

AfCFTA AWARENESS AND SENSITIZATION WEBINAR

On February 27, 2025, the Bashir Adeniyi Centre for International Trade and Investment (BACITI) of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) hosted a sensitization webinar on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This webinar, the second in a series, focused on raising awareness about the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods and its significance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in promoting intra-African trade. The event was conducted both physically and virtually to accommodate participants who could not attend in person.

Dr. Erediauwa, the Coordinator of BACITI and the webinar's moderator, welcomed participants by providing an overview of BACITI's functions. She emphasized that the Centre offers policy advisory, research, capacity building, and consultancy services for stakeholders involved in trade facilitation and investment. Dr. Erediauwa highlighted the importance of the AfCFTA as a landmark agreement that reduces trade barriers and unites 54 out of 55 African markets into a single market. She stressed the need to educate SMEs on the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods, as these businesses contribute up to 50% of Nigeria's GDP but remain largely unaware of the trade benefits.

The first speaker, Barrister Eberechukwu Ezike, a corporate and commercial lawyer and founder of AfCFTA Dialogues, provided an in-depth analysis of the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods. She outlined the protocol's objectives, which focus on trade liberalization through the removal of tariffs and non-tariff barriers. According to her, the protocol aims to eliminate 90% of tariffs gradually while addressing other barriers that impede trade among member states. Member countries are required to present a schedule outlining how they will phase out these tariffs. She also elaborated on the principles of non-discrimination and national treatment, ensuring that any trade benefits granted to member states must be extended to all others.

Barrister Ezike further explained the concept of rules of origin, which grants preferential treatment to goods that are either wholly obtained or substantially transformed within member states. This provision enables reduced tariffs for qualifying products. She also discussed special and differential treatment measures aimed at assisting least-developed countries. Addressing non-tariff barriers, she categorized these obstacles into government policy restrictions and technical barriers. The protocol emphasizes enhanced collaboration between customs authorities, allowing for simplified customs procedures and faster clearance of goods, particularly when backed by a bank guarantee.

Additional innovations in the protocol aligned with the World Trade Organization's Trade Facilitation Agreement include the establishment of an online reporting tool for exporters to address non-tariff barriers, mandatory online publication of trade regulations, electronic payment systems, and the introduction of a single-window platform for streamlined document submission. Barrister Ezike concluded by recommending that exporters enhance their understanding of the AfCFTA Protocol through technical training, regular engagement with

the AfCFTA website, participation in trade facilitation events, and collaboration with chambers of commerce.

Brendan Chukwuebuka Ugwu, the second speaker and founder of the Trade Law and Policy Research unit at the Young African Policy Research Hub, provided insights into the operational framework of the AfCFTA. He explained that the agreement, which was launched in 2018 and became effective in January 2021, aims to create a single market for 1.3 billion people across Africa. This initiative seeks to dismantle barriers to intra-African trade, with a specific focus on supporting micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in accessing new market opportunities. Mr. Ugwu highlighted the diverse sectoral opportunities available under the AfCFTA, including agriculture, transportation, logistics, textiles, pharmaceuticals, and the financial sector.

Mr. Ugwu outlined key steps for Nigerian traders seeking to leverage AfCFTA benefits. These include selecting the appropriate business model, registering with the Corporate Affairs Commission, obtaining a certificate of origin, developing a market entry strategy, and ensuring product standardization. He described various market entry methods, such as direct product sales through trade transit routes, establishing distribution networks or warehouses in member states, forming partnerships, or using franchising arrangements.

Both speakers emphasized the critical role of SMEs in maximizing the benefits of the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods. They underscored the importance of engaging with digital trade platforms, adopting a continuous learning approach, and building strategic networks to navigate the evolving trade environment effectively.

In her closing remarks, Dr. Erediauwa reiterated that the AfCFTA and its protocols should not be the exclusive domain of large corporations. She encouraged SMEs to actively engage with the framework to expand their market reach and capitalize on the numerous opportunities presented by the agreement.

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