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Trade Facilitation and the AfCFTA: Opportunities for U.S. Economic Engagement in Francophone Africa

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Abstract

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is the largest free trade area with 54 member states. Language barrier issues, infrastructure shortfall constraints, and structural challenges have plagued the U.S. trade with Francophone Africa. AfCFTA presents opportunities for the U.S. to strengthen its trade relationship with Francophone Africa. This paper combines peer-reviewed studies and policy reports on governmental reforms, digital services, infrastructure, and logistics to create new opportunities for U.S. businesses and offer insights to guide policy decisions. The findings highlight that uniform regulatory frameworks, efficiency in customs operations, and expanding intra-African trade present opportunities for the U.S. to increase exports, improve supply chain systems, and promote diversity in trade relationships. The findings suggest that U.S. support for the AfCFTA framework will benefit U.S. economic interests. The U.S. will achieve significant gains through technical support, private sector participation, and government engagement with AfCFTA. Additionally, the U.S. will benefit from the opening up of new markets for products, the competitive positioning of U.S. businesses against global trade rivals, and the formation of mutually beneficial economic alliances that strengthen energy security and supply chains. U.S. involvement in enhanced digital trade and infrastructure partnerships will enhance its position in the African trade and economic landscape and secure U.S. geopolitical interests. It is argued that sustained U.S. support for implementing AfCFTA could yield significant benefits.

Keywords: African Continental Free Trade Area; Trade facilitation; Francophone Africa; U.S. engagement; Economic partnership

1. Introduction

Trade facilitation is crucial for regional integration and economic development. It is important because the logistical challenges, lack of regulatory transparency, and non-tariff barriers have exceptionally high costs for smaller firms and landlocked economies. These issues characterize much of West and Central Africa's trade. The evidence from multilateral and regional studies indicates that focused facilitation initiatives (e.g., electronic single windows, authorized economic operator arrangements, mutual recognition of conformity assessment), which are designed to compress clearance times, reduce uncertainty in the trading environment and expand market access can achieve benefits not possible from tariff preferences alone [1; 2].

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) came into effect in 2021 as the largest free trade area in the world [3]. The AfCFTA implementation framework include rules of origin, schedules of concessions, services commitments, and protocols on investment, competition, and digital trade. These offer a continental vehicle through which such reforms can be harmonized and extended [4; 5].

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Francophone Africa is an important bloc within the African continent. With immense potential in the agricultural and services sectors and abundant mineral wealth, it merits critical attention in U.S. economic engagement with Africa. The countries that make up Francophone Africa share historical, linguistic, and institutional structures. These similarities are consequences of a shared colonial history. Francophone Africa has developed trade and economic frameworks that offer opportunities and challenges for sustained international trade engagements [6-8].

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) has been the foremost framework that has underlined trade between the U.S. and Africa. Since AGOA's inception, Sub-Saharan African countries that meet its qualifying criteria have had duty-free access to the U.S. market for their products. While some African markets have derived immense benefits from the policy, AGOA has not been an effective tool for economic engagement with the U.S. for others [9].

Historically, the U.S. has not had the same volumes of trade and commercial engagement with Francophone Africa as its English-speaking counterparts. Several factors have limited American involvement in Francophone Africa. Language differences create communication challenges. The colonial history of these countries left behind institutional systems unfamiliar to American businesses. Poor transportation and logistics networks also make trade difficult [10].

AfCFTA provides a framework through which the United States could strengthen economic relationships with African countries, especially Francophone ones. The AfCFTA includes several provisions that make trade easier and cheaper. These include digitizing customs processes, reducing non-tariff barriers, and creating compatible payment systems. These changes can significantly lower trading costs and create new opportunities for countries outside Africa, including the U.S. [11; 12].

Beyond the economic benefits of enhanced trade engagements with Francophone Africa are geopolitical considerations. It is in the U.S.'s interest to diversify supply chains and consolidate access to critical mineral resources while implementing strategic countermeasures against the influence of its global rivals in the Francophone Africa bloc. Additionally, because the Francophone Africa market is not fully integrated into the global marketplace, there are opportunities for U.S. businesses to gain a competitive head start in these emerging markets.

2. Methodology

The literature review uses a comprehensive approach to examine the intersecting points between the AfCFTA blueprint and the prospects for improved U.S. trade relations with Francophone Africa. The review encompasses peer-reviewed academic literature, government reports, policy documents from international institutions, and industry insights from 2018 to 2025. The keyword search included "AfCFTA", "Francophone Africa", "trade facilitation", and "U.S. economic engagement". Policy documents were drawn from organizations such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Congressional Research Service, and policy institutions such as Brookings.

This review analyzes how trade facilitation under the AfCFTA framework generates commercial opportunities between the U.S. and Francophone Africa. Additionally, this paper will identify the potential for each sector and the challenges that affect this trade relationship. Finally, the review will offer policy proposals and recommendations to guide U.S. government and private sector strategies to enhance trade with Francophone Africa. This paper contributes to the expanding discussion on AfCFTA and how governments, industry, and other relevant stakeholders can maximize the opportunities and potential that AFCFTA presents.

3. AfCFTA and the Concept of Trade Facilitation

Trade facilitation refers to simplified, harmonized, and digitalized trade procedures and data flow between those regulating trade. These measures speed up the movement of goods, reduce bureaucracy, and lower the cost of compliance for businesses [13]. According to the World Bank [1], the removal of non-tariff barriers and enhancements in trade facilitation are critical channels for achieving trade gains throughout Africa. These tools that harmonize and simplify trade include national and regional single windows, digital certificates for Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures and Technical Barriers to Trade (SPS/TBT), authorized economic operator schemes, and smooth interaction of network technology across borders (Authorized Economic Operator schemes). The United Nations had identified these tools as essential for improved trade in the digital age [14; 13].

Modernizing customs procedures and digital systems is central to AfCFTA's trade facilitation plan. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed many African countries to make changes to their customs systems. They had to enable digital payments and remote processing of documents and certifications [15]. The AfCFTA framework emphasizes harmonized documentation so that similar paperwork can be used across countries. It promotes risk-based assessments where customs officials focus on higher-risk shipments. The third improvement to reduce paperwork burdens is support for single window systems, where traders can submit all their required documents through one unified system.

AfCFTA's Digital Trade Protocol presents a continent-wide policy and regulatory framework to standardize these tools and encourage cross-border digital interoperability [16]. This digital blueprint addresses modern trade and commercial challenges, thus placing AfCFTA ahead of other regional trade agreements.

4. State of Trade in Francophone Africa

Several factors shape the current trade relationship between the U.S. and Francophone African countries. These include historical connections, changing economic structures, and new business opportunities.

Recent trade data shows positive trends. In 2024, the U.S. had a services trade surplus of $5.5 billion with Africa. This represents a 15.3 percent increase ($724 million) compared to 2023 [17]. This growth occurs while the U.S. and African countries strategically change their trade approaches. Both sides are trying to diversify their economic partnerships in response to shifts in global trade.

Analysis of trade data shows that French-speaking African markets have significant untapped potential. Overall statistics suggest these markets comprise a large portion of total U.S.-Africa trade.

Francophone African countries have very different types of economies, which create diverse opportunities for American businesses. Cameroon and Gabon are rich in natural resources. Others, like Cote d'Ivoire, are agricultural powerhouses, while countries like Senegal are becoming important service centers. This variety means American companies can find opportunities across many different sectors.

Many Francophone African countries rely heavily on exporting raw materials and basic commodities. For example, Cote d'Ivoire's main exports in 2022 were cocoa, petroleum products, and rubber. Cameroon's economy depends primarily on oil, cocoa, and liquefied natural gas. The Democratic Republic of Congo's main exports are copper and cobalt. These minerals have increasingly been sold to China in recent years. This shift has altered global supply chains for these critical minerals [18; 19]. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Francophone African countries like Mali and Senegal have built advanced agricultural systems for producing peanuts, cotton, and rice. These developments create opportunities for American companies to sell agricultural technology and equipment and provide technical assistance.

The mining sector also offers significant potential for American businesses. Countries like Burkina Faso, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of Congo [20] present mining opportunities that could benefit U.S. mining companies, equipment suppliers, and service providers.

Research indicates it costs more to trade goods in West Africa than the global average. This higher cost stems from three main issues: customs delays, poor transportation infrastructure, and non-tariff barriers [21]. These inefficiencies make West African businesses less competitive in global markets. However, trade facilitation reforms included in the AfCFTA could reduce these trading costs by 11-14 percent [22].

Poor infrastructure, logistics, and custom systems are major obstacles preventing Francophone African countries from scaling up trade with each other. According to the World Bank (2018), many countries score below high-income standards in several key areas. They have problems with port, rail, and road networks. Their custom systems are slow and inefficient. These issues make trade expensive and reduce the benefits countries should get from lower tariffs under the AfCFTA [23; 24].

The challenges with ports and transportation corridors are real. Major trading hubs like Abidjan and Dakar face severe congestion. They also have a poor connection to inland areas, making it difficult to move goods efficiently. Governments and international organizations recognize these challenges and are working to fix them through multi-year projects and investments in new deep-water ports [25; 26]. This means that investing in better infrastructure is just as important as reducing tariffs. Countries need lower trade barriers and better transportation systems to make trade work effectively.

Different regulations and currency systems also affect cross-border trade between African countries. Non-tariff measures, different standards and paperwork requirements, and varying customs procedures are some problems that create barriers to cross-border trade. Because of these issues, simply lowering tariffs through the AfCFTA will not automatically increase trade. Countries must also simplify and harmonize their procedures [27].

Currency arrangements add another level of complexity. Some Francophone countries in West and Central Africa use different versions of the CFA franc (WAEMU and CEMAC). Since 2019, there has been an ongoing debate about reforming this monetary system. Any reforms would affect exchange rate flexibility, liquidity, and cross-border payments. These changes would have important implications for the region's trade competitiveness [27; 28].

Trade networks with Francophone Africa work within the bloc and with countries outside the continent. Many Francophone African countries have established strong trade relationships with partners outside Africa. The main external partners are European Union countries like France, Spain, and the Netherlands; China is another external partner. To a lesser extent, the U.S. is also a trade partner. Côte d'Ivoire and Cameroon have strong trading relationships with European countries and China. There is also significant trade among Francophone African countries. Senegal and Mali have established trade flows between them. This shows the undeveloped potential of the AfCFTA to strengthen regional supply chains. However, this can only happen if countries solve problems with trade facilitation, rules of origin, and logistics bottlenecks [29; 30].

Table 1 Selected Trade Profile of some Francophone African Countries

Country	Exports (USD millions)	Top Export Destinations	Import (USD millions)	Top Import Partners
Côte d'Ivoire	16,429.	Mali, Netherlands, Switzerland, United States, Burkina Faso	17,889.	China, Nigeria, France, India, United States
Democratic Republic of Congo	15,672.	China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tanzania, South Africa	11,406.	China, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, India, Tanzania
Senegal	5,710.	Mali, India, Switzerland, China, Australia	12,065.	China, France, India, Belgium, Spain
Cameroon*	4,294.	China, Netherlands, India, Italy, Spain	6,996.	China, France, India, Russia, Belgium
Burkina Faso	4,556.	Switzerland, Mali, United Arab Emirates, Singapore, Côte d'Ivoire	5,647.	China, Cote D'Ivoire, France, Russia, India
Gabon	10,470	China, Italy, India, Indonesia, Gibraltar	4,060.	France, China, United States, Singapore, Norway
Benin	899.	Bangladesh, India, China, Egypt, Pakistan	3,846.	India, China, France, United Arab Emirates, Nigeria

Note. Compiled from World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), World Bank. All data are from 2022, except Cameroon (2021).

Kolade, Azangeo, and Thompson [31] highlight how linguistic limitations continue to weaken the U.S. trade standing in Francophone markets. Evidence indicates that the absence of sustained French language capacity in U.S. institutions reduces negotiation effectiveness and slows commercial engagement.

When all these structural issues are analyzed together, they explain why improving trade facilitation is so important and effective. Francophone African countries rely heavily on commodity exports, have uneven logistics performance, deal with fragmented regulations, and focus mainly on external trading partners. Making targeted improvements to trade systems can have significant benefits. These improvements include reducing time-in-port, harmonizing customs procedures across countries, modernizing payment systems, and making strategic investments in ports and transportation corridors. These changes include finding regional solutions to currency issues in CFA zones.

With these improvements, Francophone Africa can significantly increase the benefits from AfCFTA. External partners like the U.S. would also derive major benefits from these changes.

5. Key Sectors to Improve Economic Engagement with the U.S.

The AfCFTA's focus on trade facilitation creates specific, short-term opportunities for U.S. businesses to engage in commercial activities. These opportunities are profitable for American companies and strategically important for the U.S.

Africa has a significant infrastructure gap. Infrastructure development is one of the biggest opportunities for U.S. involvement in Francophone Africa. The continent urgently needs better transportation and digital infrastructure to reduce trade costs and improve production and logistics systems [30]. At the same time, China's growing presence in Africa is changing how the U.S. approaches the continent. This happens even as the U.S. tries to counter Chinese influence in important sectors like critical minerals (van Staden, 2024). This competitive dynamic creates opportunities for American companies to distinguish themselves by offering innovative solutions, better technology, and more sustainable development approaches in areas like logistics, engineering, and services. Programs such as the U.S. Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) illustrate recent efforts to mobilize private investment in transportation corridors projects, with the aim of reducing transit times and improving supply chain connectivity projects. Recent studies show that U.S. economic diplomacy programs like Prosper Africa and the Development Finance Corporation are pivotal to strengthening America's business relationships in Francophone Africa. These programs help solve unique challenges and counter the influence of Russia and China within the bloc [32].

The energy sector offers substantial potential for energy and renewable projects for U.S. companies. Investment projects in this sector, like cold-chain systems, industrial parks, and port electrification, which support trade-related services, are attractive to U.S. companies. The U.S. Export-Import Bank (EXIM) and the DFC have supported large-scale infrastructure deals in Africa. This demonstrates that U.S. financing and political risk protection are available for commercially viable projects. These financing agencies can potentially support commercially viable projects that align with AfCFTA's implementation goals. Technology transfer and digital trade are critical areas where U.S. companies can gain competitive advantages. The fintech sector in Africa is growing rapidly. At the beginning of 2024, 1,263 African companies were offering new financial products and services, an increase from just 450 in 2020 [33]. This expansion is part of a broader trend toward digital transformation across Francophone Africa. Governments within the bloc are increasingly making digital economic strategies a priority. Additionally, digital trade, electronic certification, and integrated payment systems are seamless to implement and have substantial impacts. U.S. programs like the Prosper Africa initiative and private sector pilot projects supported by U.S. partners can help fast-track these improvements. These programs can help Francophone African countries adopt single-window systems faster. They can also support electronic certification for health and safety standards (SPS/TBT e-certification) and create better cross-border payment connections. These enhancements drastically reduce border delays and lower compliance costs for Francophone African and U.S. traders. These improvements ensure that lower tariffs lead to increased cross-border trade.

The fintech industry in Francophone Africa is dynamic and characterized by fast-paced expansion. In 2024, fintech companies raised $2.4 billion in venture capital, representing nearly 59 percent of all investments in the region [34]. West Africa, which includes major Francophone markets, raised $587 million in startup funding in 2024. U.S. companies can provide technological solutions, form partnerships, and invest capital as opportunities stemming from this [35]. The growth of mobile payments, digital banking, and e-commerce platforms creates considerable market opportunities for American fintech companies that want to expand into emerging markets.

The agricultural sector offers abundant opportunities for U.S. involvement, especially in agricultural technology, equipment, and developing value chains. Many Francophone African countries produce large amounts of agricultural products, but lack modern processing facilities, storage, infrastructure, and distribution networks. American agricultural companies can help by providing technology solutions, equipment, and expertise. This assistance would enable these countries to add more value to their agricultural production and access international markets.

The services sector offers extensive opportunities for U.S. companies with established expertise and global operations. This includes professional services, education, healthcare, and financial services. The growing middle class in countries like Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon creates demand for high-quality services. Simultaneously, government modernization efforts need technical assistance and consulting services that American firms are well-equipped to provide.

U.S. government initiatives and programs are increasingly important in assisting the private sector in doing business in Africa. The U.S. Trade and Development Agency's Global Procurement Initiative trains government officials across Africa on procurement best practices (United States Trade and Development Agency [36]. This capacity-building enables U.S. companies to learn about procurement processes for infrastructure and technology projects. These training programs help American businesses compete in these markets while supporting institutional development in partner countries.

When these initiatives are designed using DFC and EXIM risk protection tools and Prosper Africa's deal support, they can produce measurable results. Specifically, they can significantly reduce the time it takes to conduct trade and create lasting commercial relationships between U.S. companies and francophone African markets.

6. Challenges to Enhanced U.S.-Francophone Africa Engagement

Increased U.S. economic engagement in Francophone Africa faces challenges that require careful planning and risk management strategies. These challenges include competition from global powers, weak governmental and institutional systems, economic vulnerabilities, and complex regulatory systems. These factors affect the success of American business ventures and policy initiatives.

Competition from other global powers, especially China, is the biggest strategic challenge facing U.S. engagement in Francophone Africa. In 2023, total trade between China and Africa reached $282 billion [37]. This demonstrates the extent of China's economic engagement on the continent. As of 2023, over 150 countries and 30 international organizations have signed cooperation agreements with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The total value of these agreements has surpassed $1 trillion [38]. China's extensive presence creates a competitive disadvantage for the U.S. and limits the options for American diplomatic initiatives. The shifting geopolitical situation means the U.S. needs a new economic diplomacy strategy for Francophone Africa. This strategy must be distinct from France's historical methods in the region. The U.S. should focus on building strong relationships with these countries that strengthen America's presence in the region [6].

The European Union also has significant influence in Francophone African countries through historical connections, preferential trade agreements, and ongoing development assistance programs [33]. Turkey has also emerged as another competitor, using cultural and religious connections to expand its regional economic presence [34]. Because of these competing influences, the U.S. policymakers and businesses must highlight the uniqueness of American economic engagements. These are in the areas of advanced technology and sustainable development approaches.

Regulatory and institutional challenges create significant barriers for U.S. businesses across Francophone Africa. The regulatory environment is fragmented across different countries. Each country has different standards, procedures, and institutional capacities. These variations increase transaction costs and make operations more costly for foreign investors. Non-tariff measures and fragmented regulations remain considerable, measurable barriers to trade within Africa. According to UNCTAD [30], these barriers (non-tariff barriers, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and technical trade barriers) impose high costs on vital sectors. Regulatory alignment will be required to unlock the full benefits of the AfCFTA. The process will, however, be technically complex and politically sensitive.

Political instability and governance challenges remain significant risk factors across much of Francophone Africa. Insurgencies in the Sahel remain a challenge after military coups. Fatalities from political violence increased 30 percent in 2023, and civilian fatalities grew by 18 percent in 2022 [40]. The security situation in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger creates operational risks for businesses and makes developmental programs less effective.

Cultural and linguistic factors are often underestimated, but they are important considerations for U.S. engagement strategies. French is the primary language used by businesses and governments in Francophone Africa. This can create barriers for American companies that do not have French language capabilities. Business practices, negotiation styles, and ways of building relationships differ in these countries. Strengthening French-language capacity has been identified as a strategic economic tool. Recent evidence shows that countries with strong French language education systems, like Canada and Germany, show greater resilience, better trade stability, and stronger positioning in Francophone markets [41].

The timing of market entry and the order of investments require careful consideration of political cycles, regulatory changes, and competitive dynamics.

7. Recommendations

Combining AfCFTA implementation and evolving U.S.-Africa economic relations creates opportunities for stronger American engagement with Francophone Africa. It also reveals critical challenges that require strategic policy responses.

The U.S. can provide targeted technical assistance to modernize customs systems, create digital systems for trade (single windows), and establish authorized trader programs (authorized economic operator). These measures reduce clearance times and reduce paperwork [42; 1].

U.S policymakers must develop new frameworks that align with African priorities. AGOA provides a basis for the United States to create inclusive opportunities for African entrepreneurship and offer a sustainable path to prosperity through good governance and free market principles. These are things China has been unable to do [43]. The framework that replaces AGOA after 2025 should incorporate lessons learned from AGOA while addressing modern challenges such as digital trade, services liberalization, and regional value chain integration.

Stronger government engagement is a critical policy priority. The U.S. Department of Commerce should deepen its engagement across Africa at all levels. This should include more involvement in strategic minerals and greater engagement with the U.S. business community outside of Washington, D.C., especially with the vibrant African diaspora [44]. This expanded engagement should prioritize Francophone markets where American businesses face unique language and cultural barriers.

Recommendations for private sector engagement reiterate the importance of strategic partnerships and risk management. In 2024, the U.S. government strengthened the U.S.-Africa partnership through global trade and investment. Each completed deal and direct investment on the African continent demonstrates how a strategic U.S.-Africa connection drives mutual prosperity. Building on these achievements, private companies should develop comprehensive market entry strategies that use government support programs while meeting local partnership requirements.

The digital transformation agenda offers promise for U.S. engagement in French-speaking Africa. Several private sector deals were announced to promote African entrepreneurship, expand access to digital health services, and establish technology training centers [7]. These demonstrate the potential for technology-driven partnerships that address development priorities while creating commercial opportunities.

The U.S. should support reforms within the CFA franc monetary system and expand infrastructure financing measures. These are critical for enhancing the ease of doing business under the AfCFTA agreement [6].

8. Conclusion

The AfCFTA holds potential and allows for deepening trade and economic potential within Africa. However, its promise will only be realized if trade facilitation reforms make cross-border commerce faster, cheaper, and more predictable. For the U.S., trade facilitation offers practical entry points for expanding commercial ties. U.S. financial instruments, technological expertise, and development partnerships could be leveraged to strengthen economic engagement, increase exports, and enhance its strategic presence in Francophone Africa. Successful engagement with Francophone Africa within the AfCFTA framework could serve as a model for broader continental partnerships. This could contribute to diversified supply chains and enhanced energy security across the Francophone Africa bloc.

Future research should examine how effective these approaches are in specific sectors, compare different engagement models, and evaluate whether policies successfully promote sustainable economic partnerships. This paper adds to the policy discourse by pointing out how the trade facilitation features of the AfCFTA might be used as an approach to redefine American economic engagement with Francophone Africa through mutually beneficial, evidence-based collaboration.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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