AFCFTA: WHERE UGANDA'S EXPORTERS SUCCEED AND WHY OTHERS GET STUCK

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The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) has moved from treaty to trading reality. Uganda is exporting more within Africa. Some exporters are expanding regionally with ease, while others face border delays, regulatory confusion and rising compliance costs.

Uganda's exporters are winning in the regional markets. In 2025, the country exported goods worth US$2.4b to COMESA. This is a 21% increase from $2b in 2024.

Overall exports for the year stood at US$12.6b, a 57% growth from US$8b the previous year. Products showing potential are processed foods, manufactured goods plus logistics, construction and professional services.

Whereas Uganda is a landlocked country, this provides land-linked access in the great lakes region.

UGANDA IS RE-EXPORTING

Deliberate investment of oil proceeds to improve land, air, water, rail, road transport and logistical chains is strategic. Uganda is a re-exporter of products benefiting business people along the export supply chain through efficiency and location.

A huge portion of Uganda's re-exports includes petroleum products, vehicles and electronics. A car is imported from Japan, cleared at a bonded warehouse in Kampala and then sold to a buyer in Goma.

Successful exporters who are winning are doing certain things differently; market research before entry, documentation discipline and local partnerships in destination markets.

However, there are hidden bottlenecks slowing AfCFTA trade. Non-Tariff Barriers are replacing tariffs. These are hidden rules and regulations with the intent of frustrating imports into a country.

Think of a chameleon changing colours. There are rules of origin misunderstandings. Importing countries can doubt whether Uganda produces sufficient sugar for export. Border inefficiencies and inconsistent enforcement are a bottleneck in addition to limited awareness of AfCFTA procedures at SME level. With Uganda a landlocked country, transport and logistics costs erode price competitiveness. AfCFTA success is no longer about access, but execution.

Trucks loaded with goods for export. Uganda is a re-exporter of products including petroleum products, vehicles and electronics

SOME EXPORTERS ARE STUCK

There are reasons why some exporters are stuck, despite open markets. Some of these challenges include poor export readiness plus weak quality and poor standards compliance. Business people should make a move after adequate research. The lack of reliable market intelligence in potential markets keep exporters stuck. Uganda's embassies in Africa are not adequately financed and equipped with skilled export intelligence specialists.

There is over reliance on informal trade channels and absence of a long-term export strategy. We must think possible solutions for Uganda to fully benefit from AfCFTA. There are two sides of the coin; what exporters must do and expectations from institutions. Synergy between these two forces will deliver export-led growth.

Exporters must treat AfCFTA as a business strategy, not a policy announcement and scout opportunities.

Louis Pasteur said: "Chance (fortune) favours the prepared mind." Breakthroughs look like luck, but they usually happen to people who were already ready to recognise and use an opportunity.

The business community should invest in compliance, packaging, branding and build relationships, not just shipments.

Institutions form a key backbone and must perform their roles. There should be a deliberate effort to simplify procedures from company registration, regulatory compliance to customs procedures. Information dissemination should be improved with one stop centres for faster processing.

Border agencies need to be aligned and work as a team. SMEs need support beyond awareness workshops. AfCFTA is open and competitiveness decides who benefits. AfCFTA is no longer about potential. It is here with us.

The private sector will make it happen on condition that Government forms the back bone.

Export led growth without tangible government support remains a paper tiger. It is about preparedness and competitiveness. Uganda's exporters who adapt will grow. Those who don't will remain locked out, despite open borders.

While efforts are made to promote exports, this should not be done at the expense of the environment. The pollution of Lake Victoria will affect fish exports, tourism and the marine economy. We should aim to have deforestation-free supply chains.

The writer is an export trade specialist

PERSONAL FINANCE
SYLVIA JUUKO

Why earning more may not

...the last 10 years ...a has been climbing the ...orate ladder at a local firm ...ampala...

And if you have experienced a significant salary increase, you probably understand exactly what she is going through...

everyone else's expectations of you.

works for most people is to separate their worth from their earning capacity. More to that, you must consider the psychological shift that comes with change in income.

It is important to remember that stress is not just about giving money away. It is...

there is also the arrival fallacy or what we call "arrivalism." Nana, like most of us, thought: "Once I earn sh8m or sh20m, I will be happy." "I will fulfil all my dreams." Once she hit that target, she discovered that happiness didn't arrive. Instead...