



Cameroon Economic Policy Institute



HENRI KOUAM  
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# The African Trade Observatory Will Unleash New Markets for *Cameroonian Entrepreneurs*

Jules Moukam, *Research Analyst, Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI)*

**1.4B**

People in the AfCFTA  
single market

**\$450B**

Income boost projected  
for Africa by 2035

**3**

ATO modules for  
entrepreneurs

## I. Introduction

Too many African businesses drive through a fog. Entrepreneurs are forced to make decisions based on data that is often outdated, incomplete, or unavailable. Meanwhile, reliable data is essential for the efficient functioning of markets. The IMF highlights that better access to data presents a tremendous opportunity to boost growth through efficiency and innovation.

The Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) and Kouam (2025) echo this point, suggesting that data allows firms to operate more efficiently. Businesses constantly have to make economic decisions: what to produce? How to produce it? Where to sell? Making these decisions relies on refined business acumen and reliable data. Without data on market realities, too many business decisions are based on luck and intuition alone, slowing the implementation of the AfCFTA.

### The Data Problem for African Entrepreneurs

Fortunately, the African Trade Observatory (ATO) was designed to solve this problem. As one of the five AfCFTA instruments, it provides real-time, reliable data that Cameroonian entrepreneurs can leverage. This brief covers three sections: an overview of the AfCFTA and ATO, how to use the ATO's main features, and practical guidance for Cameroonian entrepreneurs — concluding with recommendations.

## II. Overview of the AfCFTA and the ATO

### a. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)

The African Trade Observatory is one of the AfCFTA instruments. The AfCFTA is a flagship trade agreement part of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, creating a single continental market that connects 1.4 billion people with a combined GDP of approximately \$3.4 trillion. It aims to eliminate trade barriers, boost intra-African trade, and advance trade in value-added products across all service sectors of the African economy. The AfCFTA entered into force on May 30, 2019, after 24 member states deposited their instruments of ratification.

**30M**

people could be lifted from poverty by AfCFTA implementation

**\$450B**

income boost projected for Africa by 2035

**\$29T**

projected size of Africa's economy by 2050

### b. The African Trade Observatory (ATO)

Launched in 2020, the ATO is an initiative led by the African Union Commission, implemented by the International Trade Center, and funded by the European Union. Its mandate is to help businesses identify and compare emerging opportunities across the continent. The policy agreement signed by the Council of Heads of States and Governments creates an enabling environment — but real economic growth depends on businesses' ability to create and exchange value across borders.

The ATO helps to fill this gap. It automatically collects, processes, and analyses data sourced from member states and elsewhere. Then, it presents key insights to equip African businesses with trade intelligence on trends, opportunities, and market access conditions for their goods or services.

## III. How to Leverage the ATO's Main Features as an Entrepreneur

Cameroonian entrepreneurs could significantly benefit from any of the three modules of the African Trade Observatory. The three modules are divided into two categories: the Business Intelligence dashboard (Compare and Explore modules) and the Monitoring dashboard. The Business Intelligence dashboard primarily offers African businesses timely and reliable information tracking intra-continental trade flows. The Monitor module tracks the implementation of the AfCFTA and its impact through real-time indicators.

### The Cotton Producer Use Case

Say there is a cotton producer in Cameroon. During MC14 in Yaoundé, they were emboldened by Dr. Elombi's speech — Afreximbank's President called for continent-wide collaboration to transform the cotton sector, while the bank has been supporting the development of special economic zones dedicated to cotton processing across Africa. So, how can the ATO assist the Cameroonian cotton producer to identify and sell their product in new markets?

### Compare Module

#### *Business Intelligence Dashboard — Identify Promising Markets*

C

The Compare module allows entrepreneurs to identify promising opportunities, assess trade performance, and compare tariffs and regulatory conditions — without having to search through dense legal texts or national statistics websites. To use it: log in to ato.africa, choose 'Cameroon' as the exporter, and enter 5201 (the HS code for Cotton, not carded or combed). The ATO returns the top 5 export destination countries with key economic indicators: total untapped market potential, current trade volume, MFN tariff, and effectively applied tariff. At the time of writing, Egypt has an untapped market potential of \$2 million (~1.1 billion CFA Franc) and imposes a 0% effective tariff rate.

### Explore Module

#### *Business Intelligence Dashboard — Dig Deeper into Opportunities*

E

The Explore module acts like a magnifying lens by letting you dig deeper into a specific opportunity. It provides detailed market insights on demand trends, regulatory requirements, and preferential requirements. Traders can see market opportunities and market conditions, trade agreements and applicable tariffs, domestic and regulatory requirements for export from Cameroon and import into Egypt, and under Business Contacts — a list of Trade Finance Providers, Trade Promotion Organizations, and up to ten potential trade partners via the Trade Map.

### Monitor Module

#### *Policy Dashboard — Understand the Operating Environment*

M

The Monitor tool was designed primarily for African policymakers. It provides data on 20 tailored indicators, including trade flows, market access conditions, border performance, AfCFTA implementation progress, and border crossing data. However, entrepreneurs do not operate in a policy vacuum. Though a Cameroonian entrepreneur may have limited access to some Monitor data, the information available still provides powerful insights for understanding the external environment. Specifically, data from the Monitor module can help an entrepreneur conduct market analysis.

## IV. Recommendations

Data is essential. It informs the participants of free markets and ensures the efficiency of the decision-making process. At a time when African economies strive to integrate more deeply, the African Trade Observatory plays an essential role. CEPI identifies four recommendations to maximize its impact for Cameroonian entrepreneurs:

### 01: Train SMEs and Informal Traders on ATO Usage

Expand ATO training programmes to ensure Cameroonian SMEs and informal traders know how to leverage all three modules — Compare, Explore, and Monitor. Building on CEPI's existing entrepreneur training events, this should be extended to rural areas and key border communities where trade volumes are highest.

## 02: 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 national data, the platform's market intelligence value is significantly diminished for all users.

## 03: Integrate ATO into Cameroon's Export Strategy

Cameroon should formally integrate ATO usage into its national export strategy and SME support programmes — embedding it in the National Development Strategy (NDS30) and making it a mandatory tool in business planning for firms accessing government trade support.

## 04: Adopt a Simplified Trade Regime for Informal Traders

A simplified trade regime should ensure that informal sector traders — who account for up to 50% of cross-border trade in Central Africa — can easily access and benefit from the market intelligence the ATO provides, without being blocked by documentation or registration requirements.

## Conclusion

The Compare module provides a quick dashboard to evaluate market opportunities. The Explore module zooms in on specific opportunities to shed light on the practicalities of implementing trade. The Monitor module helps entrepreneurs understand the policy environment in which they operate. By leveraging the full power of this platform, Cameroonian entrepreneurs can identify and sell into new markets they never knew existed.

*Data is the fuel of modern trade. The ATO puts that fuel in the hands of Cameroonian entrepreneurs — for the first time, at no cost, in real time.*

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## About the Author



### Jules Moukam, Research Analyst

Jules is a Research Analyst at CEPI, working trade, climate and economic development. **Jules Moukam** is an Economics Major at American University of Beirut (AUB). Known for his strong leadership potential and dedication to global development, he has been closely involved with educational mentorship initiatives like *Open Dreams*, which helps high-achieving students access fully funded international scholarship opportunities.

## 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 three verifiable policy reforms and is advancing the implementation of policies that support economic freedom in Cameroon.

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