

A Review of Cameroon's Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

Introduction

In June 2018, 53 countries signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to create a single market across Africa and facilitate the free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. The AfCFTA provides for a gradual tariff reduction scheme implemented as follows: the tariff of 90% (5,838 tariff lines) of goods will be gradually reduced, in equal annual installments, until they are eliminated within 5 years for countries that are not among the least developed countries (LDCs) and 10 years for least developed countries. The tariff of 7% (408 tariff lines) of goods considered sensitive products will be eliminated in 13 years for LCDs and 10 years for other countries. The remaining 3% (175 lines) of goods will be excluded from tariff obligations and will therefore not be subject to liberalization.

In Africa, there are eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) or trading blocs. These include;

- **Arab Maghreb Union (AMU/UMA):** Focuses on integration between North African countries like Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia.
- **Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD):** Promotes cooperation between countries located in the Sahel and Saharan regions.
- **Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA):** Creates a common market for goods and services traded in Eastern and Southern Africa.
- **East African Community (EAC):** Drives regional integration and cooperation among nations in East Africa.
- **Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS-CEMAC):** Promotes economic integration and development in Central Africa.
- **ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States):** Fosters economic integration in West Africa.
- **Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD):** Focused on achieving regional peace,

Research Article

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Received: 25 November, 2025; Accepted: 11 December, 2025; Published: 18 December, 2025

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security, and development, especially in the Horn of Africa.

- **Southern African Development Community (SADC):** Promoting regional cooperation and integration across Southern Africa.

This research note provides a step-by-step overview of how Cameroon is implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area. It recommends strategies to accelerate the implementation of the Agreement in the future. Section one outlines a brief overview of the Cameroonian Economy, section 2 illustrates yearly developments from 2018 – 2024, section three provides a succinct overview of companies that have successfully exported under the AfCFTA and those who have attempted to import under the continental trade agreement. Section four highlights some institutional gaps that need to be tackled. This is followed by lessons that can be drawn from the implementation of the AfCFTA.

1. A Brief Overview of the Cameroonian Economy

Cameroon is a member of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) with five other countries, Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Republic of Congo. Cameroon's membership in the AfCFTA does not trump its regional

commitments as a member of the CEMAC region. Cameroon's population will reach 30 million by 2026 according to the Institute of National Statistics (2023). Inflation is falling but remains above the 3% threshold agreed by member states and GDP growth has averaged 4% over the last decade [1]. Cameroon has the largest economy in the CEMAC region and trade with other countries contributes 41% to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Its poverty rate has fallen from 38.6% in 2021 and has since fallen to 37.7% in 2022, with around ten million people living below the poverty line in 2022, out of a total population estimated at around 27 million [2].

According to the World Bank, the United Nations and the Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI), free trade is beneficial for the Cameroonian economy. The AfCFTA could add 1% more to Cameroon's growth rate, leaving GDP to accelerate from 4% to 5% on average. It is therefore important to assess what has been achieved so far and what needs to be done to make tariff-free trade between Cameroon and its neighbors a reality.

2. Cameroon Signs and Launches Domestic Plans for the AfCFTA

2018: Cameroon signed the AfCFTA in 2018, and the National Assembly and Senate passed a bill authorizing the President to ratify the AfCFTA agreement in June 2019 (Cameroon Trade Hub, 2025).

2019: The President, Paul Biya, signed Decree No. 2020/03 of 06 January 2019 relating to Cameroon's accession to the Agreement Establishing the African Trade Insurance Agency, signed on 18 May 2000 [3].

2020: Cameroon established and adopted a new implementation strategy for the AfCFTA (UNECA, 2020) which emphasizes the capacity building of all socio-economic actors, promotes free trade and supervises economic operators. This document took the challenges and opportunities faced by economic operators and identified priority actions for institutions charged with the implementation of the AfCFTA.

2022: To encourage and accelerate intra-African trade, the AfCFTA Secretariat launched the AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) on 7th October 2022 to allow 10 countries to start trade under the AfCFTA. The countries currently involved in the AfCFTA GTI

include Algeria, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Rwanda, Tanzania, Tunisia and South Africa. The AfCFTA Secretariat chose countries for the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) because they had published their e-tariff handbook and were implementing these progressively across their borders. As a result, Cameroon was allowed to test AfCFTA trading documents and procedures on pre-selected shipments.

"The legal basis for the AfCFTA GTI is provided for in Article 13 (3-j) of the Agreement which mandates the Council of Ministers to make regulations, issue directives, and make recommendations in accordance with the provisions of the AfCFTA Agreement, and detailed in Ministerial Directive 1/2021 of the 7th Meeting of the AfCFTA Council of Ministers responsible for Trade of 10th October 2021". Bama Etienne Bama, AfCFTA GUIDED TRADE COORDINATOR, CAMEROON.

The Guided Trade Initiative is improving matchmaking among businesses and products for import and export between interested state parties in coordination with their national AfCFTA implementation committees. The Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) has three main objectives;

- **To facilitate meaningful trade under the AfCFTA.**
- **To test the operational, institutional, legal, and trade policy environment under the AfCFTA.**
- **To send an important and positive message to African economic operators.**

After a consultative session between the Minister of Trade and technical agencies with a mandate on international trade issues, the Cameroon National Shippers' Council was mandated on September 8, 2022 [4], to host the GTI Ad-hoc Sub-committee. This agency is also mandated as the government agency responsible for trade data collection, capacity building of exporters and importers, trade facilitation, trade and transport infrastructure development as well as export promotion.

The National Council of Shippers of Cameroon (CNCC) promotes the AfCFTA is charged with the implementation of the AfCFTA and took part in the Commonwealth Business Forum in Kigali in June

2022. This Ad Hoc subcommittee held two training seminars. The first focused on building capacity for its members and the secretariat and took place on November 16, 2022. On December 28-29, 2022, the second seminar equipped local entrepreneurs and promoters of the “Made in Cameroon” an initiative designed to promote Cameroon products at home and abroad. The Council of National Shippers continues to hold working sessions, trainings and events to support stakeholders in the implementation of the AfCFTA.

2023: In 2023, the National Council of Shippers of Cameroon (CNCC) promoted the AfCFTA at a national trade fair and educated businesses on opportunities presented by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) [5].

2024: In 2024, the Cameroon National Shippers' Council (CNSC) equally promoted the AfCFTA at the Central Africa Annual Cross-Border Trade Fair (FOTRAC) in Ebolowa, Cameroon. It held a one-day training with local businesses assisting with information about the AfCFTA. 80 SMEs took part in this initiative, which is vital as small and medium enterprises make up 19.4% and 1.3% of Cameroon's economic fabric. Attendees and policymakers continued to call for trade facilitation infrastructures.

- On 18 July 2024, CNSC's General Manager welcomed participants of the sub-regional workshop organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). This included senior policymakers such as Mr. Benjamin Evita (Vice-President of the Equatorial Guinea Chamber of Commerce), Mrs. Fatime Amissane (Member of the National Transition Council of Chad), Mrs. Rose Hélène Mengue (Vice-President of MTA Colis Express) and Mrs. Augustine Pauliane Boum (Attorney-at-law at the Cameroon Bar).
- The Cameroon sub-committee shared their experience in the implementation of the AfCFTA Guided Trade initiative, chaired by Mr. Auguste Mbappe Penda (CNSC, 2024). Also present was the Executive Director of the Trade Law Centre (TRALAC), Mrs. Trudi Hartzenberg who applauded Cameroon's efforts.
- The CNSC Ad-hoc committee on the AfCFTA held a 2-day working session with several stakeholders

to ensure a more inclusive path towards the implementation of the AfCFTA. Several local SMEs and representative of the Port Authority of Kribi, SME Promotion Agency, Chamber of Commerce, Port Authority of Douala, Single Window for Foreign Trade Operations (GUCE) and others outlined their experience with the AfCFTA and discussed challenges. These challenges range from a lack of information, limited SME production capacity and access to trade finance [6, 7]. Work with the Director of Tralac continued on March 20 2025 to discuss ways to ensure that women and youth benefit from the AfCFTA. The 2025 action plan was unveiled and is set to focus on the informal sector as well as Cameroon–Nigeria trade.

Making trade work seamlessly between 53 countries belonging to eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) was never going to be easy. This makes implementation difficult, resulting in the creation of the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) for countries that have the tools and infrastructure to conduct trade under the AfCFTA. This has reinforced calls for greater inclusion in the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Four Companies have Successfully Imported and Exported Under the AfCFTA

Since January 1, 2021, Cameroon met a significant portion of its commitments under the AfCFTA making it eligible for trade under the Guided Trade Initiative. Cameroon began exporting and importing in 2023 with countries that have met a minimum requirement to trade under the AfCFTA. For example, published e-tariff books, implementation of AfCFTA preferential tariffs at borders, and the required infrastructure to do so.

On 6th October 2022, the Cameroonian customs administration issued the first certificate of origin for products exported to Ghana. The exporting company - Gig Afatex - was the first to export goods under the preferential arrangements of the AfCFTA. In the same month, Cameroon customs issued a total of 2 certificates of origin to Agri food companies Cameroon Tea Estate and Ndawara Tea Estate, who successfully exported 38.6 kg of Cameroonian tea to Ghana.

Imports into Cameroon under the AfCFTA also began on July 3rd 2023, where INODA INDUSTRIES SARL received a cargo of resin from Tunisia under the

AfCFTA. Cameroon has published its e-tariff book and so has begun progressively removing tariffs for certain products entering its market. The cargo benefitted from a 30% reduction in custom duties as it is part of the pilot phase of the AfCFTA – Guided Trade Initiative (GTI).

This happened under the pilot phase of the AfCFTA and demonstrates the effectiveness of Cameroon in implementing the AfCFTA. However, not all businesses in Cameroon have been able to import under preferential tariffs as some countries have not taken the necessary measures to implement the AfCFTA. Some businesses expressed their desire to import under the GTI but have been confronted by two challenges, which include;

- 1. Non-eligibility of the exporting country.**
- 2. Non-liberalization of product at this stage by the Economic and Monetary Community of Central African States (CEMAC).**

Urea from Nigeria: There was a case of Granular Urea - HS Code 31021000 (fertilizer) where a distributor who previously imported from Ukraine had to switch to Nigeria where Dangote fertilizer is producing Granular Urea. The import to Cameroon from Nigeria could not take place under the AfCFTA because Nigeria has not completed its domestic processes and made available the AfCFTA tariff book at the border, as well as the AfCFTA Certificate of Origin.

Plaster from Tunisia: Another case was an importer of plastics from Tunisia - HS Code 25.20.20.90 who wanted to import under the GTI. The CEMAC's e-tariff book published by the AfCFTA Secretariat, states a phase-out period of 13 years, even as tariffs will only be dismantled from the 6th year (2026). As such, the implemented Most Favored Nation (MFN) tariff is 10% under the agreed schedule of tariff liberalization. After 2026, the CEMAC region will apply a 0.77% tariff reduction until it reaches zero tariffs by 2033.

As outlined earlier, Cameroon is a member of the CEMAC region, and so it has a common external tariff estimated at 15%. This has to be implemented on imports of certain products from all countries and so Cameroon must adhere to this despite the AfCFTA. However, the AfCFTA provides a framework for such product categories to be liberalized slowly.

1. Institutional and Infrastructural Barriers to Effective AfCFTA Implementation.

Despite Cameroon joining the Guided Trade Initiative and being one of the first countries to trade under the AfCFTA, different institutional capacity gaps persist which hinder the full implementation and scale-up of trade under the AfCFTA framework in the country. Some major shortcomings which need to be tackled include:

Human resource limitations: To fully leverage the benefits of the AfCFTA, the country needs to have personnel skilled in fulfilling the regulations that relate to the agreement's implementation. However, the lack of skilled personnel leads to delays, poor execution quality, and overall failure in meeting planned objectives [8]. Also, the AfCFTA, through the digital trade protocol, seeks to introduce more digital innovations to enhance intra-African trade. In 2023, Cameroon recorded a score of 24.5 out of 100 in the Global Talent Competitiveness Index, with a low score of 9.0 out of 100 for high-level skills like ICT [9]. This score represents a weak digital labor force, highlighting the need to train qualified human resources capable of implementing the digital transition effectively.

Digital readiness and infrastructure: With protocols like the Protocol on Digital Trade, a major part of the effective implementation of the AfCFTA is the adoption of digital transformations in trade. These have the potential to improve the efficiency of trade and scale operations, especially the digitization of public administration in the trade sector, like electronic authentication, paperless trading, electronic contracts, and digital payments. However, poor electricity connectivity, especially in rural areas, slows down digital innovation and affects the full implementation of the AfCFTA and inclusion of different communities. In Cameroon, though electricity access is about 70%, only 32% of households are connected to the public grid, with personal subscriptions [10]. Such limitations in power supply must be tackled as it serves as a bedrock or digitization.

Also, public administration is characterized by weak equipment in advanced digital tech due to issues like financing shortcomings and inadequate digital tools to automate procedures. Also, the process involved in the transition from a long-standing analogue process

streamlining to digital systems has proven to be slow and a major challenge within public administration.

Multiple infrastructural deficits also exist with respect to poor road networks and connectivity. Only about 8% of roads in Cameroon are paved, with paved roads not in the best condition themselves, with potholes and congestion [11]. Limited port facilities and insufficient logistics services have been noted to increase trade cost and time [8]. These infrastructural limitations have the potential to limit Cameroon's full implementation of the AfCFTA framework.

Institutional bottlenecks: Another major challenge is institutional bottlenecks that make trade processes less effective. The administrative bodies involved in the trade sector are highly bureaucratic with excessive procedures and regulatory requirements. It is also detrimental that these requirements are not readily available to businesses, especially SMEs involved in trade [12]. These inefficiencies go a long way in increasing trade costs, creating more avenues for corruption, and causing delays. For example, export processing times at the Port of Douala have nearly doubled between 2015 and 2023, increasing from 10.6 days to 21.2 days due to numerous administrative checks, including customs, tax, and ministry controls [13]. These must be tackled to see a sustainable and beneficial implementation of the AfCFTA.

What Lessons can we draw from the implementation of the AfCFTA?

Among others, the following lessons can be learned;

- State parties should gazette domestic procedures, relevant existing laws, and or updated reforms to effectively implement the AfCFTA and tariff schedules should be integrated into the daily customs management processes and procedures.
- Stakeholders should design a step-by-step guide to enable exporters and importers to trade under

the AfCFTA without having to reduce trade costs and encourage exports.

- A fully automated system where tariffs are automatically applied based on product and goods category and any related payments should be digitized to reduce risks of bad governance.
- Accelerate the creation of Special Economic Zones in Limbe, Bafousam, and Garoua to attract foreign direct investment and boost industrial capacity to meet the growing demand in local and regional markets.
- Fund relevant committees and initiatives across Cameroon to deliver the promise of the AfCFTA. For example, the sub-committee should be financed by the Cameroonian government to ensure that it develops the tools and strategies to effectively monitor trade under the AfCFTA.
- Importer and exporter data should be shared formally on the websites of the Cameroon National Shippers' Council as they are mandated to collect and share relevant information about the AfCFTA. This will enable stakeholders to identify relevant value chains, carry out importer/exporter analysis, and readily identify new opportunities.

Conclusion

The AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative (GTI) allows participating countries to begin trading under the AfCFTA as they have met a minimum legal requirement with relevant laws and processes in place. Going forward, all AfCFTA member countries should accelerate the implementation of the AfCFTA and move from laws to practical implementation of the agreement. Digitizing the processes and training customs officials across all trade routes will ensure businesses can benefit from the AfCFTA sooner.

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Citation: Henri, Kouam. "A Review of Cameroon's Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)." J Glob Entrep Manage (2025): 132 . DOI: [10.59462/3068-174X.3.3.132](https://doi.org/10.59462/3068-174X.3.3.132)