



Cameroon Economic Policy Institute

The Role of the AfCFTA in Advancing Food Security in *Central Africa*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- *Food insecurity in CEMAC stands at 28% — close to 3 in every 10 people cannot afford safe and nutritious food — driven by security crises, inflation, and extreme climate events.*
- *Central Africa's intra-regional trade share of ~3% is the lowest of any African REC. Food imports grew from USD 4.1 billion (2015) to USD 7.4 billion (2024), widening the agricultural trade deficit to USD 4.7 billion.*
- *The AfCFTA, through tariff reductions, NTB elimination, and formal trade corridors, can lift 9.3 million Central Africans from extreme poverty by 2035 — but only with deliberate policy sequencing, logistics investment, and PAPSS integration.*

**HENRI KOUAM
FOUNDATION**



Introduction

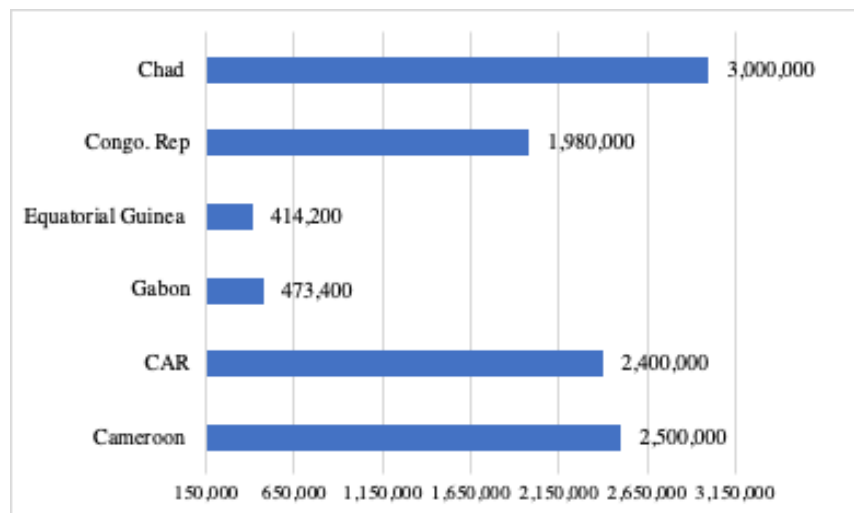
Food security is described as a state where people have enough safe and nutritious food for growth and development. It is necessary for economic development, reduces poverty, and fosters health and economic stability. This is especially important in the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) sub-region, made up of Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Republic of Congo.

Among CEMAC member countries, food insecurity stands at approximately 28%, meaning close to 3 in every 10 people are unable to afford safe and nutritious food. This is driven by a cocktail of security crises, inflation, and extreme climate events. The 1.4 billion continental market created by the AfCFTA — by reducing tariff and non-tariff barriers — makes it possible for agricultural products to reach consumers across Africa at affordable prices.

Section I: State of Play of Food Security in Central Africa

a. Structural Data

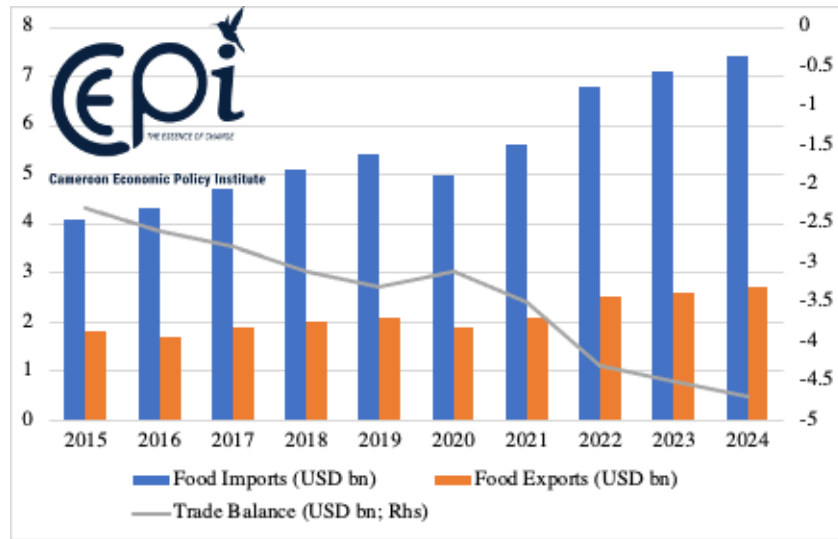
Figure 1: Number of Food-Insecure People in the CEMAC Region



Source: FAO, WFP, World Bank

Central Africa is structurally and chronically food insecure. Food imports across ECCAS member states grew from USD 4.1 billion in 2015 to USD 7.4 billion in 2024, while food exports stagnated, producing an agricultural trade deficit that widened from USD 2.3 billion to USD 4.7 billion over the same period. According to World Bank trade indicators, food imports crowd out productive capital investment and expose national budgets to international price volatility. This means that 60% of Central Africans cannot afford a healthy diet.

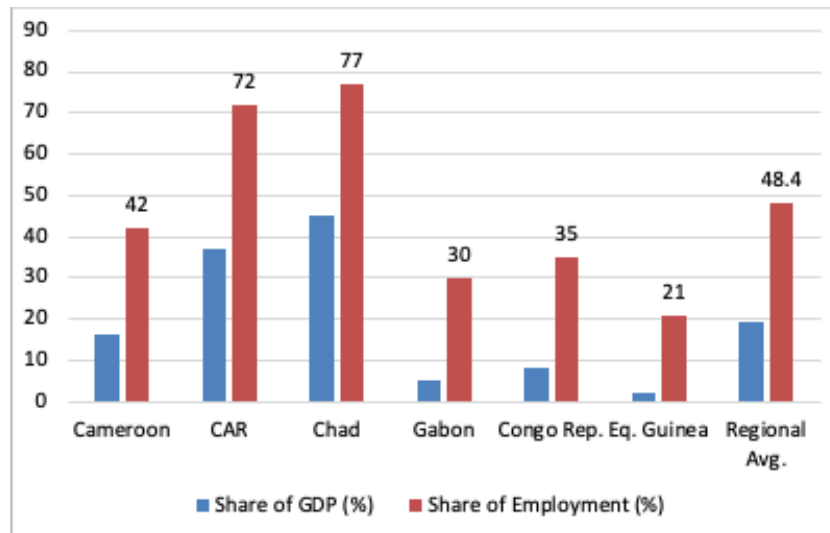
Figure 2: Central Africa Agricultural Trade Balance, 2015–2024 (USD Billion)



Source: World Bank Trade Indicators (2026); FAO Regional Overview (2025)

Agriculture dominates the regional economy in ways that aggregate GDP figures understate, employing 48.4% of the working-age population. Despite employing close to half of the population, low yields and market distortions such as price caps limit households' ability to afford food.

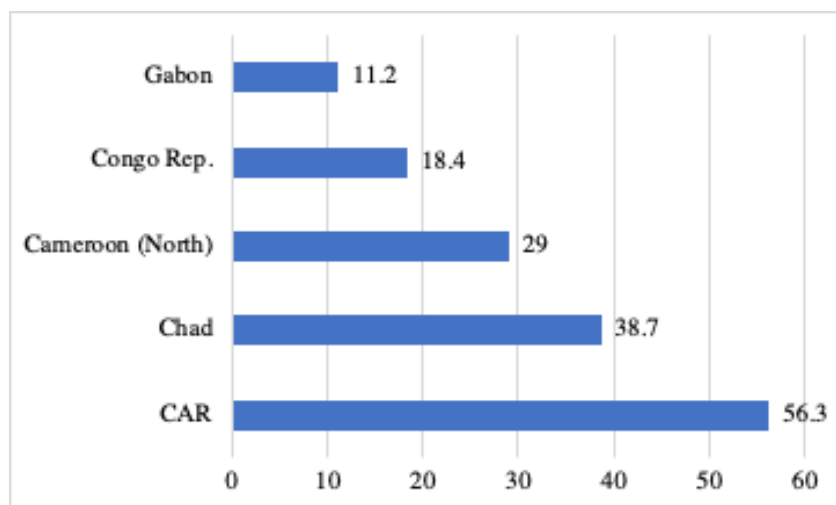
Figure 3: Agriculture — Contribution to GDP and Employment, Central African Countries (%)



Source: World Bank (2026); IFAD (2025)

Food insecurity is unevenly distributed, ranging from 11% in Gabon to over 40% in the DRC and CAR. Poor transport and road networks, ill-adapted logistics, and extreme climate events that increase food spoilage limit cross-border trade and increase the cost of basic food products like eggs, tomatoes, and rice.

Figure 4: Population-Level Food Insecurity Rates, Selected Central African Countries, 2024–2025 (%)



Source: FAO GIEWS (2026); FAO Africa Regional Overview (2025)

b. Structural Weaknesses

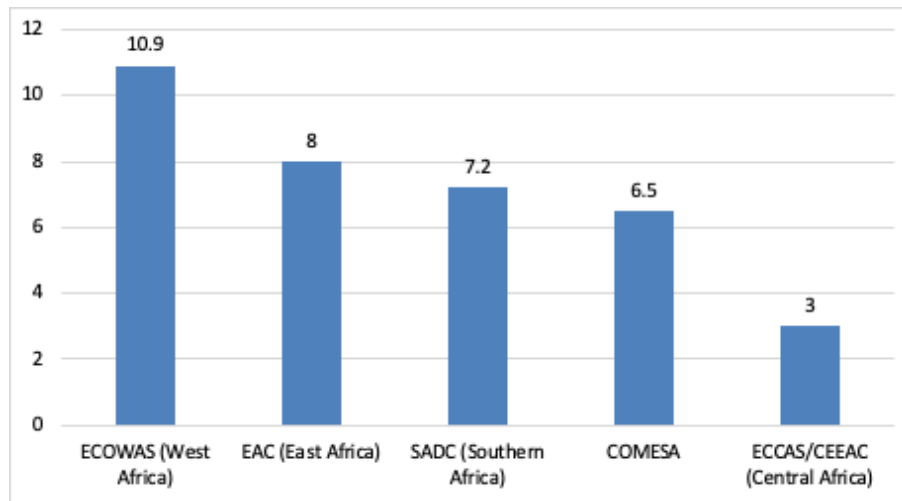
Four interacting structural weaknesses sustain the food security crisis in Central Africa:

Weakness	Evidence	Policy Implication
Infrastructure & spoilage	Transport costs ~40% of goods value; post-harvest losses 30–50% where cold-chain is absent.	Regional cold-chain investment; replicate Angola's USD 635M DRC border complex model.
Low productivity	Average cereal yields ~1.1 t/ha vs. 3.0 t/ha potential; limited access to seed, credit, and extension.	Bundled smallholder support: certified seed + credit + advisory services.
Informal cross-border trade	Cross-border trade is mostly informal and dominated by women — invisible in official statistics.	AfCFTA simplified trade regime; gender-sensitive border formalization.
Non-tariff barriers (NTBs)	NTBs impose 15–25% ad valorem equivalent costs within CEMAC despite zero formal tariffs.	Binding NTB elimination timelines; harmonized SPS standards; digitized customs.

c. Low Intra-Regional Trade

Central Africa's intra-regional trade share of approximately 3% of total exchanges is the lowest of any African regional economic community — less than a third of ECOWAS's 10.9% and well below the EAC (8.0%), SADC (7.2%), and COMESA (6.5%).

Figure 5: Intra-Regional Trade Share by African Regional Economic Community, 2023–2024 (% of total trade)



Source: Nonos (2026); UNECA (2024); AU–OECD (2025)

The Outcome Gap Is a Policy Gap

The ECOWAS example — whose superior trade performance reflects decades of sustained investment in regional corridors and market information systems — confirms that Central Africa's low integration is not a geography problem. It is a policy problem. The AfCFTA-AGRA alliance explicitly draws on this model to target farmer-centered intra-African trade.

Section II: Brief Presentation of the AfCFTA

The AfCFTA is an unprecedented milestone towards achieving regional integration in Africa, designed to create a single continental market, accelerate industrialization, diversification, competitiveness, and the development of regional value chains. With a 90% tariff reduction, intra-African trade is expected to increase by more than 50%, while non-tariff barriers are equally addressed (ITUC-Africa, 2021).

Estimates from UNECA's 2025 economic report on Africa suggest that the AfCFTA will increase the continent's GDP by 1.2%, exports by 7.3%, and imports by 6.9% by 2045. At the CEMAC level, Kouam et al. (2024) find that agriculture exports in Cameroon alone could increase by \$14.01 million, while industry exports could rise by \$63.43 million.

As of 2026, 47 countries have ratified the agreement. As one of the ECCAS countries in the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI), Cameroon has seen an increase in its agro-food export revenue to FCFA 532.2 billion in 2024 (INS, 2025). Despite this progress, Central Africa still faces persistent NTBs, infrastructure deficits, low economic diversification, institutional fragmentation, and complexities around rules of origin.

Section III: How the AfCFTA Can Strengthen Food Security in Central Africa

Although the AfCFTA is projected to reduce the continent's hungry and malnourished people by 1 million and lift 9.3 million Central Africans from extreme poverty by 2035 (World Bank, 2022), global inflation and local conflicts continue to undermine food security in the sub-region. Since the signing of the AfCFTA in 2018, most Central African countries have witnessed mixed outcomes in their agricultural value added — with Cameroon recording an increase from USD 4,589 million in 2018 to USD 5,087 million in 2022. However, food insecurity continues to rise, with moderate or severe food insecurity in Congo going from 66.9% to 79.7% and in DRC from 66.9% to 79.8% between 2020 and 2024.

The Most Impactful Lever: Non-Tariff Barrier Reduction

Reducing non-tariff barriers is four times more impactful for food security compared to tariff cuts alone (Simola et al., 2022). The AfCFTA's online NTB reporting and monitoring platform enables sub-region's landlocked countries to resolve border delays — limiting the destruction of perishable produce and lowering food costs for consumers.

However, this depends on the pace of implementation of the AfCFTA and reforms to accelerate cross-border trade — such as digitizing trade documentation, harmonizing SPS standards, and integrating CEMAC banks into PAPSS for local currency settlement.

Section IV: Limitations and Structural Constraints

a) Slow Implementation

Negotiations on tariff offers and the definition of sensitive products have proven complex and politically sensitive. Many African countries have classified strategic agricultural products as 'sensitive products,' entirely excluded from liberalisation programs. Governments are reluctant to expose farmers to foreign competition, but maintaining tariff protections on food products hinders the development of regional food markets and limits the ability of surplus countries to supply deficit regions.

b) Complexity of Rules of Origin

Rules of origin determine whether a product qualifies for AfCFTA tariff preferences. For processed agri-food products, a minimum threshold of 35–40% local value added is required — but many African agri-food companies still rely on imported inputs. Exporters must also obtain an AfCFTA Rules of Origin certificate, which requires documentation capacity that many smallholders and cooperatives lack.

c) Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Standards

Significant gaps in the adoption and implementation of SPS standards adversely impact agricultural trade. SPS vulnerability limits opportunities in global markets, reduces trade under the AfCFTA, and impacts human health. Urgent investment in human capital and SPS infrastructure is essential — these are indispensable to achieving commitments under CAADP, the Malabo Declaration, AU Agenda 2063, and the SDGs.

d) Logistical Constraints and Weak Regional Coordination

Transport and distribution costs account for approximately 40% of the value of goods in Africa, reducing the profitability of cross-border trade in staple foods. Tariff schedules, rules of origin, and transit regimes remain unaligned among RECs and the AfCFTA. Double taxation, prolonged border waits times, and non-integrated customs databases deter investors and economic operators from fully exploiting AfCFTA opportunities.

AfCFTA's Strategic Role for Central Africa

Central Africa will serve as the geographical connector between the three largest African RECs: SADC, EAC, and ECOWAS. Land trade from Kigali to Lagos, from Gaborone to Accra, is only possible through Central Africa. This geography creates both an opportunity and an obligation — investing in logistics corridors across Central Africa benefits the entire continent.

Policy Recommendations

To translate AfCFTA potential into food security outcomes, Central African governments should prioritize the following short-term and medium-to-long-term reforms.

01: Activate the AfCFTA NTB Monitoring Portal

Countries should accelerate and expand the use of the AfCFTA non-tariff barrier monitoring and negotiation portal to swiftly address impediments to trade — particularly for perishable agricultural products where delays cause direct food losses.

02: Implement the AfCFTA Simplified Trade Regime

Activate the AfCFTA simplified trade regime to formalize and protect the informal cross-border agricultural flows on which border-zone food supply depends. This is especially critical for women traders who dominate informal agri-food trade in the CEMAC region.

03: Fully Implement All AfCFTA Protocols in CEMAC

While ratification is complete, CEMAC and ECCAS countries need to fully implement all AfCFTA protocols to start trading under preferential terms — specifically to accelerate trade in agro-processed products such as cassava flour, palm oil, and cereals.

04: Connect CEMAC Banks to PAPSS

CEMAC banks and the BEAC should join the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) to reduce the cost of cross-border agricultural trade. Local currency settlement removes the dollar conversion premium that currently inflates food import costs for landlocked countries like CAR and Chad.

05: Invest in Human Capital and SPS Infrastructure

Accelerate investments in sanitary and phytosanitary standards infrastructure to build domestic capacity for trade in agro-processed products. SPS compliance is indispensable to accessing higher-value regional and international markets and protecting public health.

06: Attract Investment in Agro-Processing and Fertilizer Production

Investment incentives already exist, but CEMAC countries should popularize them to attract investments in chemical fertilizers and agro-processing plants — supporting the production of key staple foods like cassava, plantain, and yam flour and reducing dependence on imports.

Food insecurity in Central Africa is driven by fragmented markets and prohibitive costs — with intra-regional trade at just 3% while 28% of the population faces food insecurity.

The AfCFTA presents a unique opportunity to reverse this trend — but success hinges on facilitating formal and informal cross-border trade, strategic cold-chain investment, and local currency settlement through PAPSS.

About the Authors



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Henri Kouam is the Founder of the Cameroon Economic Policy Institute of the Henri Kouam Foundation. He is a consultant for the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and was an Economic Expert for NATO providing strategic direction on debt, security, and sustainability across Africa. He previously consulted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and participated in R&D consultations with the UK Tax Authority.



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Dr. Egbe-Njie Fride is a Research Fellow at CEPI specializing in trade policy, AfCFTA implementation, and agricultural value chains in Central Africa. She has contributed to multiple CEPI briefs on informal sector integration, fisheries subsidies, and food security across the CEMAC region.



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Hawaing Djamo is the National Coordinator at CEPI, responsible for program coordination, stakeholder engagement, and policy outreach. He has co-authored several CEPI briefs on WTO trade governance, AfCFTA implementation, and Cameroon's trade policy priorities.



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Dr. Chefor Daisy is a Research Fellow at CEPI with expertise in digital trade, WTO governance, and food systems policy. She contributed to CEPI's MC14 policy brief and has conducted research on e-commerce moratoriums, TRIPS agreements, and their implications for Central African economies.



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Dr. Lukas Kornher is a researcher at the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS) specializing in agricultural markets, food price volatility, food security policy, and trade in developing countries. His work focuses on the intersection of global commodity markets and household food security outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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