

Reducing Trade Costs Through *the Africa Trade Observatory (ATO)*

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3,700+

Users accessed ATO
beta version in 2021

44%

Internet penetration
in Cameroon (2024)

~40%

of goods value spent
on transport in Africa

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The African Trade Observatory (ATO), a key instrument of the AfCFTA, provides reliable and up-to-date data to reduce information gaps and the costs of trade in Africa. This brief analyses its operation, use, and impact, with a focus on opportunities for Cameroonian businesses. By centralizing data on tariffs, trade flows, and markets, the ATO promotes transparency and better decision-making. However, challenges remain, such as limited internet access, irregular data updates, and low levels of digital literacy.

Introduction

African trade integration continues to face numerous challenges, including a lack of reliable information on markets, tariffs, and trade opportunities. This lack of reliable information is a major factor driving up trade costs in Africa. The Africa Trade Observatory (ATO), established within the framework of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), aims to fill this gap by offering a centralized platform of up-to-date and accessible data on intra-African trade. In 2021, more than 3,700 users from countries including South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, and Ethiopia accessed the beta version of the ATO dashboard. This tool provides states, businesses, and researchers with a strategic instrument to better understand trade dynamics, identify import/export opportunities, and anticipate tariff and non-tariff barriers.

This brief analyses the functioning of the ATO, its modalities of use, as well as its expected impact on the reduction of commercial costs — with a particular focus on the opportunities and challenges for Cameroonian economic operators.

Section 1: What is the Africa Trade Observatory (ATO)?

The ATO is one of the five operational instruments of the AfCFTA. It is a digital portal that provides reliable and up-to-date trade data on trade between African countries. Its main objective is to enable businesses and policymakers to make evidence-based decisions: identifying markets with potential, comparing access conditions, and monitoring the implementation of the AfCFTA.

Its primary targets include:

- *African companies (SMEs, exporters) seeking market intelligence and trade data;*
- *Governments and public institutions designing trade policy and AfCFTA implementation strategies;*
- *Researchers, think tanks, and academies that study trade dynamics on the continent.*

ATO as an AfCFTA Instrument

The ATO is one of five core operational tools of the AfCFTA — alongside the tariff reduction schedules, rules of origin guidelines, the NTB monitoring mechanism, and the PAPSS payment system. Together, they form the implementation architecture for Africa's single market.

Section 2: How Does the ATO Work?

Market Information Search: One of the factors limiting large-scale trade integration across Africa is the lack of readily accessible business information for local firms (Ngwu & Ojah, 2024). The ATO seeks to address this by providing traders with country-specific information to facilitate trade between countries. Traders can obtain timely information on customs duties and tariffs through a search function that specifies the country and the product. The ATO achieves this by collecting and processing trade data — including tariffs, standards, and procedures — from member countries, ensuring the accuracy of the information received by traders.

Analysis of Trade Flows: Maintaining a trade data repository is a major step towards more informed analysis to support trade. By collecting data such as import and export flows by product and country, the ATO is able to provide actionable insights based on data analysis. The observatory also has a strong network of specialized trade experts in data analysis to guide this work. Such information from advanced data analysis is very useful for making informed decisions at the national, regional, and continental levels, thereby fostering further growth.

Comparison Tools: The ATO also allows entrepreneurs to pursue the most promising opportunities by enabling them to compare different markets for their products. This allows companies to choose markets with the right demand for their products and offering growth potential — a critical function for Cameroonian SMEs exploring AfCFTA export corridors for the first time.

Update and Reliability: The ATO ensures the reliability of its data through regular updates from official sources such as customs authorities, the WTO, and the ITC, guaranteeing accurate and credible information for users across the continent.

Section 3: How to Use the ATO?

Usage Steps

The ATO is a platform accessible online via ato.africa. To use it, the operator must first log in to the official website. They then select the relevant categories, such as trade flows, customs tariffs, or non-tariff barriers. The platform allows users to filter data by country, sector, or product — making it easier to obtain targeted information for specific trade decisions.

Case Study: A Cameroonian Cocoa Exporter

ATO in Action

A Cameroonian cocoa exporter can search for African markets where demand is highest and tariffs are lowest. With a few clicks, they can view the main African cocoa importers, the volumes traded, and the applicable tariffs. They can also identify countries offering a more favorable environment in terms of logistics or regulatory costs — information that previously required expensive consultants or extended market research trips.

Expected Results

The use of the ATO therefore reduces information gaps and helps trade actors make better decisions. Businesses can better target their markets, anticipate tariff and non-tariff barriers, and optimize their trade costs. For Cameroonian operators, this tool is an opportunity to increase exports and participate more effectively in African trade under the AfCFTA framework.

Section 4: Expected Impacts on Reducing Commercial Costs

Save Time & Money	Improved Strategic Decisions	Reduce Customs Errors & Delays
<p>By creating and maintaining a data repository, the ATO provides up-to-date and low-cost information that saves businesses time and redirects investments in expansion. One of the obstacles preventing SMEs from fully engaging in trade is the lack of available information and the high cost of obtaining it (Geda & Seid, 2015).</p>	<p>Data-driven analytics prevents businesses from making mistakes that lead to significant costs and delays. Governments can also use the data to better inform their decisions and accelerate AfCFTA implementation at the national level.</p>	<p>Customs errors and trade disruptions due to inaccurate documentation lead to delays, increased corruption, and non-tariff barriers. The ATO ensures that all traders are better protected and reduces the time and cost of trade along land borders.</p>

Section 5: Opportunities and Limitations for Cameroonian Economic Operators

The ATO offers real opportunities for Cameroonian businesses. With internet penetration estimated at ~44% of the population by early 2024, operators in urban areas have a growing user base to access business information on tariffs, non-tariff barriers, and markets (DataReportal, 2024). The ATO reduces the cost of trade by making this information accessible to every business and SME that wants it.

CEPI's October 2025 ATO training event in Cameroon — covered by Pan African Visions and Newsupfront — demonstrated real appetite among local entrepreneurs for the platform. Business in Cameroon reported in 2026 that Cameroonian SMEs had begun learning to trade beyond borders as a direct result of these capacity-building efforts (Takang, 2026).

Opportunities	Limitations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Growing urban internet access (44%) enables more operators to use the ATO platform. ● Lower cost of market intelligence — no need for expensive consultants or travel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Internet access remains limited in rural areas — restricting ATO use for many small producers. ● Data reliability depends on frequency of national updates; outdated data can lead to planning errors.

- Direct access to tariff schedules, NTB information, and AfCFTA trade flows.
- Supports CEPI-led training events to upskill Cameroonian SMEs on the platform.

- Lack of digital skills and ability to interpret trade data are obstacles for some operators.
- Platform available primarily in English and French — language barriers persist for some traders.

Section 6: Policy Recommendations

To ensure the ATO delivers on its potential for Cameroonian operators, CEPI identifies four priority recommendations:

1. Expand ATO Training Programs to SMEs and Informal Traders

Ensure SMEs and informal traders know how to leverage the ATO to trade across Africa. This approach will promote and stimulate trade — building on CEPI’s existing training programme and extending it to rural areas and border communities.

2. Ensure National Agencies Provide Regular Data Updates

Customs administrations and sectoral ministries must regularly update the ATO database to ensure the reliability and relevance of information. Without current data, the platform’s decision-support value is significantly diminished.

3. Integrate ATO into Cameroon’s Export Strategy and SME Support

Cameroon should integrate the ATO into its export strategy and SME support programmes to encourage systematic use of this tool in business planning and decision-making — embedding it in the National Development Strategy (NDS30).

4. Adopt a Simplified Trade Regime for Informal Sector Traders

A simplified trade regime should ensure that informal sector traders can easily trade under the AfCFTA — reducing administrative barriers at border posts and enabling small-scale operators to access ATO-facilitated trade flows.

Conclusion

The Africa Trade Observatory (ATO) is a strategic tool for boosting intra-African trade and reducing trade costs. By centralizing trade data, it promotes greater transparency, evidence-based decision-making, and reduces the cost of trade for businesses. For Cameroon, the ATO offers a real opportunity to further integrate its economic operators into regional value chains — an opportunity that CEPI is actively working to realize through capacity-building, policy advocacy, and research.

However, the success of this instrument will depend on the reliability and integration of national data, strengthening the capacity of entrepreneurs to use it, and the pace of AfCFTA implementation. With the right institutional support and sustained investment in digital literacy, the ATO can become a transformative tool for Cameroonian SMEs, informal traders, and agricultural exporters.

“The ATO will only deliver for Cameroon if three things happen together: national data is updated regularly, entrepreneurs are trained to use it, and the simplified trade regime makes it practically accessible for informal traders.”
Haiwang Djamo, National Coordinator

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

About the Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI)

CEPI is a think tank at the Henri Kouam Foundation improving economic development through fact-based research, policy advocacy, and events. CEPI has successfully led two verifiable policy reforms. Areas of work: Fiscal Policy & Taxation | Gender & Inclusive Growth | Trade & Investment | Labour Markets | Agriculture & Food Security | Digital Economy.

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This policy brief is possible thanks to the generous Support of Atlas Network and the authors acknowledge no conflict of interest with national or international parties in the completion of this brief. All mistakes are our own and occur solely in the context of advancing economic freedom in Cameroon.

To Cite: Djamo, H. F., Nyaba, E., Mbarga, S. & Kouam, H. (2026). Reducing Trade Costs Through the Africa Trade Observatory (ATO), Trade for You, No. 30, Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI), Henri Kouam Foundation.