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Exploring Stakeholder Perspectives on the African Continental Free Trade Area and its implications for Zimbabwe's Economic Security

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Abstract- Zimbabwe's accession to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a strategic opening to diversify exports, rebuild industrial capacity, and buffer the economy against external shocks. Yet progress has stalled amid policy incoherence, institutional fragmentation, and limited SME readiness. This study interrogates how AfCFTA is reshaping Zimbabwe's economic security through an exploratory, qualitatively driven design. Data was collected via 25 key-informant interviews with officials from key government ministries, agencies, private sector bodies, SME associations, civil society, and development partners, two focus-group discussions with SME operators and systematic document analysis. Cross-cutting themes that emerged included i) fragmented domestic implementation and weak inter-ministerial coordination ii) infrastructure and customs bottlenecks that blunt export competitiveness ii) heightened exposure to economic crime owing to porous borders and opaque enforcement and guarded optimism among private actors contingent on clearer incentives and digital trade facilitation. Findings reveal that while legal ratification signals commitment, the absence of a cohesive national AfCFTA strategy risk entrenching existing vulnerabilities. The study proposes a four-pillar roadmap: (i) sector-based industrial clusters anchored in value addition; (ii) formalisation and up-skilling of SMEs through a digital AfCFTA support portal; (iii) trade-facilitation infrastructure, including a real-time border-transaction dashboard; and (iv) a multi-stakeholder oversight council empowered to run periodic impact audits.

Index Terms- AfCFTA; Economic Security; Stakeholder Perspectives; Zimbabwe; Regional Integration

I. Introduction

Continental economic agreements have a significant impact on Zimbabwe's economic security, as they provide opportunities for trade, investment, and regional cooperation that can either strengthen or challenge the country's economic position. The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement wholly consummated through the heads of African state and their governments, marks a pivotal transformation in the trade and economic dynamics across the continent. By prioritizing the establishment of a cohesive African market, the AfCFTA agreement not only encourages economic collaboration among member nations but also holds considerable ramifications for economic security frameworks, especially in Zimbabwe (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2020; AfCFTA Secretariat, 2021). Numerous years, integration into global and international markets as well as the ensuing trade liberalization have been critical factors driving economic success across nations (Hadhek & Mrad, 2021). Increased trade openness has allowed countries to access innovative production methods (Ahn et al., 2019 & Ibrahim, 2020), draw in foreign investments (Bajo-Rubio, 2020; Khalid et al., 2019), and capitalize on economies of scale (Conti, 2014).

For Zimbabwe, AfCFTA represents a potential game-changer. As a landlocked country in Southern Africa, Zimbabwe faces significant challenges in terms of economic growth, employment, and industrial development. The country's economic structure is highly dependent on primary sectors, with agriculture (particularly tobacco, maize, and cotton) and mining (gold and diamonds) being the primary sources of revenue. Despite its resource-rich economy, Zimbabwe has been plagued by high inflation, currency instability, a lack of industrial diversification, and political uncertainty, which have stymied its long-term economic growth. Zimbabwe's economic situation is characterized by several structural weaknesses. These include overdependence on agriculture and raw materials, limited industrial capacity, and insufficient infrastructure. In this context, AfCFTA presents both opportunities and risks. While the agreement promises to create new markets and enhance Zimbabwe's integration into regional value chains, there are concerns that Zimbabwe's current economic structure may make it ill-prepared to compete effectively in a liberalized trade environment. Zimbabwe's ability to leverage the benefits of AfCFTA will depend on its capacity to adapt its economic policies, strengthen its industrial base, and address the underlying vulnerabilities that have hindered its economic development. This study therefore critically examines the implications of the AfCFTA for Zimbabwe's economic security through a careful examination of stakeholder perspectives.

II. 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The impact of the AfCFTA on Zimbabwe's economic security can be analyzed through various economic and political theories that explain trade liberalization, economic integration, and security dynamics.

2.1.1 *Comparative Advantage Theory*

The comparative advantage theory, developed by David Ricardo, explains how trade benefits nations by allowing them to specialize in producing goods and services where they have a relative efficiency advantage (Ricardo, 1817). Because different countries have different factors of production, the concept of comparative advantages is based on this reality. The comparison of a good's producers based on their opportunity cost is known as comparative advantage. If the opportunity cost of producing a thing is less than that of another manufacturer, that producer is said to have a comparative advantage (Mankiw, 2017). According to the idea, these variations in opportunity costs provide trade incentives and benefits. Zimbabwe, through AfCFTA, can leverage its strengths in agriculture, mining, and manufacturing to compete more effectively in African markets. By focusing on sectors where it has a lower opportunity cost compared to other African countries, Zimbabwe can improve its export performance and generate higher revenues. Moreover, access to a larger market under AfCFTA will provide Zimbabwean businesses with economies of scale, reducing production costs and making locally produced goods more competitive (Krugman & Obstfeld, 2009). However, Zimbabwe may face challenges if its industries are not competitive enough to withstand increased intra-African competition. Weak industries could collapse due to an influx of cheaper imports, leading to job losses and economic insecurity (Samuelson & Nordhaus, 2010).

2.1.2 *Economic Integration Theory*

The economic integration theory, as developed by Bela Balassa (1961), provides a framework for understanding how regional trade agreements like AfCFTA influence economic security. Economic integration, according to Molle (1994), is the progressive removal of national boundaries over time. It is intended to boost international commerce, which benefits consumers by reducing costs, raising economic well-being, and boosting productivity. AfCFTA, which aims to remove trade obstacles and encourage cross-border investments, is a step towards greater economic integration in Africa. For Zimbabwe, AfCFTA fosters economic security by providing access to a larger market of over 1.3 billion people, encouraging investments and economic diversification (Balassa, 2021). As trade increases among African nations, Zimbabwe can reduce its reliance on traditional trade partners outside Africa, thereby strengthening its economic resilience against global shocks such as currency fluctuations and trade restrictions imposed by western or Asian markets (Venables, 2003). Increased regional trade can also promote industrialization by facilitating value chain linkages across multiple African economies. However, deeper economic integration also poses challenges, especially if Zimbabwean industries are unprepared for competition from stronger economies like South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt. Without sufficient structural reforms, local businesses may struggle to survive in a more open trade environment, leading to economic vulnerabilities (Frankel & Romer, 2020).

2.1.3 *Structuralist Development Theory*

The structuralist development theory, associated with scholars such as Raul Prebisch and Gunnar Myrdal, argues that developing economies like Zimbabwe face structural disadvantages in global and regional trade due to historical economic imbalances (Prebisch, 1950). According to this theory, trade liberalization under AfCFTA may not automatically translate into economic security unless Zimbabwe undertakes structural transformations to increase value addition and industrialization. One of the key arguments of the structuralist perspective is that African countries, including Zimbabwe, are dependent on the export of primary commodities such as minerals, agricultural products, and raw materials (Myrdal, 1957). If Zimbabwe remains trapped in this low-value production structure, it risks reinforcing economic insecurity due to fluctuating global commodity prices and vulnerability to external shocks. AfCFTA provides an opportunity to change this dynamic by encouraging industrialization and regional value chains, allowing Zimbabwe to move toward manufacturing and high-value exports. Nevertheless, the theory also highlights the dangers of trade liberalization without adequate protection for developing industries. If Zimbabwe opens its markets too quickly under AfCFTA without developing competitive industries, it could lead to economic insecurity as local producers fail to compete with more advanced African economies (Stiglitz, 2002). This could result in deindustrialization and economic instability, exacerbating unemployment and income inequality.

2.2 EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Several empirical studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between trade openness and economic growth, particularly in developing economies. For instance, Keho (2017) found that trade openness had a significant positive impact on economic growth in Côte d'Ivoire from 1965 to 2014, employing the Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) bounds test alongside the Toda and Yamamoto Granger causality method. Similarly, Frankel and Romer (2019) identified positive growth effects from trade openness using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method. Comprehensive panel data analysis by Yanikkaya (2023) and Dollar and Kraay (2024) similarly affirmed that trade openness fosters economic growth, particularly in emerging nations. Wang et al. (2024), analyzing a panel of 79 countries from 1970 to 2020, and Freund and Bolaky (2018), examining data from over 100 countries, both found consistent evidence of positive impacts using panel regression techniques.

Further supporting this relationship, Khobai et al. (2018) investigated the effect of trade openness on economic growth in Ghana and Nigeria using the ARDL model, incorporating additional variables such as exchange rates, investment, and inflation. Results showed a statistically significant positive impact of trade openness on Ghana's growth at the 1% level, while in Nigeria, the impact was negative but statistically insignificant. The analysis also indicated a long-run equilibrium relationship among the variables in both countries. Ijirshar (2019) evaluated trade openness and economic development in ECOWAS member states within a regional framework, utilising data from 1975 to 2017.

Employing dynamic panel models, the study found a positive long-run effect of trade openness on growth, although short-run impacts varied across countries. It clearly emerges from literature review that the studies have revealed mixed findings on the economic security implications of trade liberation in Africa. In Zimbabwe an empirical evaluation of the subject seems to be nonexistent even through the country has already signed and ratified the AFCFTA. This study attempts to draw lessons from the data to simulate the potential implications such an agreement would have on economic security resulting from the implications of AFCFTA.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate how key stakeholders perceive and experience the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and its influence on Zimbabwe's economic security. The research is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasised the importance of understanding human experiences within their social and institutional contexts. This philosophical stance is well-suited for qualitative research aimed at understanding how different stakeholders in Zimbabwe such as SMEs, policymakers, and trade officials perceive and interpret the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on the Zimbabwe's economic security. In contrast to positivism, which aims for objective, quantifiable facts via hypothesis testing and statistical confirmation, interpretivism emphasises acquiring a profound knowledge of intricate, lived experiences.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

The study employed a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate how Zimbabwean stakeholders perceive and experience the impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on the country's economic security. This design was particularly appropriate for addressing research questions that aimed to understand complex social phenomena from the perspective of those directly involved, rather than testing pre-established integration theories and statistical relationships. Since the AfCFTA agreement is a new phenomenon and under-explored, it further made an exploratory research design relevant and appropriate. The study adopted an inductive approach, grounded in the belief that knowledge should emerge from the lived experiences and contextual realities of those directly affected by this new phenomenon, rather than being imposed by pre-existing theories. This design was especially appropriate for this exploratory study where the goal and intention were to generate new insights, uncover patterns, and build conceptual understanding from integration empirical data.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The primary methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. These tools were not only chosen to allow flexibility, depth, and contextual understanding of stakeholder experiences and institutional processes but also to assist with data validity and triangulation. Interviews were conducted with key informants including government officials, trade policy experts, representatives from trade associations, academia, and economists. These interviews provided a platform for participants to share detailed, nuanced perspectives on AfCFTA's implementation, institutional readiness, and its perceived impact on Zimbabwe's economic conditions. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across sessions, while still allowing space for probing and follow-up questions based on participants' responses. To capture the experiences and views of small and medium enterprise (SME) operators, two focus group discussions were held in Harare and Bulawayo Zimbabwe's key commercial hubs. Each FGD consisted of 6–10 participants and was moderated using a discussion interview guide aligned with the study's objectives. Topics included knowledge of AfCFTA, perceived benefits and risks, challenges to access regional markets, and the role of government. Focus groups enable dynamic interaction among participants and help to uncover shared experiences and divergent opinions. Complementing the primary data sources, the study analyzed relevant policy documents, trade agreements, economic reports, and media publications. Key documents included Zimbabwe's National Trade Policy, AfCFTA implementation frameworks, and reports from institutions such as ZIMTRADE, the African Union, and UNCTAD. Document analysis helped contextualize the interview and FGD findings and provided insight into official policy narratives and implementation strategies.

3.3 SAMPLING STRATEGY

This study employed a purposive/ judgmental sampling strategy, a non-probability method commonly used in qualitative research to select participants who possess relevant knowledge, experience, or exposure to the phenomenon under investigation (Dawson, 2009). The researcher took advantage of Snowballing in this study which supported judgmental sampling. Participants were selected from three main stakeholder groups: Policymakers and government officials involved in trade and economic policy; SME operators and business leaders, especially those operating in key economic sectors; and Trade and economic experts, including academics, economists, and researchers working in think tanks or development organizations. The sample comprised 25 key informants selected based on their expertise, institutional roles, and relevance to AfCFTA implementation in Zimbabwe. Participants were drawn from government ministries (Industry and Commerce, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Finance and Economic Development, ICT), regulatory bodies (ZIMRA, ZIMSTAT, RBZ), private sector associations (CZI, ZNCC, Chamber of Mines, CEOART), SME representatives, civil society organisations, and development partners. In addition to interviews, the study conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of six participants, involving SME owners, informal traders, and logistics operators actively engaged in cross-border trade.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

The research utilised theme analysis as the principal tool for qualitative data examination. Thematic analysis is a versatile and methodical technique employed to uncover, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) in qualitative data. This method was particularly well-suited for exploratory research design, as it allowed for the emergence of themes directly from data, rather than testing pre-established hypotheses. Thematic analysis was chosen because it aligned with the study's interpretivist philosophy, which emphasized understanding participants lived experiences and contextual realities. Given the complexity of economic integration under the AfCFTA and the multifaceted nature of economic security, thematic analysis provided a practical framework for organizing stakeholder narratives into coherent and meaningful themes. The analysis followed the six-step thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher invoked the application of Delve, a qualitative data analysis tool that allowed the researcher to code, classify, and arrange qualitative data on a simple platform so enabled thematic analysis. It helped with the identification, analysis, and reporting of themes, that is, patterns within data including focus group comments, interview transcripts, literature search and focus group discussions

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 AFCFTA AWARENESS AND READINESS

Most participants demonstrated a general awareness of AfCFTA's goals, often emphasizing market access. KIR1 pointed that "We see AfCFTA as an opportunity to break into larger African markets where our producers can sell to our neighbors more easily than before". Ordinarily reflect the theory of comparative advantage, where expanding markets would allow Zimbabwe scope for specialisation in sectors where it has efficiencies. These sectors may include agriculture, mining and tourism. KIR 3 commented that "Our agriculture sector, particularly farms and tobacco estates have traditionally enjoyed a comparative advantage regionally, the AfCFTA could provide a window for us to leverage that advantage". In line with comparative advantage theory, respondents believe that pursuing specialization is beneficial. However, the understanding is varied by another stakeholder group. FGH, P2 admitted low familiarity with the AfCFTA. "To be honest, the majority of us do not know this animal called the AfCFTA, we only hear about AfCFTA in government television bulletins and news items; we're absolutely clueless on how it works" This demonstrates uneven awareness among groups who are supposed to be beneficiaries of the integration model, and it naturally suggests the need for robust engagement, consultation and stakeholder communication. Literature stresses the centrality of stakeholder communication, and that successful integration is driven by elaborate knowledge dissemination (Smith, 2020) and it also supports the notion that many operating small businesses require tailormade capacity-building on trade rules, among other continental integration necessities, (ECA Trade Facilitation Report 2020).

"For Zimbabwe to make progress in broad AfCFTA implementation, stakeholders must be aware of the existence of a National AfCFTA Strategy driven by all stakeholders within the facilitative role of government through ministries of industry, trade and foreign affairs" hinted KIR5. He proceeded to remark that this would be achieved via the mechanisms of an operational implementation committees, with a designated budget and mandate for execution. The disconnect is that none of the affected stakeholders is aware of a documented strategy which should serve as an implementation roadmap, outlining comparative and priority sectors, relevant timelines, and indeed policy goals. According to NRGI (2021), this inertia not only undermines policy coherence but also signals to stakeholders, particularly the private sector, SMEs, and civil society, that regional integration is not anchored as a national development priority. Stakeholder awareness is demonstrated by the absence of strong political stewardship thus risks reducing the AfCFTA to a rhetorical aspiration rather than a transformative policy instrument (Macleod 2021).

4.2 IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORKS AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

The study revealed regulatory incoherence, institutional fragmentation, and weak enforcement capacity as major impediments. KIR 16 highlighted that "We still lack a dedicated coordinating body, so ministries duplicate efforts, and no single institution owns the process." As overlapping mandates result in contradictory rules institutions creating tariff schedules without consulting those in charge of customs enforcement this fragmentation compromises policy coherence. Structural redundancies and a lack of efficient government thus compromise implementation strength. Operationally, effective border systems and coordinated institutional arrangements will determine whether AfCFTA is successful. Reducing trade transaction costs and enhancing time-to market depend on reforms in customs and border management, including risk-based inspection, modernisation of electronic clearance systems, and the building of One-Stop Border Posts. Policy execution is still hampered, though, by institutional fragmentation and poor inter-agency cooperation (AfDB, 2021). With agencies lacking the personnel, technology, or mandate clarity to properly monitor trade flows, reduced enforcement capacity results from inadequate resources and bureaucratic lethargy. Informal traders thus take advantage of these weaknesses, so undermining institutional integrity and public confidence.

Conflicting policy priorities also compromise institutional integrity and effectiveness. One day the Finance Ministry pushes liberalisation, the next the Industry Ministry revives protectionist measures this back-and-forth signal a lack of political commitment and policy alignment (FGB, P3). Such discrepancies compound role duplicity, in which several agencies perform related tasks without coordination, so wasting resources and confusing stakeholders (ZNCC, 2023). To guarantee agencies act unison, effective AfCFTA implementation calls for harmonised legal frameworks and a single strategic roadmap. KRI 15 gave a detailed prognosis of Zimbabwe's productive base. A dying manufacturing sector that operates at less than 40% capacity, unstable electricity (with frequent load shedding), deteriorating rail infrastructure, and expensive logistics all hinder the nation's ability to produce. He moaned the frequent policy reversals and administrative inefficiencies, the regulatory environment which is still wholly unpredictable. The economy is structurally unprepared for the competition and opportunity brought about by the AfCFTA because of these factors, which also increase operational risks, discourage long-term planning, and limit the ability of domestic companies to scale up and compete in regional value chains.

4.3 ECONOMIC CRIME VULNERABILITIES

Participants repeatedly pointed out as major weaknesses compromising Zimbabwe's AfCFTA gains the fallout from under-invoicing and smuggling. KRI 10 said regretfully, 'Our borders remain porous; goods slip across without proper declaration, eroding the tariff base we rely on to fund development'. In fact, smuggling not only skews market prices but also fuels illegal financial flows free from government control, so aggravating income shortages and supporting a cycle of underinvestment in border infrastructure (OECD, 2019). This dynamic encourages informalization, in which traders choose covert paths over official ones, so undermining government ability to control trade and enforce compliance. KRI 6 said 'Procurement fraud and trade-based money laundering have become normalised, with powerful interests manipulating contracts to syphon resources," illustrating how illicit financial flows stretch beyond physical goods to white-collar crimes and corruption. Apart from eroding public confidence in the AfCFTA framework (UNECA, 2021) the spread of such behaviours compromises the rule of law and public trust in institutions (World Bank, 2021). Complicating these problems, cyber-driven financial security concerns such as digital invoice fraud emerged as new frontiers for criminals taking advantage of inadequate IT systems within customs and trade facilitation agencies (UNCTAD, 2020).

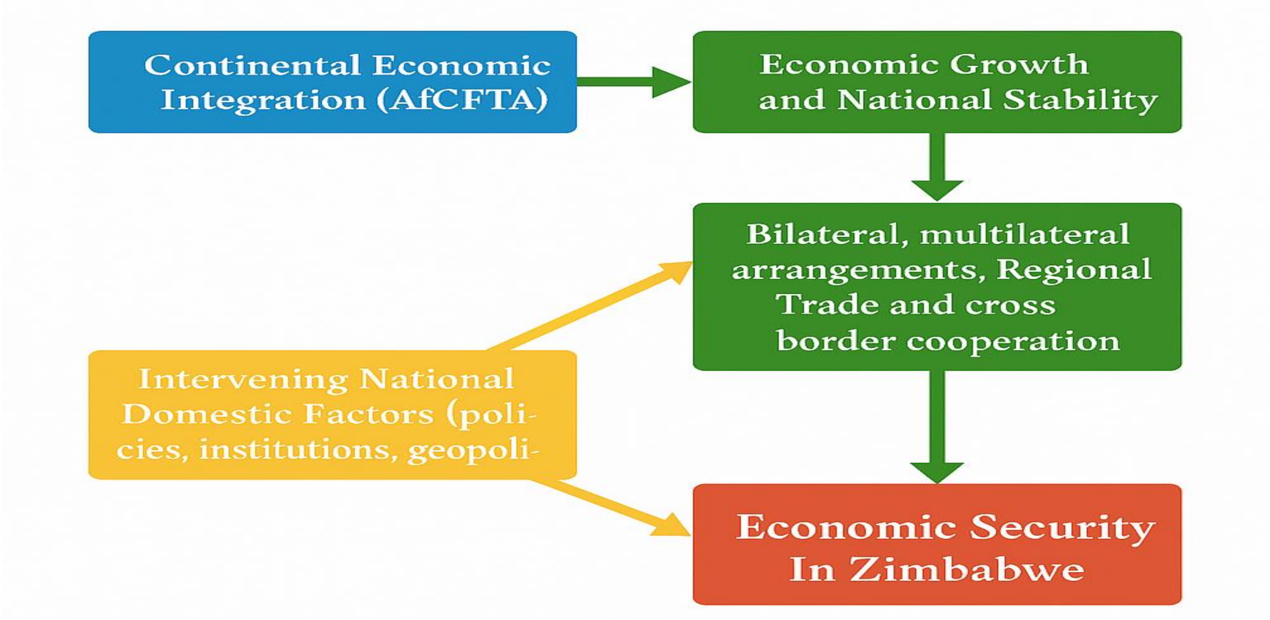
Customs fraud and border control gaps have heightened regional tensions and inter-ethnic strife in border towns. KRI 8 observed, "At unregulated crossing points, informal traders often from marginalised ethnic groups bear the brunt of violent extortion by criminal networks". This junction of crime, poverty, and political unrest not only compromises local livelihoods but also calls discredit on Zimbabwe's position in negotiations over AfCFTA protocols. Moreover, these weaknesses deter foreign direct investment and stimulate capital flight since investors believe the business environment to be unstable and risky. The whole influence of these economic crimes has been negative for industrial growth and employment. Manufacturers claim that unfair competition from underpriced or smuggled imports has caused plant closures and job losses, so aggravating unemployment and underemployment in urban and peri-urban areas. KRI 15 noted "Our steel mill shut down because smuggled steel rods undercut our prices there was simply no level playing field" in reference to these results highlight the paradox of AfCFTA: criminal exploitation and policy incoherence hollow out the possibility for trade-driven development without strong protections, adjustment mechanisms, and infrastructure investment.

4.4 STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS AND ECONOMIC SECURITY IMPACT

Stakeholder inclusivity emerged as a central concern, with many participants noting that voices from SMEs and civil society were marginalised in the AfCFTA process. (FGB, P4) lamented, "We were never invited to the national consultations; decisions are made in boardrooms with little regard for grassroots realities". This exclusion undermines trust in institutions and fueled perceptions that the process serves elite interests, thereby eroding policy legitimacy (ZNCC, 2023). Trust in the implementation process was further weakened by misalignment between national development priorities and AfCFTA objectives. KRI 18 observed, "Our government's focus on rapid liberalisation conflicts with the need to protect nascent industries; this trade-off has not been communicated clearly to stakeholders". Such policy incoherence fosters stakeholder dissatisfaction and governance vulnerability, as affected groups question the strategic rationale for AfCFTA commitments.

Participants articulated a nuanced balance between perceived risks and benefits. While some welcomed access to new markets, others feared adverse social outcomes: "Without safety nets, job losses from increased competition could heighten poverty and social tensions, especially in urban informal settlements," warned a social policy researcher KRI 13. This sentiment underscores that AfCFTA's benefits are conditional on complementary social protection measures to mitigate negative externalities. Participants showed more understanding on two key components of economic security under AfCFTA to be employment and stable income. "While new markets offer jobs, we have yet to see sustained income stability for workers, who still face layoffs when competition intensively," KRI 17. The study notes that indeed, the flood of less expensive imports under preferential rules has caused job losses in sensitive sectors, aggravating household poverty and increasing regional income gaps. Low and volatile economic growth, whereby GDP growth oscillated between 1% and 6% from 2019--2023, so undermining chances for stable employment and sustainable livelihoods (World Bank, 2021; IMF, 2022).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



Source: Researcher's Own Works

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

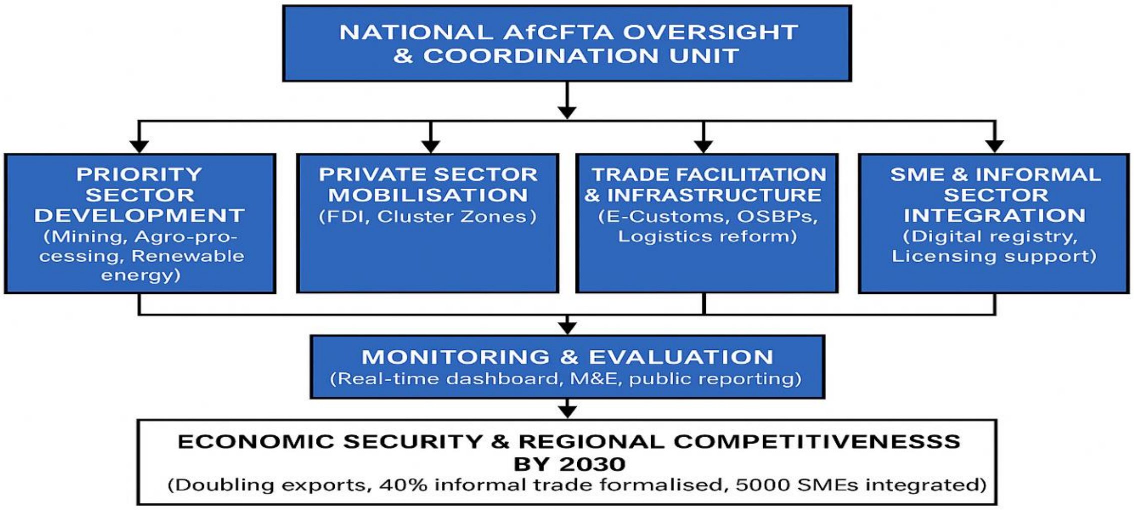
This study concludes that while Zimbabwe's engagement with AfCFTA presents a strategic opportunity to boost economic security through trade diversification, industrial expansion, and regional integration, the actualization of these benefits remains contingent on comprehensive domestic reforms. Legal ratification alone is insufficient. Without effective institutional capacity, policy coherence, and inclusive stakeholder mobilisation, AfCFTA risks entrenching existing inequalities and exposing Zimbabwe to new forms of economic insecurity. Theoretically, the findings affirm that regional trade liberalization can catalyze economic security gains but only where national institutions are capable, coordinated, and inclusive. Practically, Zimbabwe's current institutional limitations mean the country risks marginalisation and deepened vulnerabilities if implementation remains fragmented. The findings underscore the centrality of institutional readiness, anti-corruption mechanisms, and adaptive trade infrastructure in shaping AfCFTA's success. Moreover, weak monitoring and evaluation frameworks have hampered Zimbabwe's ability to detect and respond to implementation failures, illicit financial flows, and compliance breaches. The study affirms that AfCFTA's success in Zimbabwe is not automatic it must be earned through strategic planning, governance integrity, and consistent political will.

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

5.1 ESTABLISH A NATIONAL AFCFTA IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Develop and disseminate a clear roadmap outlining priority sectors, timelines, trade facilitation objectives, SME support, organised business, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This strategy must be cross-sectoral and inclusive. The study recommends a National AfCFTA Implementation Strategy (NAIS) for Zimbabwe which offers a thorough road map to make use of the African Continental Free Trade Area as a driver of industrial rebirth, more intra-African trade, and improved economic security. This approach, in contrast to current policy fragments, synthesises institutional realities, stakeholder experiences, and policy gaps into a roadmap that is coordinated, actionable, and digitally anchored. It transforms AfCFTA from a rhetorical commitment into a platform for structural economic transformation, capable of unlocking Zimbabwe's industrial, trade, and governance potential by 2030.

Figure 2: Proposed National AFCFTA Strategy



Source: Researchers' Own Works

5.2 STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION AND CAPACITY

The study recommends that the state clarifies and realign roles among government departments seized with domesticating the AfCFTA particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority. Further there is urgent need to enhance inter-agency collaboration, particularly at border posts and in tariff administration. The study established that state elites predominate in the policymaking arena, leaving little room for significant private or civic sector influence, ownership and buy-in. The study also discovered that many times stakeholder consultations are tokenistic, and decisions are already taken before involvement starts. The recommendation to ensure genuine involvement and consultation with national stakeholders has far reaching positive outcomes and benefits.

5.3 IMPROVE TRADE FACILITATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The study therefore recommends that the country upgrades digital trade infrastructure such as customs systems, expands One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs), and invest in resilient logistics to meet AfCFTA commitments efficiently. The study revealed that with its infrastructure in a state of systematic collapse, Zimbabwe is essentially excluded from significant involvement in industrialisation driven by AfCFTA and trade expansion. Frequent power outages, non-functional railroads, deteriorated road networks, and outdated industrial parks burden the economy, a combined reality that makes domestic production not only uncompetitive but also progressively impossible on scale (AfDB, 2022; World Bank, 2023). The study commends the country for ratifying the agreement however the study also notes with concern that Zimbabwe's involvement in AfCFTA runs thus mostly symbolic since the nation lacks the basic infrastructure required to satisfy even the minimum criteria of competitiveness.

5.4 SUPPORT SME AND INFORMAL SECTOR PARTICIPATION

The study therefore recommends that Zimbabwe undertakes a raft of macroeconomic measures to contain the crippling currency effects, complications presented by scarcity of economic enablers and the general pain of cost of doing business mainly on the back of a low country risk profiling. Although inclusive trade involves both SMEs, and informal businesses, their strong absorption in survivalist, uncontrolled activities motivated by economic downturn makes them unprepared to compete in continental markets. It is imperative that the country deliberately launch targeted and corruption proofed capacity-building, financing, and training programs for SMEs to enhance compliance with all eligibility articles of continental integration including rules of origin, product standards, and export processes.

5.5 ADDRESS ECONOMIC CRIME VULNERABILITIES

Strengthen anti-smuggling units, deploy cross-border intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and reinforce penalties for trade-based fraud and under-invoicing. The study noted that, particularly in high-value industries like mining and cross-border trade, Zimbabwe suffers great economic security threats from systematic corruption, smuggling, and illegal financial flows. The study recommends that the government, in dealing with these issues, invokes a digital revolution of governance, monitoring, and enforcement systems to boost compliance, lower discretion, and improve openness. Important digital solutions are e-customs systems to modernise border control, AI-assisted trade-based money laundering detection, and blockchain-based mineral tracking to stop underreporting and royalty evasion. The study believes Zimbabwe runs the danger of staying a low-trust, high-risk economy structurally excluded from the advantages of continental integration.

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