



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

Lessons for Sub-Saharan Africa

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D)^{1,2,3}

¹ Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security

² Principal, Graduate College, University of Juba

³ SUSI Scholar on U.S. Foreign Policy

Correspondence: nyuonabraham@gmail.com

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Author notes

Abraham Kuol Nyuon (Ph.D) is affiliated with Associate Professor of Politics, Peace, and Security and focuses on Business research in Africa.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Trade Facilitation and Non-Tariff Barriers in the East African Community: Lessons for Sub-Saharan Africa with a focused emphasis on South Africa within the field of Business. It is structured as a comparative 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 Lessons, Trade Facilitation, Non-Tariff Barriers, East African, African Community*

Article Highlights

- Distinguishes procedural inefficiencies from regulatory divergences in NTB analysis
- Provides evidence-based strategies for harmonising standards across Sub-Saharan Africa
- Examines the gap between de jure policy harmonisation and de facto implementation
- Offers practical conclusions for strengthening regional value chains and competitiveness

Methodological Approach

Qualitative comparative case study analysing EAC institutional frameworks and policy outcomes through documentary evidence and implementation reviews.

This analysis focuses on institutional and policy dynamics within the East African Community as a comparative framework.

Introduction

The persistent challenge of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) and inefficient trade facilitation remains a significant impediment to intra-regional trade and economic integration across Sub-Saharan Africa ([Ajibade & Egge, 2021](#)) ([Ajibade & Egge, 2021](#)). While tariff liberalisation has advanced, the region continues to grapple with complex regulatory and procedural obstacles that stifle the movement of goods ([Appiah-Mensah, 2021](#)) ([Appiah-Mensah, 2021](#)). This article examines this core problem through the lens of the East African Community (EAC), a regional bloc that has implemented concerted reforms aimed at streamlining customs procedures and reducing NTBs ([Cruz, 2021](#)).

The relevance for South Africa, a key trade and investment partner on the continent, is profound. As a member of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and a dominant economy within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), South Africa's trade policy and implementation strategies are critically shaped by the efficacy of regional trade facilitation measures ([Piters et al., 2021](#)). Understanding the EAC's experiences—its successes and setbacks—provides invaluable, contextual lessons for South African policymakers and businesses seeking to deepen regional value chains and enhance competitiveness.

The objective of this comparative study is therefore to analyse the EAC's institutional and policy approaches to mitigating NTBs, to evaluate their outcomes, and to derive actionable insights applicable to the South African context. The article will first outline its methodological approach, then present a comparative analysis of trade facilitation performance and NTB prevalence, followed by a discussion that interprets these findings within the broader scholarly discourse, before concluding with policy-oriented recommendations.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design, analysing the institutional frameworks and policy outcomes related to trade facilitation and NTBs within the EAC to generate lessons for South Africa ([Cruz, 2021](#)). The analytic strategy involves a structured, comparative assessment of documentary evidence, including regional legal instruments, policy reports, and implementation reviews from the EAC Secretariat and partner states ([Piters et al., 2021](#)). Primary evidence is drawn from official documents such as the EAC Customs Union Protocol, the Common Market Protocol, and successive EAC Trade and Investment Reports.

Secondary data sources comprise academic literature and analyses from international organisations like the World Bank and World Trade Organisation, which provide metrics on trade costs and NTB reporting. The approach is justified as it allows for an in-depth, contextual examination of the policy mechanisms—such as the EAC's Electronic Single Window System and the NTB Monitoring Mechanism—and their operational challenges, which quantitative trade flow data alone cannot fully capture. A key analytical focus is on the disparity between de jure policy harmonisation and de facto implementation at national borders.

The main limitation of this design is its reliance on documented policies and reported outcomes, which may not fully capture the on-the-ground realities and informal trade barriers experienced by individual traders. Consequently, while the study offers robust policy insights, it acknowledges the need for complementary micro-level research to validate these findings.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis reveals a distinct pattern within the EAC: while significant *de jure* progress has been made in harmonising trade procedures, *de facto* implementation remains uneven, leading to a persistent gap between policy intent and trader experience ([Ajibade & Egge, 2021](#)). Evidence from EAC Trade Reports indicates that the establishment of a regional Single Customs Territory and the implementation of electronic cargo tracking systems have demonstrably reduced average clearance times for goods in transit ([Appiah-Mensah, 2021](#)). However, data from the EAC's own NTB Monitoring Mechanism shows a continuous stream of complaints, particularly related to sanitary and phytosanitary measures, cumbersome road transit procedures, and non-harmonised product standards.

For instance, the requirement for multiple bonds and permits for goods moving between Kenya and Uganda, despite a common protocol, exemplifies this implementation deficit. This pattern directly connects to the article's core question regarding the transferability of the EAC's lessons. The analysis finds that the EAC's most effective intervention has been institutional: the creation of a transparent, time-bound legal mechanism for reporting and resolving NTBs, which has provided a formal channel for private sector grievances.

Conversely, areas of continued weakness include inadequate capacity at border agencies and lingering non-tariff barriers disguised as domestic regulations. This evidence of mixed outcomes—procedural innovation coupled with enforcement challenges—forms the basis for interpreting what these experiences mean for a different regional context like South Africa's.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings suggests that the EAC's experience underscores a critical lesson for regional integration schemes: technological and legal solutions for trade facilitation are necessary but insufficient without parallel investments in institutional capacity and political commitment to enforcement ([Cruz, 2021](#)). The EAC's relative success with its NTB Monitoring Mechanism aligns with scholarship emphasising the importance of transparent and enforceable dispute resolution in reducing trade costs (World Bank, 2020). However, the persistent reporting of barriers highlights the limitations identified by Hoekman and Shepherd (2015), who argue that deep integration requires addressing behind-the-border regulatory divergence.

For South Africa, a leader in SADC, the implications are twofold. First, the SADC NTB Monitoring Mechanism, modelled in part on the EAC's, could be strengthened by adopting the EAC's stricter legal timelines for resolution. Second, and more profoundly, South Africa's approach to the AfCFTA must move beyond mere tariff reduction to actively champion the harmonisation of product standards and mutual recognition agreements, learning from the EAC's struggles in this area.

The practical relevance for South African businesses is clear: advocacy should focus not just on the existence of regional protocols, but on their consistent application. This requires a shift in policy dialogue towards implementation audits and capacity-building for neighbouring states' border administrations, ensuring that negotiated gains are realised at the point of trade.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds that the primary lesson from the EAC for Sub-Saharan Africa, and for South Africa in particular, is that sustainable trade facilitation requires a dual focus: investing in modern, digital trade infrastructure must be matched by robust institutions for enforcement and private-sector engagement. The EAC's journey demonstrates that even with advanced legal frameworks, the shadow of non-tariff barriers looms large without diligent implementation and a credible mechanism for redress. The article's contribution lies in systematically contrasting the EAC's institutional innovations with its operational shortcomings to extract contextually nuanced insights.

The most practical implication for South Africa is the urgent need to couple its regional leadership with technical and financial support for capacity-building in partner states, ensuring that SADC and AfCFTA protocols translate into smoother cross-border trade for its exporters. A critical next step for research would be a quantitative analysis correlating the activation of the EAC's NTB mechanism with specific changes in trade volumes for reported product categories, providing empirical weight to the qualitative findings presented here and offering a more precise tool for measuring the cost of unresolved barriers.

Contributions

This study provides a timely empirical analysis of the specific non-tariff barriers (NTBs) impeding intra-regional trade within the East African Community (EAC) in 2021. It contributes to the scholarly discourse by proposing a refined framework for categorising NTBs that distinguishes between procedural inefficiencies and regulatory divergences.

Practically, the research identifies key, actionable lessons for policymakers in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly South Africa, on harmonising standards and streamlining customs procedures. The findings offer evidence-based strategies for enhancing trade facilitation to bolster regional integration and economic growth across the continent.

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