Update on the AfCFTA

March 2026

The latest news, views, and announcements on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

INSIDE

What's New?

Tariff Schedules

- **Nigeria** gazetted the ECOWAS Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions and was added to South Africa's Schedule 1, General Note O of the Customs and Excise Act on 12 September 2025.
- **Ethiopia** gazetted its Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions and was added to South Africa's Schedule 1, General Note O of the Customs and Excise Act on 24 October 2025.
- **Sierra Leone** has notified the AfCFTA Secretariat that it has gazetted ECOWAS Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions and will be added to South Africa's Schedule 1, General Note O of the Customs and Excise Act once the gazette has been received.

Rules of Origin

- Outstanding Rules of Origin on Automotive, Clothing and Textiles adopted (100% of Rules of Origin agreed).

Phase II Protocols

- South Africa has concluded its domestic processes to ratify the Protocol on Competition Policy and the Protocol on Women & Youth in Trade.
- In February 2026, the African Union Assembly of African Union Heads of State and Government adopted the eight (8) Annexes to the Protocol on Intellectual Property Rights.

Background to the AfCFTA

The AfCFTA is a flagship project of the African Union, designed to tackle Africa's low global trade participation. While Africa makes up 17% of the world population, it currently accounts for only 3% of global trade.

Key Market Statistics

Metric	Current Status
Population	1.4 Billion+ people
Combined GDP	Approximately US$3.4 Trillion
Projected Export Growth (by 2035)	+$560 Billion (29% increase)

The AfCFTA sets out a framework for tariff liberalisation across Africa, the harmonisation trade related rules to encourage greater flows of intra-African trade and investment.

This comprehensive AfCFTA Agreement covers **Trade in Goods, Trade in Services, Investment, Intellectual Property Rights, Competition Policy, Digital Trade, Women and Youth in Trade, as well as Rules and Procedures for the Settlement of Disputes.**

The AfCFTA is expected to facilitate and enhance intra African trade through:

- Progressive elimination of tariffs
- Rules to manage non-tariff barriers
- Cooperation on customs, trade facilitation and transit
- Enhanced cooperation on technical barriers to trade and sanitary and phyto -sanitary measures
- Legal certainty and predictability of market access
- Legal framework for the resolution of trade disputes
- Stimulate Africa's industrial development and employment

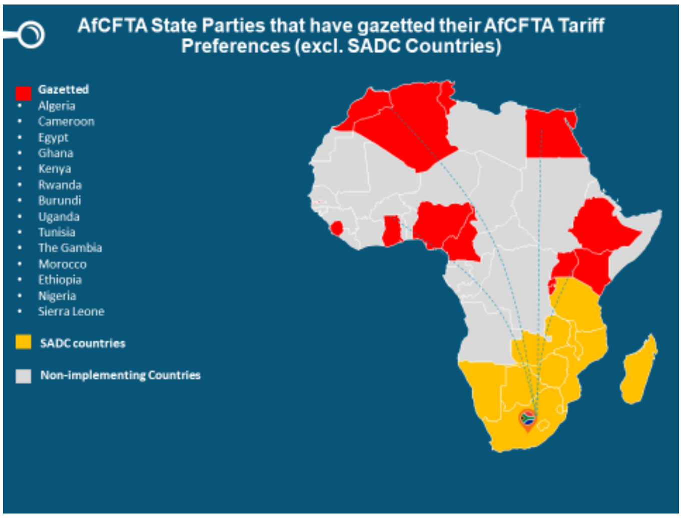
The successful implementation of AfCFTA is expected to lead to:

- the diversification of exports
- increased productive capacity,
- increased entrepreneurial opportunities,
- acceleration of growth,
- increased investment,
- increase technology transfer,
- increased employment opportunities and incomes,
- broadening economic inclusion.

While some of the benefits of the AfCFTA would be derived from reduced tariffs, the biggest gains are expected from lowering trade costs by reducing non-tariff barriers and improving hard and soft infrastructure at the borders (trade facilitation measures).

To date, 54 of the 55 AU members have signed (except Eritrea), and 50[1] of these Members have ratified the Agreement Establishing the AfCFTA. 4 countries, namely Benin, Libya, South Sudan and Sudan are yet to ratify the Agreement.

Status of AfCFTA Negotiations and Implementation



- **Tariff Offers Verified:** 48 offers have been approved by the Secretariat.
- **Active Implementation:** 25 countries have started preferential trade on 90% coverage of tariff books.
- **Market Note:** South Africa's new market access focuses on **14 non-SADC countries**, as trade with SADC partners continues under existing protocols.
- **Outstanding:** Finalisation of negotiations on remaining 10% coverage of tariff books

South Africa in Action: Trade Performance

South Africa gazetted the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) on **26 January 2024** and officially launched preferential trade on 31 January 2024.

Trade Balance (Jan 2024 – Dec 2025)

- **Total Exports: R2.3 billion**
  - *Products:* Mining equipment, appliances, food, plastics, and electrical machinery.
  - *Top Destinations:* Ghana, Kenya, Egypt, Rwanda, and Morocco.
- **Total Imports: R1.8 billion**
  - *Products:* Coffee, tea, cocoa, edible fruit, and articles of iron/steel.
  - *Top Sources:* Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kenya, and Burundi.

1 South Africa deposited its instrument of ratification in February 2019.

Trade in Services

- **50 Member States** have submitted initial offers in priority sectors: Financial, Communications, Transport, Tourism, and Business.
- **25 adopted schedules**, only 5 EAC State Parties namely: Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania gazetted their adopted Schedules of Specific Commitments in the five priority sectors.
- **South Africa Update:** Our draft schedule of commitments was verified in 2025 and awaits final Council approval in 2026 for adoption by the African Union Summit.
- The implementation of these commitments provides improved business conditions and opportunities for South African services exporters. These commitments remove and reduce barriers to South African services entry and improves how they are treated in those domestic markets.
- **Going forward:** finalisation of regulatory frameworks and negotiation of additional services sectors

Protocol Updates: "Phase II"

The AfCFTA is more than just goods; it covers the entire modern economic land-scape. Each of the Phase II Protocols **requires the ratification of 22 State Parties for entry into force.**

1. **Women and Youth in Trade**
   - The Protocol was adopted in Feb 2024.
   - **Goal:** Enhance participation and formalize trade activities for women and young entrepreneurs.
   - **Ministerial Regulation on Preferential Market Access** to be adopted.
   - South Africa has concluded domestic process of ratification and will deposit instrument of ratification as soon as possible.

2. **Digital Trade**
   - The Protocol was adopted in Feb 2024.
   - **Goal:** rules and common principles and standards that enable and support digital trade for sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development. Fosters digital transformation and intra-African digital trade by eliminating barriers to digital trade among State Parties.
   - **Annexes Finalized and Adopted (Feb 2025):** Includes Rules of Origin, Digital Identities, Cross Border Digital Payments, Cross Border Data Transfers, Legitimate and Legal Public Interest Reasons for Requesting Source Code, Online Safety and Security, Emerging and Advanced Technologies, Financial Technology

3. **Intellectual Property (IPR)**
   - The Protocol was adopted in February 2023
   - **Goal:** establish rules and principles for the promotion, protection, cooperation, and enforcement of Intellectual Property Rights by promoting African innovation and creativity and deepen intellectual property culture in Africa.
   - **Annexes Adopted (Feb 2026):** New Plant Variety Protection, Geographical Indications, Marks, Copyright and Related Rights, Patents, Utility Models, Industrial Designs, Traditional Knowledge, Traditional Cultural Expressions and Genetic Resources

4. **Investment**
   - The Protocol was adopted in February 2023
   - **Goal:** Seeks to foster coherence and consistency with respect to the rules and principles that govern the promotion and facilitation of investment on the African continent; and to attract great investment flows to the continent and facilitate intra-African cross-border investment.
   - **Outstanding:** Annex on the Rules and Procedures for the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Disputes.

5. **Competition**
   - The Protocol was adopted in February 2023
   - **Goal:** preventing anti-competitive practices, providing a framework for addressing market concentration, abuse of power, and other competition-related issues.
   - **Outstanding:** finalisation of supporting regulations.

What Exporters should know…

- Beyond SADC, new market access opportunities are in the following implementing countries:
  - Ghana
  - Nigeria
  - Sierra Leone
  - The Gambia
  - Ethiopia
  - Cameroon
  - Tunisia
  - Algeria
  - Egypt
  - Morocco
  - Kenya
  - Rwanda
  - Uganda
  - Burundi
- As other countries gazette/ implement, they will be added to the list of countries for preferential trade with South Africa, resulting in expanded market access.
- Please do not use the incorrect Certificate of Origin for exports under the AfCFTA or your product will not be treated preferentially.

You should contact SARS to obtain a Certificate of Origin for preferential trade under the AfCFTA. The SARS email address is rulesoforigin@sars.gov.za

1. Would South Africa be able to trade with SACU and SADC countries under the AfCFTA?

No. The AfCFTA builds on the existing regional economic integration achieved at the level of Regional Economic Communities. South Africa will, therefore, not trade preferentially with SACU and SADC Member States under the AfCFTA. South Africa, as member of SACU, will continue to trade with SADC Member States that are party to the SADC Trade Protocol under this preferential SADC arrangement.

2. How is tariff liberalization implemented?

Tariff liberalization under the AfCFTA is effective from 1 January 2021 and will be undertaken through the progressive elimination of duties in equal installments, as follows:

- 90% coverage of tariff book (Category A) over a period of between 5 and 10 years.
- 7% coverage of tariff book (Category B – sensitive products) over a period of between 10-13 years.
- 3% coverage of tariff book (Category C – excluded products) – exempt from tariff liberalization

By 2035, it is expected that 97% of tariffs would be a zero duty.

3. Is South Africa able to trade with all African countries under the AfCFTA?

At this stage, South Africa will be able to trade preferentially only with member states that have started implemented AfCFTA preferential trade. This means that they must have ratified the Agreement and gazetted their Tariff Schedules. As of March 2026, only 25 countries, including SACU, have gazette their Tariff Schedules. More countries are expected to gazette or domesticate their tariff schedules and start trading with South Africa over the coming months.

Trade with SADC will continue to take place under the respective SACU Agreement and the SADC Trade Protocols not under the AfCFTA.

4. What is the difference between the Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions and the Final Schedules of Tariff Concessions?

The Provisional Schedule of Tariff Concessions cover 90% of the tariff books (Category A) and provides for the commencement of preferential trade until the negotiations of the remaining 7% and 3% have been finalized. The final schedules of tariff concessions will be appended to the Agreement once all 3 Categories have been finalised and approved by the African Union Heads of State and Government.

5. What is the starting date for the implementation of tariff reductions?

Preferential trade under the AfCFTA commenced on 1 January 2021, as agreed by the African Union Heads of State on products with agreed Rules of Origin and subject to the adoption and gazetting/ domestication of tariff schedules. This means that tariff duties must be reduced from the baseline of 1 January 2021.

6. Where can I confirm if my product can be exported under the AfCFTA preferences and what the current duty is?

The adopted Tariff Schedules can be accessed on the AfCFTA e-tariff book https://etariff.au-afcfta.org. Alternatovelu, you can contact **the dtic** at AfCFTA@thedtic.gov.za

7. What are Rules of Origin?

Rules of Origin are the criteria that are used to define where a product was made. The origin of a product is important because it will determine how it is treated at the border of an importing country and the origin may impact on the import duty payable by the country. Where Africa has capacity to produce sufficient quantities of a product, e.g. raw sugar, we negotiate for a wholly obtained rule. This means that for a product to enjoy

preferential treatment, it must be completely produced or sourced in Africa. Where Africa does not have sufficient supply or the capacity to produce a product, rules that allow for a percentage of products or inputs from outside the continent are considered and allowed.

8. What is the Certificate of Origin?

A Certificate of Origin is a document used in international trade to identify a product's country of origin. The Certificate of Origin will also detail the product's specifications and the identities of the exporter and importer. The Certificate of Origin is used for customs purposes, especially when a tariff or other import duty is required.

9. Are the Phase II Protocols being implemented?

No, not yet. The Phase II Protocols on Investment, Competition Policy, Intellectual Property Rights, Digital Trade and Women and Youth in Trade form an integral part of the Agreement. Since these Protocols were negotiated after the Agreement entered into force in May 2019, they will need to be individual ratified by a minimum number of 22 Member States before entry into force.

10. Where can I register a Non-Tariff Barrier (NTBs)?

The Protocol on Trade in Goods provides for a mechanism for the identification, categorization and progressive elimination of NTBs within the AfCFTA. Any economic operator (i.e. the beneficiaries of NTB resolution which are the Private Sector, especially SMEs in the context of Africa) may register a complaint.

The ACFTA NTBs Online Reporting Mechanism has been established already. The AfCFTA NTB online tool can be accessed on the following link: https://tradebarriers.africa.

However, companies are encouraged to liaise with **the dtic** to assist in the resolution of any NTB with the relevant Member State.

Useful Links & Contact Information

- The AfCFTA official website: https://au-afcfta.org/
- AfCFTA e-Tariff Book & Rules of Origin https://etariff.au-afcfta.org
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- AfCFTA Hub: https://hub.au-afcfta.org/
- AfCFTA Non-Tariff Barrier (NTB) Online Mechanism https://www.tradebarriers.africa
- Weblink for the Publication notifying South Africa’s commencement of trading under the AfCFTA: Notice R.4287; https://www.sars.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/Embargo/Tariffs/2024/Legal-LSec-CE-TA-2024-16-Notice-R4287-G-50045-Sch-1-1-1892-Substitution-General-Note-O-to-implement-the-AfCFTA-Agreement-26-January-2024.pdf

For queries contact

AfCFTA@thedtic.gov.za

the dtic Campus

77 Meintjies Street

Sunnyside

Pretoria

0002

the dtic

Private Bag X84

Pretoria

0001

the dtic Customer Contact Centre: 0861 843 384

Website: www.thedtic.gov.za

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