



Recalibrating EU-Africa Agricultural Trade Relations amidst Emerging EU Sustainability Measures and Global Trade Tensions

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) remains Africa's largest trading partner, with agricultural trade constituting a central pillar of this relationship. In 2024, total EU-Africa trade in goods reached approximately €355 billion, underscoring the scale and economic significance of interdependence between the two regions. African exports to the EU are dominated by agricultural and primary commodities such as cocoa, coffee, tea, tropical fruits, nuts, and horticultural products, while EU exports to Africa largely consist of manufactured goods, processed foods, machinery, fertilizers, and agrochemicals. Despite decades of preferential market access and development cooperation, EU-Africa agricultural trade relations remain structurally asymmetrical and developmentally misaligned.

These asymmetries are rooted in colonial and post-colonial trade structures that positioned Africa primarily as a supplier of raw agricultural commodities to European markets, while value-added activities were concentrated outside the continent. Although limited diversification has occurred over time - particularly in horticulture and a small number of semi-processed products - Africa's agricultural export profile remains overwhelmingly commodity-based. Export opportunities therefore continue to be constrained by persistent structural challenges, including limited productive capacity, weak agro-industrial development, restrictive trade rules, and fragmented regional markets.

Post-colonial trade frameworks, from the Lomé Conventions to the Cotonou Partnership Agreement and subsequent Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), expanded market access for African exports but did not fundamentally alter these inherited structures. While EPAs are designed to be WTO-consistent and provide duty-free, quota-free access to EU markets, they also require extensive tariff liberalization by African countries. This has raised concerns about policy-space erosion, exposure

of domestic producers to subsidized EU competition, and the weakening of regional integration efforts and regional value-chain development.

More recently, EU-Africa agricultural trade relations have entered a new phase shaped by the EU's expanding sustainability and climate-related regulatory agenda under the European Green Deal. Measures such as deforestation-free supply-chain requirements, carbon border instruments, and mandatory corporate due-diligence obligations are increasingly embedded in trade governance. While these measures seek to promote environmental sustainability and human rights, they also raise concerns about compliance costs, market-access constraints, and the distribution of adjustment burdens. In practice, they risk shifting the costs of sustainability compliance onto African producers - many of whom are smallholders with limited institutional, financial, and technical capacity - thereby raising questions about equity, common but differentiated responsibilities, and the development consistency of unilateral sustainability measures.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the evolving dynamics of EU-Africa agricultural trade at the intersection of historical trade structures, contemporary liberalization frameworks, and emerging sustainability measures. It pursues three interrelated objectives. First, it examines how historical trade arrangements and post-colonial policy frameworks have shaped persistent structural asymmetries in EU-Africa agricultural trade relations. Second, it analyzes the implications of new EU sustainability measures for Africa's agricultural trade prospects, with particular attention to compliance asymmetries and market-access constraints. Third, it identifies policy pathways for recalibrating EU-Africa agricultural trade relations toward a more transformative, mutually beneficial, and development-centered partnership.



Chapter One:

Structural Challenges in EU-Africa Historical Trade Relations

1.1 Structural Asymmetries and Colonial Trade Legacies

EU-Africa agricultural trade relations are deeply embedded in historical and institutional legacies originating in the colonial period and extending into the post-independence era. During colonial rule, African economies were integrated into global markets primarily as suppliers of raw agricultural commodities, while processing, manufacturing, and higher value-added activities were concentrated in Europe. These production and trade patterns established structural asymmetries that persisted well beyond political independence.

In the post-independence period, successive trade arrangements expanded market access for African exports but largely reproduced inherited structures of production and exchange. African economies continued to export predominantly raw or minimally processed agricultural products, while European firms retained control over downstream segments of agricultural value chains. As a result, Africa's participation in EU-oriented agricultural trade has remained concentrated in low-value segments, reinforcing vulnerability to price volatility, external demand shocks, and limited domestic value addition.

These asymmetries are particularly visible in value chains such as cocoa, coffee, and tea, where African producers supply a substantial share of global output, yet processing, branding, certification, and retailing remain overwhelmingly concentrated outside the continent. Despite expanded access to European markets, this structural configuration has constrained agro-industrial transformation, limited employment creation along value chains, and reinforced commodity dependence across African agricultural sectors.

1.2 Preferential Trade Regimes: Market Access without Transformation

Post-colonial trade frameworks, notably the Yaoundé Conventions (1963-1975) and the Lomé Conventions (1975-2000), institutionalized preferential access for African agricultural exports to European markets through non-reciprocal trade arrangements. These regimes were framed as development-oriented partnerships and introduced compensatory mechanisms to stabilize export

earnings from agricultural and mineral commodities.

While preferential access expanded export volumes and reduced short-term exposure to market volatility, it did not fundamentally alter Africa's position within global agricultural value chains. Preferential trade regimes were not accompanied by sufficient measures to address supply-side constraints, tariff escalation, or the concentration of value-added activities outside Africa. Processing, branding, and downstream activities therefore remained overwhelmingly located in European markets, reinforcing commodity dependence and limiting prospects for diversification and industrial upgrading.

The Cotonou Partnership Agreement (2000-2023) largely maintained this trajectory. Although framed in the language of partnership and development, it continued to prioritize market access over structural transformation. As a result, preferential trade arrangements preserved colonial-era trade patterns under a development narrative, positioning Africa primarily as a supplier of raw agricultural commodities to European industries.

1.3 Economic Partnership Agreements and Policy-Space Constraints

The introduction of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) marked a decisive shift toward reciprocal, WTO-compatible trade relations between the EU and African countries. Under EPAs, African states commit to liberalizing a substantial share of tariff lines over time in exchange for duty-free, quota-free access to EU markets. While this framework provides legal certainty for market access, it has also generated significant concerns regarding policy space for industrialization and agricultural development.

Across African regions, EPA negotiations and implementation have raised common challenges, including exposure to subsidized EU agricultural products, restrictions on the use of export taxes and safeguards, and limitations on infant-industry protection. These constraints affect not only domestic agricultural producers but also broader agro-industrial development strategies and fiscal space. The asymmetry between African and EU productive capacities, institutional strength, and access to subsidies has further intensified concerns regarding uneven adjustment costs.

At the regional level, differentiated signing and implementation patterns across regional economic communities - including the East African Community (EAC), ECOWAS, SADC, and Eastern and Southern Africa

- have complicated customs-union cohesion and regional policy coordination. In several cases, bilateral or interim EPA arrangements have weakened collective negotiating positions and undermined efforts to develop regional value chains.

These dynamics sit uneasily alongside Africa's continental integration agenda under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). While the AfCFTA seeks to promote intra-African trade, industrialization, and regional value-chain development, EPAs risk locking African economies into externally oriented, low-value trade patterns and constraining the policy flexibility required to achieve AfCFTA objectives. Taken together, these tensions highlight the limitations of liberalization-centered trade frameworks in addressing Africa's long-standing development and structural transformation challenges.



Chapter Two:

New EU Sustainability Measures and Emerging Trade Challenges

2.1 EU Sustainability Measures and their Objectives

EU-Africa agricultural trade is increasingly shaped by a new generation of sustainability and climate-related regulatory measures introduced under the European Green Deal. These measures extend environmental protection, climate mitigation, and human-rights objectives into trade governance and global supply-chain regulation, thereby reshaping the conditions under which agricultural products access the EU market.

Among the most consequential instruments affecting African agricultural exports are the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). Collectively, these measures seek to promote deforestation-free supply chains, reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, strengthen corporate accountability, and align trade with the EU's climate-neutrality and sustainability objectives.

Operationally, these instruments introduce new requirements related to traceability, geolocation, environmental reporting, carbon accounting, and mandatory due-diligence processes across global value chains. In principle, these objectives are consistent with broader international commitments to sustainable development, environmental protection, and responsible business conduct. At the same time, their extension into trade governance represents a significant shift in how sustainability standards are embedded in market-access conditions for external trading partners.

2.2 Implications for Africa: Compliance Asymmetries and Market Access Constraints

While EU sustainability measures pursue legitimate environmental and social objectives, they raise significant concerns regarding equity, feasibility, and development impacts for African agricultural exporters. Many of these measures extend beyond existing multilateral trade commitments and can be characterized as “WTO-plus” requirements, as they impose regulatory obligations that have not been universally agreed upon within the World Trade Organization framework.

Compliance with these emerging sustainability measures entails substantial costs related to traceability systems, geolocation technologies, certification, carbon accounting, and corporate due-diligence procedures. Available estimates suggest that compliance costs may amount to approximately 8-12 percent of the free-on-board value for African exporters, compared to around 2-3 percent for producers in developed economies. These disparities reflect differences in scale, institutional capacity, and access to finance and are particularly pronounced in smallholder-dominated sectors such as cocoa and coffee.

In the absence of predictable technical assistance, simplified compliance procedures, and inclusive implementation frameworks, these requirements risk excluding smallholders and small enterprises from EU markets. There is also a growing risk that stringent regulatory demands may accelerate consolidation toward large plantations and vertically integrated estates, where compliance is easier to achieve. Such outcomes would undermine smallholder livelihoods, gender equity, and broader rural development objectives.

From a development perspective, these dynamics raise concerns about consistency with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. While international frameworks - including the Sustainable Development Goals and successive WTO Ministerial Declarations - emphasize enhanced market access and special treatment for least developed countries, complex regulatory requirements may restrict access for precisely those countries with the least capacity to comply. Without adequate transition periods, cost-sharing mechanisms, and institutional support, EU sustainability measures risk reinforcing existing trade asymmetries and shifting the burden of climate and sustainability adjustment onto African producers who have contributed least to global environmental degradation.

Chapter Three:

Policy Proposals for Transformative, Mutually Beneficial, and Equitable EU-Africa Agricultural Trade Relations

3.1 Recalibrating the EU-Africa Trade Architecture

Transformative EU-Africa agricultural trade relations cannot be achieved within inherited trade structures that prioritize tariff liberalization while neglecting underlying structural asymmetries. A recalibration of the trade architecture is therefore required, moving away from fragmented Economic Partnership Agreements toward a more coherent continent-to-continent framework anchored in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

While EPAs were designed to be WTO-compliant and to secure market access to EU markets, their liberalization commitments have constrained policy space for industrialization, limited the use of export taxes and safeguards, and weakened regional integration efforts. In contrast, the AfCFTA provides a strategic platform for promoting intra-African trade, regional value chains, and agro-industrial development. Aligning EU-Africa trade relations with AfCFTA objectives would reduce fragmentation, strengthen regional coherence, and support Africa's long-term structural transformation agenda.

A reconfigured trade architecture should therefore prioritize reviewing, suspending, or amending EPA provisions that restrict development-oriented policy instruments. EU engagement with Africa should increasingly reference AfCFTA tariff schedules, rules of origin, and integration priorities rather than relying on bilateral or sub-regional EPA frameworks. Establishing dedicated AU-EU mechanisms to ensure coherence between existing trade arrangements and AfCFTA objectives would further enhance policy alignment and mutual accountability.

3.2 Market Access, Sustainability, and Regulatory Coherence

Unconditional duty-free, quota-free market access remains a cornerstone of equitable EU-Africa agricultural trade relations. However, market access cannot be meaningfully sustained if it is undermined by complex regulatory requirements that function as de facto barriers

to trade. Sustainability measures affecting African agricultural exports must therefore be implemented in a manner consistent with development commitments and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities.

Regulatory coherence requires that EU sustainability measures be accompanied by predictable transition periods, legally anchored technical and financial assistance, and simplified compliance procedures tailored to smallholder-based production systems. Without such measures, sustainability requirements risk privileging large-scale producers and exporters with greater compliance capacity, while excluding smallholders and small enterprises from EU markets.

Sustainability governance must also address regulatory inconsistencies. While African producers face increasingly stringent requirements related to pesticide use, traceability, and environmental compliance, the EU continues to export fertilizers, pesticides, and agrochemicals - including substances banned within the EU - to African markets. This reflects both weaknesses in domestic regulatory capacity across parts of Africa and the EU's offensive trade interests. Addressing these asymmetries is essential to ensuring that sustainability measures serve environmental and developmental objectives rather than functioning primarily as instruments of trade protection.

3.3 Ensuring a Just and Inclusive Green Transition

A credible green transition in EU-Africa agricultural trade requires a shift from unilateral regulatory imposition toward co-designed sustainability governance. Sustainability objectives are more likely to be effective and legitimate when developed collaboratively with African governments, regional institutions, producer organizations, women's groups, and civil society actors.

Such an approach should include sustained support for agro-processing and value addition in sectors such as cocoa, coffee, fruits, and food products, enabling African producers to move up value chains rather than remain locked into low-value commodity exports. Acceptance of higher consumer prices within the EU to support living incomes, decent work, and sustainable production practices in Africa constitutes an integral component of this transition.

Institutionalized participation by African stakeholders in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of sustainability-related trade measures would further enhance

transparency, legitimacy, and long-term effectiveness. Without such participation, sustainability measures risk reproducing earlier asymmetries associated with trade liberalization under EPAs and weakening trust in EU-Africa partnership narratives.

3.4 Addressing CAP Distortions and Agricultural Dumping

The effectiveness of sustainability-oriented trade reforms is further constrained by persistent distortions arising from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. Despite increasingly stringent environmental and sustainability requirements imposed on external suppliers, EU agricultural exports supported by domestic subsidies continue to enter African markets, generating competitive pressures for local producers and complicating food-security and food-sovereignty objectives.

Policy coherence for development therefore requires systematic assessment of the external impacts of CAP reforms on African agricultural markets. Enhancing transparency regarding export subsidies, addressing dumping practices, and establishing structured EU-Africa monitoring mechanisms would contribute to a more balanced and development-consistent trade relationship.

3.5 Investing in Productive Capacity and Democratic Trade Governance

EU-Africa cooperation should prioritize agricultural and rural transformation, including infrastructure development, access to finance, technology transfer, and skills development, rather than focusing narrowly on market access or regulatory alignment in isolation. Trade reform alone is insufficient without sustained investment in productive capacity and institutional strengthening.

A recalibrated EU-Africa agricultural trade relationship therefore requires more than expanded market access or sustainability conditionalities. Without addressing the interaction between liberalization frameworks, sustainability governance, and entrenched structural asymmetries, trade reforms risk reproducing earlier development failures under a new regulatory guise. Anchoring EU-Africa trade relations in equity, policy coherence, and shared responsibility remains essential to advancing a genuinely inclusive and transformative partnership.

4. Conclusion

EU-Africa agricultural trade relations continue to reflect structural asymmetries shaped by colonial legacies and reinforced through successive post-colonial trade frameworks. While preferential access and liberalization have expanded trade volumes, they have not delivered the structural transformation, value addition, or policy space required to support inclusive agro-industrial development across Africa. These limitations form the critical backdrop against which contemporary trade dynamics must be understood.

The emergence of EU sustainability and climate-related measures under the European Green Deal introduces a new layer of complexity into this relationship. Although these measures pursue legitimate environmental and social objectives, their unilateral design and uneven compliance burdens risk reproducing existing asymmetries under a sustainability-oriented framework. Without adequate attention to common but differentiated responsibilities, regulatory coherence, and development capacity, sustainability governance may constrain rather than enable Africa's participation in agricultural trade.

Recalibrating EU-Africa agricultural trade therefore requires a coherent approach that aligns market access, sustainability objectives, and development priorities. Anchoring trade relations in the AfCFTA, addressing regulatory and policy inconsistencies, and investing in productive capacity and inclusive governance are central to advancing a more balanced and mutually beneficial partnership. Such an approach offers a pathway toward aligning trade with sustainability in a manner that supports long-term structural transformation rather than reinforcing historical inequities.

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