

From schoolchildren to digital nomads, our cross-border trade is even more lit

For years, Africa has been told a poor story about itself: that it barely trades with its own neighbours. Official figures have long put intra-African trade at between 15 and 17 per cent of the continent's total commerce, reinforcing the idea of fragmented markets and outward dependence.

But that story is badly incomplete. Fresh research from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), reported in *The Economist*, finds that about \$10 billion in food is traded each year informally in West Africa alone. Why is that striking? Because it is up to six times higher than the officially recorded figure. Similar cross-border flows exist across East, Central and Southern Africa, quietly sustaining livelihoods and food systems.

Once these informal exchanges are factored in, intra-African trade is likely to rise to between 17 and 20 per cent of total trade. This conclusion was also reached in "Borderless Africa: A Sceptic's Guide to the Continental Free Trade Area" by Francis Mangeni and Andrew Mold (a good East African and a friend of East Africa, respectively), published in April 2024. Yet, because they are not celebrity economists who wear sneakers without socks and tweed jackets with leather elbow patches, their book barely registered in African media.

Even when we talk about informal trade, it still doesn't capture everything left out of the official numbers. There are other exchanges right under our noses, wrapped in cultural habits, that we overlook. Take the Busia or Malaba Kenya-Uganda border. Each morning, thousands of children walk across to study in Kenya, and thousands move the other way to study in Uganda. Because of unique border cultures, they are viewed as "children of the village", part of the border furniture. No one pays much attention to them if they are not sickly, and there is no deeper interrogation of what they represent.

The value of education services, which is technically exported by both countries to each other, is absent from both official and informal data. That is because for both sets of numbers, we count only what we can "see with our naked eyes" and touch - a bag of flour, smuggled fuel in a jerrycan, soap, and food. But we miss the human capital being ferried across the line in small yellow uniforms and scuffed shoes.

Then there are the "border patients". In places like Namanga or Taveta, a mother might wake up in Tanzania with a nagging fever and decide that the clinic two kilometres away in Kenya has better, more reliable pills. She crosses over, pays her few shillings, receives a diagnosis and a blister pack of malaria tablets, and walks back home to cook dinner.

In the East African Community ledger, this transaction does not appear. It is a ghost



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export of healthcare services. Yet, if a German tourist flies into Nairobi for a dental procedure, we call it medical tourism and write glowing reports about it.

Or take the bride in South Sudan's capital, Juba, who decides that the tailors in the big Konyo Konyo market aren't up to scratch, while those in Eastleigh, Nairobi, are more "happening". She sends measurements via WhatsApp to an Eastleigh tailor her cousin uses, pays via mobile money, and a cousin brings the gown across on a bus, tucked inside a suitcase with a smelly mitumba sweater on top to mask the scent of luxury. The gown is a high-value textile export, and the tailoring is a professional service. To the border guard, it's just a suitcase with stinky clothes that once belonged to some American. And in the region's gross domestic product, it is invisible.

We also have what you might call the "Digital Nomads of the Bush". In the border towns of West Africa, young people often sit in "grey zones" where the 4G signal from the neighbouring country is stronger and cheaper. They run small graphic design businesses or manage social media for clients across the border while perched on a jerrycan in their own country. They are exporting digital services, yet the only thing the taxman sees is a boy with a smartphone who supposedly needs a "real job".

Why does this matter? Firstly, it gives the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) much-needed credibility. If you tell a sceptic that Africa doesn't trade with itself, they will dismiss the AfCFTA as a vanity project for suit-wearing bureaucrats.

But if you show them that the trade is already happening, it attracts serious money. Investors are like vultures; they circle where they see a carcass of profit. If a warehouse developer sees official data indicating that only 10 trucks cross a border, he stays home. But if the "real" data shows 1,500 motorcycles carrying small loads a day, he realises there could be a market for mini storage and logistics.

And a president is more likely to sign off on a modern shipping vessel on Lake Victoria if he knows he isn't building a bridge to nowhere, but rather a pipeline for the millions of dollars already flowing under his nose on rickety boats.

We have spent too long focusing on the significant, formal failures in African trade and missing the small, informal victories. It is time we started counting the children in yellow uniforms, and wedding dresses tucked at the bottom of suitcases. We might find that the integrated Africa we have been dreaming of isn't a future destination—it's a reality we've been ignoring while waiting for the paperwork to catch up.

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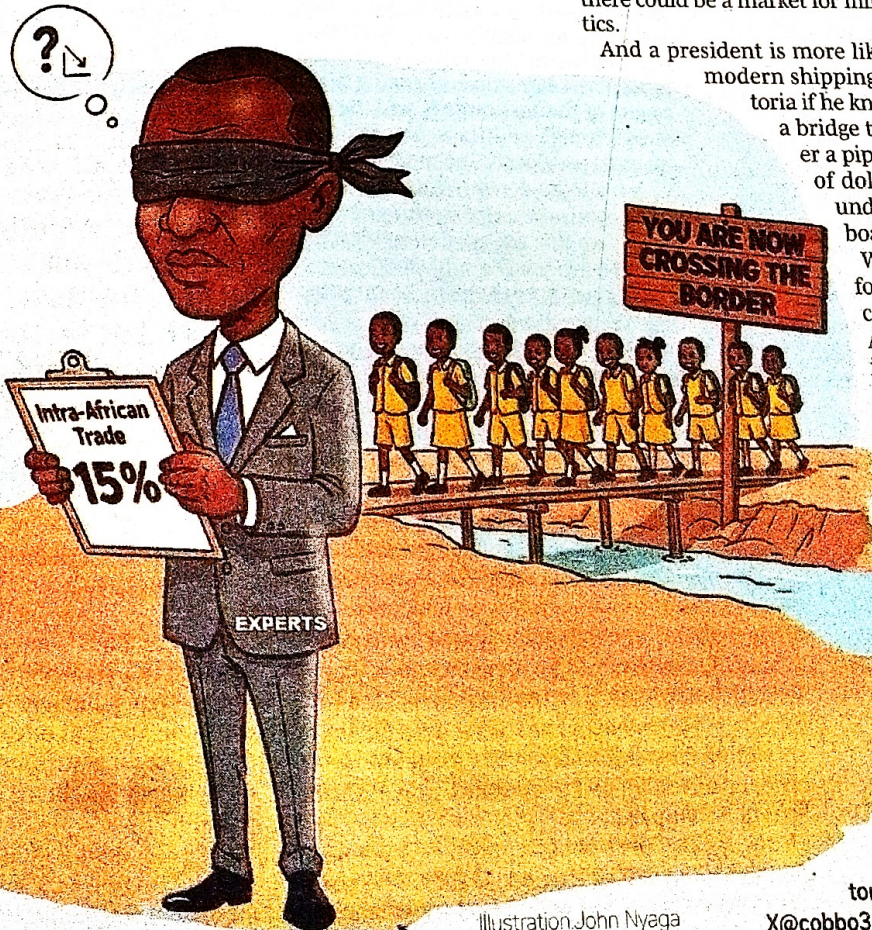


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