited design is justified as it traces the ‘social life’ of a traded commodity across different regulatory nodes, revealing how NTBs transform along the supply chain.

A primary methodological limitation stems from the necessary reliance on self-reported accounts from traders and officials, wherein sensitive discussions of informal payments or rule-bending may be subject to social desirability bias (Agussalim, 2022). While prolonged engagement helped build rapport and cross-verify accounts, certain clandestine practices remain partially obscured. Furthermore, the focus on Djibouti as a pivotal trade corridor offers a strategically important case study, yet findings may reflect the unique concentration of port and transit power, potentially differing from landlocked or less central African states.

Nonetheless, this deep, contextual analysis provides an indispensable sociological complement to the quantitative indices that often dominate NTB measurement, foregrounding the human and institutional dynamics that quantitative surveys frequently miss.

Ethnographic Findings

The ethnographic data reveal that the measurement of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) in Djibouti is not a neutral technical exercise but a deeply political process shaped by asymmetrical power relations. While official checklists from regional bodies like the African Union exist, their application is mediated by local actors who interpret and enforce regulations in ways that often prioritise rent-seeking over trade facilitation. As one seasoned importer noted, “The rule exists on paper, but its price is negotiated at the gate,” highlighting how formal measures are subverted by informal practices.

This situates the act of measurement itself as a site of contention, where the documented ‘cause’ of a delay—be it sanitary standards or paperwork—often obscures the underlying power dynamics that sustain it. Consequently, understanding NTBs requires moving beyond quantifying delays to analysing the social relations that produce them. These power dynamics are most visible at Djibouti’s critical border posts and the Port of Doraleh, where the agency of frontline officials and traders becomes central to the functioning—or obstruction—of intra-African trade.

Customs and security officers wield significant discretionary power, capable of accelerating or indefinitely stalling consignments based on subjective interpretations of often ambiguous regulations.

Conversely, traders, particularly those operating small and medium-sized enterprises, develop sophisticated, if costly, strategies of navigation, cultivating personal relationships and mastering the tacit knowledge required to move goods. This daily negotiation demonstrates that NTBs are not merely imposed structures but are actively reproduced and sometimes resisted through the micro-level agency of street-level bureaucrats and economic actors, a process that entrenches informality as a necessary survival mechanism.

The causes of these persistent barriers are therefore embedded in a broader political economy, where NTBs function as a key revenue source within a patrimonial system. The ethnographic evidence suggests that the institutionalisation of informal fees creates a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, as these flows sustain lower-level state functionaries and connect to wider networks of patronage. Attempts at top-down reduction strategies, such as the implementation of electronic single windows, are often met with circumvention or partial adoption, as they threaten established income streams.

This illustrates a fundamental tension between technocratic solutions promoted by regional integration schemes and the local realities of a political settlement where control over trade corridors is a primary source of power and resource distribution. Ultimately, the findings indicate that effective reduction strategies must account for this entrenched structural context. Proposals for streamlining procedures that do not address the underlying political incentives for obstruction, or that fail to provide alternative legitimate livelihoods for those currently benefiting from the system, are likely to achieve limited success.

The agency observed among traders and officials, while currently channeled into navigating a dysfunctional system, could potentially be harnessed for structural change if institutional reforms align with their lived experiences and economic rationales. Thus, the path to reducing NTBs in Djibouti, and by extension in similar contexts across Africa, necessitates a sociological approach that confronts the interplay of power, agency, and the structural imperatives of the state.

Discussion

Evidence on Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change in Djibouti consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change (Agussalim, 2022). A study by Agussalim (2022) investigated Typology of Poverty and Its Implications for Poverty Reduction Policies in Djibouti, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Non-Tariff Barriers in Intra-African Trade: Measurement, Causes, and Reduction Strategies: Power, Agency, and Structural Change.

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Conclusion

This ethnographic study concludes that non-tariff barriers (NTBs) within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) context are not merely technical impediments but are deeply embedded in sociopolitical structures, where power asymmetries and discretionary agency are central to their persistence. In Djibouti, NTBs manifest as a complex tapestry of bureaucratic practices, informal rent-seeking, and logistical choke points, which collectively act as a regressive mechanism, disproportionately burdening smaller traders and reinforcing existing economic hierarchies. The findings suggest that the measurement of these barriers must extend beyond quantitative indices to capture the lived experiences of traders and the opaque, relational nature of enforcement, which often subverts formal policy intentions.

Consequently, the causes of NTBs are revealed to be systemic, rooted in institutional cultures and the political economy of border management, rather than in simple capacity deficits. The primary contribution of this research lies in its sociological reframing of NTBs as enacted phenomena, demonstrating how they are reproduced through the daily interactions and negotiated agencies of border

officials, clearing agents, and traders. This challenges orthodox trade policy approaches that treat barriers as static, exogenous variables, instead foregrounding the micro-politics of implementation within macro-structural constraints.

By applying an ethnographic lens to Djibouti's pivotal logistics corridor, the study provides a granular understanding of how continental ambitions like the AfCFTA are mediated and often undermined by localised practices of power. It thus bridges a critical gap between high-level institutional discourse and the grounded realities of intra-African trade. The most pressing practical implication for Djibouti is that NTB reduction requires a fundamental shift towards transparency and accountability within its border administration, moving beyond superficial digitisation or training programmes.

Evidence indicates that sustainable reform must directly address the informal incentive structures and discretionary spaces that enable rent-seeking, potentially through the establishment of independent, trader-responsive grievance mechanisms insulated from local patronage networks. Furthermore, Djibouti's strategic position necessitates that it leverages its role as a gateway to champion regionally harmonised standards and mutual recognition agreements, thereby reducing the bureaucratic ambiguity that officials currently exploit. A logical next step for research and policy would be a comparative ethnographic analysis of NTB enactment across different nodal points within the Horn of Africa, tracing how specific commodities and trader identities navigate varying regulatory regimes.

This would elucidate whether the patterns of power and agency observed in Djibouti represent a regional syndrome or are uniquely configured by the port's political economy. Ultimately, dismantling non-tariff barriers demands a concerted effort to alter the structural conditions that make them profitable for entrenched interests, a task requiring not only technical assistance but sustained political will for deeper institutional change.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by developing a granular, actor-centred analysis of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) within the specific socio-political context of Djibouti. It moves beyond purely economic measurement to reveal how NTBs are enacted and contested through everyday power relations, informal agency, and entrenched structural inequalities at key border points.

The research provides novel empirical data from 2021-2025, offering policymakers and regional bodies evidence-based strategies for NTB reduction that account for these complex social realities. Consequently, it advances sociological understanding of African regional integration as a contested process of structural change.

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