Strengthening Africa in World Trade

ASSESSING INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS AND FRAMEWORKS FOR PROMOTING MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE EU-AFRICA AGRICULTURAL TRADE RELATIONS.

Analytical Paper, 2026

Contents

Executive Summary

This paper assesses the effectiveness of existing institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks in shaping EU–Africa agricultural trade relations, with particular attention to equity, inclusion, and the distribution of benefits across different actors within African economies. While agriculture remains central to livelihoods, food security, and rural transformation across the continent, prevailing trade arrangements continue to yield uneven outcomes, often favoring large-scale exporters and external actors over smallholders, women, and youth.

The analysis situates current trade relations within a broader landscape of asymmetrical rule-making and institutional influence, where key frameworks governing trade including Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), the Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA), and wider EU–Africa cooperation platforms have not consistently translated into transformative outcomes for African agricultural systems. Despite their stated commitments to partnership and development, these mechanisms frequently operate within structural constraints that limit policy space, restrict value addition, and reinforce primary commodity dependence.

Continental and regional institutional efforts, particularly through the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) present important opportunities to recalibrate trade relations and strengthen intra-African coordination. However, the extent to which these frameworks effectively interface with EU trade regimes remains uneven, with gaps in policy coherence, implementation capacity, and stakeholder representation.

Drawing on a desk-based review of policy documents and targeted expert consultations, the study evaluates institutional performance across three core dimensions: responsiveness to African priorities, equity in participation and outcomes, and effectiveness in delivering sustainable and inclusive agricultural trade. The findings indicate that, while institutional frameworks are formally established, their operationalization often falls short in addressing entrenched inequalities, particularly in relation to small-scale producers and marginalized groups.

The paper identifies key challenges, including limited influence in trade negotiations, misalignment between continental and external policy frameworks, and persistent barriers such as subsidies, tariffs, and non-tariff measures that distort agricultural trade. Additionally, capacity constraints and limited access to information continue to hinder meaningful participation by stakeholders in trade-related decision-making processes.

In response, the paper proposes a set of actionable recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional effectiveness and ensuring more balanced outcomes. These include enhancing representation and negotiating capacity within EU–Africa platforms, improving policy coherence between AU, REC, and EU frameworks, and embedding equity considerations more systematically into trade agreements. Particular emphasis is placed on mechanisms that expand opportunities for smallholders, women, and youth, as well as on strengthening accountability and transparency within trade governance structures.

By focusing on the interface between institutional design and practical outcomes, this paper contributes to ongoing policy discussions on how trade relations can better support structural transformation, rural development, and sustainable livelihoods.

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1. Introduction

Agricultural trade between Africa and the European Union (EU) remains a critical component of the continent's engagement with the global economy. Given the centrality of agriculture to livelihoods, employment, and food systems across Africa, the nature and structure of these trade relations have significant implications for economic transformation, rural development, and social inclusion (FAO, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

Over time, a range of institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks have been established to govern EU–Africa trade relations, including trade and trade-related agreements, dialogue platforms, and development cooperation initiatives. These mechanisms are intended to facilitate mutually beneficial exchange, support agricultural development, and enhance participation by African stakeholders. However, the effectiveness of the above mechanisms in delivering their intended objectives remains uneven, with persistent concerns related to limited value addition, constrained policy space, and unequal participation in decision-making processes (UNCTAD, 2022; UNECA, 2021).

From the African side, institutions and regional frameworks have been created to strengthen coordination and articulate more integrated approaches to trade and agricultural development. Efforts by the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and the AfCFTA reflect growing emphasis on intra-African trade, value chain development, and structural transformation (African Union, 2020; UNECA, 2021). Yet, the interaction between these initiatives and external trade arrangements continues to present both opportunities and challenges.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the institutional mechanisms and frameworks shaping EU–Africa agricultural trade relations, with a focus on their responsiveness to African priorities, their inclusiveness, and their capacity to deliver equitable and sustainable outcomes. By analyzing both external and African-led institutional arrangements, the analysis seeks to identify key gaps, challenges, and opportunities for reform. It further aims to generate actionable recommendations that can support more balanced and development-oriented trade relations.

1.1 Background and Context

Within this context, agriculture remains a central pillar of economic activity, employment, and livelihoods across Africa, accounting for a significant share of GDP and sustaining the majority of rural populations. In many countries, the sector is closely linked to food security, poverty reduction, and broader processes of structural transformation (FAO, 2021; World Bank, 2023). However, despite its importance, agricultural systems across the continent continue to face persistent challenges, including low productivity, limited value addition, vulnerability to external shocks, and constrained access to regional and international markets (UNCTAD, 2022). The above challenges are compounded by high levels of dependence on imported inputs and the continued use of illegal, banned, or hazardous chemicals, including substances such as weed killers that are prohibited in Europe but may still be sold in African countries (Atieno et al., 2025). Moreover, the effects of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which promoted liberalization while reducing public investments, also hindered investment in critical sectors such as health and education, leading to poor service delivery. The poor performance of health and education services across African countries due to SAPs significantly undermined farmers' ability to increase production and productivity, further exposing them to greater vulnerabilities.

Despite the challenges, African countries have vast opportunities to harness for agricultural transformation. With vast arable land, increasing population and access to new technologies, African countries can realise structural transformation by expanding agricultural trade with partners both within the continent and with third parties (Signé, 2026). The EU remains one of Africa's largest trading partners, particularly in agricultural commodities exported from Africa and processed food products largely imported from Europe (European Commission, 2023).

1.2 Scope of the Paper

This analysis focuses on institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks shaping agricultural trade relations between African countries and the European Union (EU). The geographical scope includes African countries engaged in agricultural trade with the EU, with particular emphasis on Uganda as a case study to illustrate how institutional dynamics translate into national-level outcomes. The sectoral scope encompasses agricultural trade broadly defined, including crops, livestock, processed food products, and agro-industrial goods. The analysis focuses on value chains relevant to EU–Africa trade, as well as opportunities for diversification and value addition.

The paper examines institutional mechanisms across multiple levels, including EU–Africa frameworks such as EPAs and the JPA, continental and regional institutions such as the African Union (AU), RECs, and AfCFTA, as well as complementary initiatives such as development programs, public–private partnerships, and technical assistance mechanisms.

Methodologically, the study relies primarily on a desk-based review of policy documents, agreements, and institutional reports, complemented by targeted expert consultations. It prioritizes an assessment of institutional effectiveness in relation to how they promote agricultural transformation in an equitable way, how inclusive they are, especially for small-scale farmers, women and youth, and how they facilitate sustainable agricultural practices rather than a comprehensive quantitative analysis of trade flows. While the study provides a broad overview of institutional dynamics, it focuses on key mechanisms and issues most relevant to understanding how trade frameworks shape participation, distributional outcomes, and development trajectories. The Uganda case study is used to ground the analysis while drawing insights applicable to other African contexts.

2. Mapping Existing Institutional Mechanisms

Understanding the outcomes of EU–Africa agricultural trade relations require a systematic examination of the institutional mechanisms through which these relations are structured, negotiated, and implemented. These mechanisms operate across multiple levels bilateral, interregional, continental, and multilateral and collectively shape the rules, incentives, and constraints that influence trade outcomes, participation, and the distribution of benefits.

This section maps the key institutional frameworks governing EU–Africa agricultural trade, focusing on both EU–Africa interface mechanisms and African-led institutional arrangements, as well as complementary engagement channels. The analysis goes beyond descriptive mapping to assess how these mechanisms function in practice, the extent to which they reflect development priorities, and the structural factors that affect their effectiveness in delivering equitable and inclusive outcomes. In doing so, the section provides the analytical foundation for identifying key challenges and informing policy recommendations in subsequent sections.

2.1 EU–Africa Institutional Mechanisms

Institutional arrangements at the EU–Africa interface play a central role in shaping agricultural trade relations, particularly in defining market access conditions, regulatory frameworks, and development cooperation priorities. While these mechanisms are formally grounded in principles of partnership and mutual benefit, their operational dynamics often reveal asymmetries in influence, agenda-setting, and outcomes.

One of the key platforms for engagement is the Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA), which brings together representatives from the European Parliament and African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries. The JPA is intended to facilitate dialogue, enhancFoe mutual understanding, and provide parliamentary oversight of EU–ACP relations. In principle, it offers a space for African representatives to raise concerns related to trade and agricultural development. The first JPA plenary session in Eswatini provides an opportunity for African stakeholders, including women and youth, to engage in the process (EU, 2026). However, its role remains largely consultative, with limited influence over binding trade decisions, which are primarily undertaken with limited participation of African representatives. This constrains its effectiveness as a mechanism for advancing African priorities within trade governance.

EPAs constitute the principal legal framework governing trade relations between the EU and African regions. Designed to promote trade liberalization alongside development objectives, EPAs provide preferential access to EU markets while requiring varying degrees of reciprocal market opening. Although these agreements have facilitated export opportunities in certain sectors, they have also raised concerns regarding their implications for domestic agricultural systems. In particular, the exposure of local producers to increased competition from subsidized European producers, combined with restrictions on the use of tariffs and other policy instruments, has implications for policy space and long-term structural transformation (UNECA, 2021; UNCTAD, 2022). For instance, the EAC EU EPAs reduce import duties on milk concentrates from 10 percent to 0 percent over 25 years, while maintaining a 60 percent duty on milk and cream as part of the sensitive products. The EU dairy farmers, with high subsidies, will therefore compete with African farmers, whose governments lack the funds to offer such subsidies. For EU exports, even though EU exports of agricultural products like onions and potatoes to countries like Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire do not cause significant structural negative effects on local prices (Dekeyser et al., 2026), the long-term implications of increasing such exports hinder the prospects for developing domestic capacity in agriculture, a sector on which a majority of people in African countries largely rely for their livelihoods. Besides, the development cooperation under the agreement does not provide additional support to the level required to transform the African agricultural sector. Further, development cooperation through budget support, as evidenced by SAPs, has been claimed to be a strategic use of aid to promote extensive liberalization that, in most cases, undermines farmers' livelihoods (Langan, 2015;(Hickel et al., 2026).

Beyond formal agreements, EU–Africa trade relations are supported by a range of development cooperation programs and policy dialogue platforms aimed at strengthening agricultural value chains, improving standards compliance, and enhancing export capacity. These initiatives provide important technical and financial support; however, they are often oriented toward facilitating integration into EU markets rather than prioritizing domestic or regional value addition. As a result, their contribution to broader development objectives can be uneven, particularly where local institutional capacities are limited or where support is not aligned with national and regional priorities (OECD, 2020).

A recurring feature across these mechanisms is the unequal distribution of negotiating capacity and institutional influence. African countries often face constraints related to technical expertise, coordination, and access to timely information, which can limit their ability to effectively shape trade outcomes (UNCTAD, 2022). Consequently, institutional arrangements that are formally framed as partnerships may, in practice, reproduce existing structural asymmetries, with implications for inclusiveness, policy autonomy, and the distribution of benefits within agricultural trade.

2.2 African Institutional Mechanisms

African-led institutional frameworks play an increasingly important role in shaping the continent's approach to agricultural trade, reflecting efforts to strengthen regional integration, enhance policy coordination, and promote structural transformation. These mechanisms are central to advancing collective priorities, including value addition, food security, and the development of resilient agricultural systems. The effectiveness of these mechanisms is shaped by varying levels of institutional capacity, policy coherence, and implementation across countries and regions.

At the continental level, the AU provides a strategic platform for articulating shared priorities in agriculture and trade. Through policy frameworks and continental strategies, the AU has sought to promote agricultural transformation, intra-African trade, and coordinated engagement with external partners. Initiatives aligned with the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) and broader Agenda 2063 objectives reflect an emphasis on enhancing agricultural productivity, value addition, and inclusive growth. However, translating these continental commitments into effective implementation at national and regional levels remains a persistent challenge. There are challenges associated with capacity in terms of finances and extension support, fragmentation, and varying national interests (African Union, 2020; UNECA, 2021).

Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), serve as key mechanisms for promoting agriculture through trade and as intermediaries in operationalizing trade and agricultural policies. These regional bodies play a critical role in facilitating trade integration, harmonizing standards, and supporting cross-border value chains. In some cases, RECs have made progress in reducing trade barriers and promoting regional agricultural markets. However, despite efforts at integration, challenges such as overlapping memberships, differing regulatory regimes, and uneven implementation continue to limit their effectiveness. These challenges can complicate coordination with external trade frameworks, including those established with the EU, thereby affecting the coherence of trade policies across different governance levels (UNECA, 2021). For instance, the application of a common external tariff remains challenging due to multiple memberships across different RECs, while within the RECs, countries persistently request exemptions because of differing national interests.

The AfCFTA represents a significant step toward consolidating continental trade integration and expanding opportunities for agricultural development. By creating a unified market for goods and services, AfCFTA has the potential to enhance intra-African trade, support value chain development, and reduce dependence on external markets. For the agricultural sector, this includes opportunities to diversify production, strengthen regional supply chains, and increase value addition. However, the realization of these benefits depends on effective implementation, including the development of supporting infrastructure, harmonization of standards, and alignment of national policies. Moreover, the AfCFTA also presents challenges of increased competition in the domestic markets, with less capacity of some countries to effectively compete. Further, the interaction between AfCFTA provisions and existing external trade agreements, such as EPAs, introduces additional complexity that may affect policy coherence and strategic positioning (UNECA, 2021; UNCTAD, 2022), especially with regard to addressing the rule of origin criterion and external tariffs.

Across these African-led mechanisms, a key issue relates to the extent to which they are able to collectively shape engagement with external partners, including the EU. While they provide important platforms for coordination and agenda-setting, disparities in capacity, resources, and institutional alignment can limit their ability to fully leverage collective bargaining power. In addition, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders particularly smallholders, women, and youth within these institutional processes remains uneven, reflecting broader structural and governance challenges.

Overall, African institutional frameworks offer significant potential to support more integrated, inclusive, and development-oriented agricultural trade. However, realizing this potential requires addressing internal coordination challenges, strengthening implementation capacity, and ensuring that these mechanisms are effectively aligned with both national priorities and external trade engagements.

2.3 Other Engagement Channels

In addition to formal institutional frameworks, a range of complementary engagement channels play a significant role in shaping EU–Africa agricultural trade relations. These include bilateral and multilateral funding initiatives, public–private partnerships, multi-stakeholder platforms, and technical assistance programs. While often positioned as supportive mechanisms, these channels can have substantial influence over policy implementation, capacity development, and the direction of agricultural value chains.

Bilateral and multilateral funding initiatives frequently supported by the European Union and its member states, as well as international financial institutions provide critical resources for agricultural development, trade facilitation, and export promotion. These initiatives often focus on improving infrastructure, strengthening value chains, and enhancing compliance with international standards through research, policy engagement and farmer support for sustainable agriculture (Baumüller et al., 2025). While such support can contribute to increased market access and competitiveness, it is often structured around externally defined priorities and conditionalities. As a result, the alignment between funding objectives and locally defined development strategies may be partial, particularly where projects emphasize export-oriented production over domestic food systems and regional trade (OECD, 2020; UNCTAD, 2022).

Public–private partnerships (PPPs) and multi-stakeholder platforms have also emerged as important mechanisms for promoting agricultural investment and facilitating dialogue among governments, private sector actors, and civil society organizations. These platforms can support innovation, improve access to finance, and strengthen linkages within value chains. However, their outcomes are shaped by the distribution of power among participating actors. In many cases, PPPs have exposed African governments to more risks yet the returns are disproportionately shared. Some PPP projects also lead to losses as the government guarantees huge borrowings without a substantial return on investment. Moreover, larger firms and external investors are better positioned to influence priorities and capture benefits, potentially limiting the extent to which smallholders and local enterprises are able to participate meaningfully (FAO, 2021).

Technical assistance and capacity-building programs represent another key dimension of engagement, particularly in areas such as standards compliance, certification, and trade facilitation. These programs are often essential for enabling African producers and exporters to meet regulatory requirements in EU markets. Moreover, these programs tend to prioritize alignment with external standards and market requirements, which may impose additional costs and barriers for smaller producers. Without adequate support mechanisms, these requirements can reinforce existing inequalities within agricultural systems, favoring larger and more capitalized actors (UNECA, 2021).

Across these engagement channels, a common feature is their role in shaping the practical implementation of trade frameworks and influencing who can participate in and benefit from agricultural trade. While they offer important opportunities for capacity development and market integration, their effectiveness in supporting inclusive and sustainable outcomes depends on how well they are aligned with broader development priorities and the extent to which they address underlying structural constraints. These complementary mechanisms form an integral part of the broader institutional landscape, interacting with formal frameworks to influence both the opportunities and limitations of EU–Africa agricultural trade. Understanding their role is therefore essential for a comprehensive assessment of how institutional arrangements shape development outcomes.

3. Uganda Case Study

This section examines Uganda as a case study to illustrate how institutional mechanisms and policy frameworks shaping EU–Africa agricultural trade relations operate in practice. Uganda was selected because of its strong dependence on agriculture for employment, livelihoods, and export earnings, as well as its active participation in regional and international trade frameworks. By analyzing Uganda's experience, this study bridges the gap between institutional design and practical outcomes, demonstrating how broader structural dynamics are reflected at the national level.

Uganda's agricultural sector remains a cornerstone of its economy, employing a large share of the population and contributing significantly to export revenues. Agriculture not only provides livelihoods for millions of rural households but also serves as a critical source of food security, raw materials, and foreign exchange earnings. Major export commodities include coffee, tea, fish products, cocoa, and horticultural goods such as flowers, fruits, and vegetables. While the European Union remains one of Uganda's most important export destinations, countries in the Middle East and China are also emerging as significant markets, reflecting a gradual diversification of Uganda's trade partnerships. This diversification has created new opportunities for exporters, particularly in sectors such as coffee and horticulture, where demand has continued to grow. The successful example of Vietnam's coffee industrial transformation, the world's second-largest exporter after Brazil, provides valuable lessons for Uganda. Through investment in skills and policy reforms such as the establishment of the Vietnam Coffee Corporation, reform of law laws, among others, the country was able to increase production from 92,000 tonnes in 1990 to 1,683,971 tonnes in 2019 (Kamwilu et al., 2021). Therefore, Uganda can harness the coffee sector and strategically use the commodity for structural transformation by implementing the right policies and incentives, such as price stabilization, input support, marketing and adequate financing for producers.

Despite these opportunities, Uganda's exports remain heavily concentrated in primary or minimally processed agricultural products. As a result, the country captures only a limited share of the higher-value and more profitable downstream segments of global value chains, such as processing, branding, packaging, and distribution (World Bank, 2023; UNCTAD, 2022). The continued dependence on raw commodity exports exposes Uganda to fluctuations in global prices and limits its ability to generate higher incomes, create skilled employment, and expand industrial capacity. In addition, producers and exporters often face constraints related to inadequate infrastructure, limited access to finance and technology, inconsistent quality standards, and high trade and transport costs. Compliance with stringent sanitary and phytosanitary standards in European markets also presents challenges, particularly for smallholder farmers and small-scale exporters who may lack the resources required to meet food safety, certification and traceability requirements. These challenges undermine efforts aimed at value addition and industrialization and ultimate structural transformation.

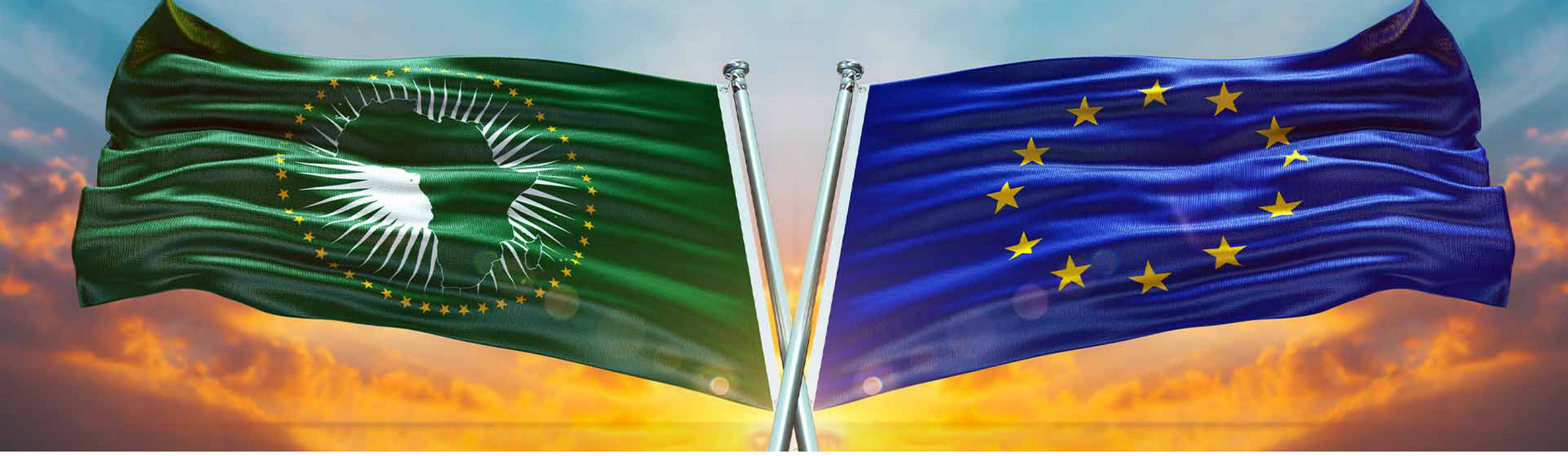
Uganda's trade relations with the EU are shaped by both regional and bilateral frameworks, particularly through the EAC and the market preferences granted by the EU. The EAC has sought to strengthen regional integration through the harmonization of trade policies, the establishment of a customs union, and the promotion of intra-regional trade. As Part of the EAC, Uganda negotiated the EPA with E. The EPA was intended to provide improved and more predictable access to European markets while supporting development and regional cooperation. The agreement also aimed to enhance export competitiveness by encouraging investment, improving standards compliance, and fostering closer economic ties between East Africa and the EU. However, the EPA is only being implemented by Kenya, as the rest of the region is concerned about its negative implications on agriculture and industrialization (KHRC, 2016; Kweka & Sioi, 2022; SEATINI, 2020). While the EPA promotes access to agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides and may reduce costs through trade liberalization, it also constrains the policy space for industrialization in view of the tariff protection for value-added products. For instance, the WTO bound tariff rate for milk is 80 percent, whereas the EPA caps it at 60 percent. Consequently, implementation of the EPA would reduce Uganda's tariff policy space by up to 20 percentage points, limiting the flexibility granted by existing WTO commitments to promote industrialization. risk of deindustrialization as it exposes Ugandan producers to increased competition from their counterparts in the EU, which have more technological and financial capabilities. Uganda's industrial sector remains relatively underdeveloped, with existing industries facing high costs of production as well as financing. There is also challenges posed by inadequate infrastructure such as roads, shipping and railway networks all of which increase the cost of doing business. By reducing tariffs on imported processed and manufactured goods, the EPA could expose domestic industries to competition before they build competitiveness. Industries such as dairy processing, textiles and garments, including used clothes, and food processing may struggle to compete with European imports that benefit from economies of scale, advanced technologies, and, in some cases, substantial agricultural support measures (Kweka & Sioi, 2022). Implementing the EPAs would therefore undermine the market position of Ugandan local firms, discourage investment, and hinder industrial development.

Although the EPA has been argued to promote reginal integration, it instead undermines regional integration efforts. For instance, Uganda, under the EAC, implements a common external tariff, with the aim of promoting value chain development by imposing 0 percent import duty of raw materials and capital goods, 10 percent on intermediate goods, and 25 percent for finished products. However, as observed, the differing approaches to EPA implementation, with Kenya implementing the agreement risk creating asymmetries in trade policy and market access. Such divergences may weaken the effectiveness of the EAC customs union, undermining efforts to build regional production networks. For Uganda, whose industrialization strategy increasingly depends on access to regional markets, the fragmentation of a common trade regime could reduce opportunities for regional value addition and weaken the collective negotiating capacity of EAC Partner states when engaging with the EU.

The EPA restrictions on export taxes are also problematic to EAC's development objectives. The EPA prohibits the introduction of new export taxes and only grants an exemption to EAC to impose export taxes for a temporary period, subject to renewal by the EPA council after 48 months. Such renewal will likely be difficult to realise, considering the overall liberalization objectives of the agreement Export taxes have often been employed by developing countries to encourage domestic value addition by making it more attractive to add value domestically rather than exporting raw materials (SEATINI, 2020). For example, Uganda could seek to impose export taxes on raw hides and skins to promote the domestic leather industry or on unprocessed coffee to encourage local roasting, packaging, and branding. EPA disciplines on export taxes could limit the country's ability to use such measures to support value chain development in the domestic markets. Therefore, Uganda may remain dependent on the export of raw and semi-processed commodities, earning less from the global value chains.

The EPA "rendezvous clause," which commits the parties to negotiate additional agreements in areas such as services, investment, competition policy, government procurement, and trade-related rules in the future presents a challenge to the EAC. It has been argued that these negotiations could further narrow the policy instruments available to Uganda for agricultural and industrial development (SEATINI, 2020). For instance, future commitments on investment or government procurement could constrain the government's ability to promote local content by implementing policies that favour local firms, support emerging industries, or implement policies aimed at strengthening domestic agricultural value chains. Moreover, even at the multilateral level, countries have not consented to negotiated on the identified issues in the rendezvous clause, which implies that Uganda, as part of the EAC would further be forced into deeper disciplines on development-oriented policy measures.

The implementation of the EAC–EU EPA has therefore been delayed by differing national interests and policy priorities among EAC member states. Some countries have expressed concerns that increased market liberalization could expose domestic industries and agricultural producers to competition from European imports, potentially undermining local production and industrial development. These internal differences demonstrate the notion that EPAs undermine rather than promote regional integration. The agreement weakened the coherence of the region's external trade policy. Uganda must therefore balance the objectives of regional integration, domestic economic protection, and international trade commitments. This situation illustrates the broader challenges that often characterize EU–Africa trade relations, where efforts to expand market access and integration are faced with the reality of different levels of development, unequal bargaining power, limited industrial capacity, and the developmental implications of trade liberalization.



4. Challenges

One of the main challenges relates to the limited influence of African actors in trade negotiations and decision-making processes when engaging with the EU. While institutional platforms formally provide opportunities for dialogue and participation, the distribution of technical capacity, access to information, and negotiating power remains uneven. This imbalance often constrains the ability of African countries to effectively shape trade agreements and policy outcomes, resulting in frameworks that may not fully reflect their development priorities (UNCTAD, 2022).

The shrinking policy space, particularly within trade agreements such as EPAs, presents a challenging situation for African countries as they engage with the EU. Provisions related to tariff liberalization, regulatory alignment, and market access can limit the use of policy instruments necessary for supporting domestic agricultural development, including measures aimed at protecting emerging sectors or promoting value addition. For instance, the extensive liberalization as agreed in the EPAs not only presents potential revenue losses but also exposes African producers to more competition. This has implications for long-term structural transformation, as countries may face constraints in pursuing industrial and agricultural policies tailored to their specific contexts (UNECA, 2021).

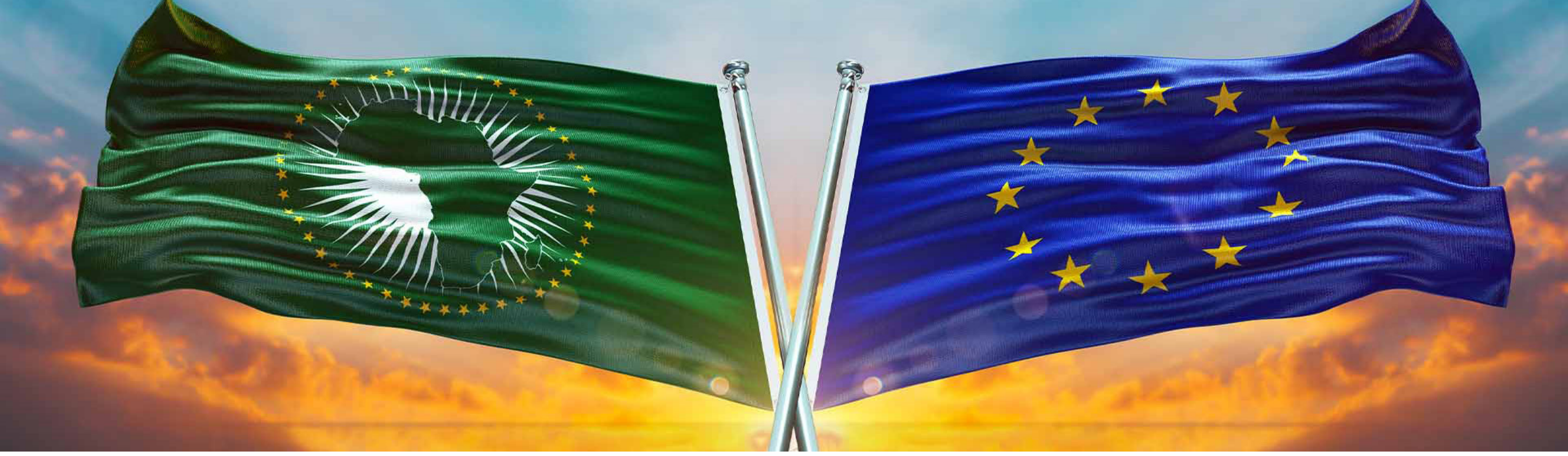
The uneven distribution of benefits within agricultural trade systems, particularly hinders small-scale farmers' livelihoods. Existing arrangements often favour larger exporters, agribusiness firms, and actors with greater access to capital and infrastructure, while smallholders and informal producers face barriers to participation.

The market access requirements and structural setup of the trading system often pose export barriers for African countries. These barriers include compliance costs associated with standards and certification, limited access to finance and technology, and inadequate integration into value chains. As a result, the potential benefits of trade in Uganda are not equitably distributed, with gains often realized by established exporters and larger commercial enterprises. Therefore, smallholder farmers and rural communities largely remain exposed to unfair competition. This has raised growing concerns about inclusiveness, particularly as liberalized trade policies expose local producers to increased competition from imported goods without sufficient institutional support or government support. In many rural areas, limited infrastructure, limited access to financing, and limited capacity to add value further constrain farmers' ability to effectively participate and benefit from trade (FAO, 2021).

At the institutional level, policy misalignment and fragmentation present additional challenges. The coexistence of multiple frameworks ranging from EU agreements to regional and continental initiatives such as RECs and AfCFTA can result in overlapping mandates and inconsistent policy signals. This lack of coherence complicates implementation, reduces efficiency, and can weaken the overall effectiveness of trade strategies. Capacity constraints and limited stakeholder engagement continue to affect the functioning of trade-related institutions. Many African countries face challenges in terms of institutional resources, technical expertise, and coordination across agencies.

In addition, mechanisms for including diverse stakeholders, particularly smallholders, women, and youth, remain insufficiently developed. This limits the extent to which trade policies reflect the needs and realities of those most directly affected.

Although EU-funded initiatives provide important financial and technical assistance, many are primarily designed to facilitate the integration of African countries in foreign markets, mostly through isolated initiatives rather than the required strengthening of domestic productive capacity and regional value chains. The new global push for critical minerals, reorientation of international trade, and the EU support may prioritize the EU's strategic interests beyond those of African countries, hindering the mutually beneficial trade relations that African countries advocate for. Consequently, these interventions risk enforcing the dependence of African countries on raw material exports and external markets, while offering limited support for industrialization, diversification, and long-term structural transformation.



6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the institutional and policy dimensions shaping EU–Africa agricultural trade relations, with particular attention to their implications for an equitable, inclusive, and sustainable agricultural transformation. Although trade cooperation between the EU and Africa is framed around partnership, development, and mutual benefit, significant structural imbalances continue to shape it. Existing trade arrangements often promote trade liberalization that promotes opportunities for established players, with less support for small-scale producers that dominate African agriculture. The African continental framework is anchored in promoting integration at both regional and continental levels. With the EU, the framework is structured on trade agreements, development cooperation, and other engagement platforms. While these frameworks provide opportunities for integration and market access, insufficient coordination between national, regional, and continental institutions reduces their effectiveness and limits the developmental impact of trade policies. Moreover, the challenges of trade liberalization without sufficient capacity building continue to hinder agricultural sector transformation in Africa. Uganda's engagement with the EU and regional trade frameworks has created opportunities for export growth and market access, particularly within the agricultural sector. However, persistent structural constraints hinder development prospects. The following recommendations need to be considered to address the identified constraints and ultimately promote structural transformation.

1) African countries should strengthen African negotiating capacity and institutions. This should be realized by building technical capacity in research, advocacy, and negotiations. Capacity building would support both trade negotiations and engagement in the joint parliamentary platform.
2) African countries should enhance policy coherence at across all levels. African countries should align their negotiating positions and policies at different levels, including national, regional, continental, and with the EU.
3) African countries should promote value addition and agro-industrial development. This should be realized by building agro-processing industries, rural infrastructure development, and regional value chains to promote competitiveness in both domestic and external markets.
4) Facilitate inclusiveness within agricultural trade systems. This includes designing targeted support measures for smallholder farmers, women, youth, and local enterprises, including improved access to finance, technology, and market information. The support should also be directed to promoting the participation of stakeholders in trade negotiations and other engagement frameworks.
5) The EU and African countries should collectively build the capacity of African exporters to meet export market requirements. This involves African producers meeting EU standards and certification requirements through technical assistance, training, and institutional support.

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