

Balancing Trade and Health

The AfCFTA's Impact on Tobacco Control in Central and West Africa

ACBF Policy Brief No. 1 | November 2025



Summary

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a historic milestone in Africa's pursuit of economic integration. By reducing tariffs on 90% of traded goods, the agreement seeks to promote intra-African trade, industrialization, and sustainable growth. However, while these economic goals are laudable, the implementation of AfCFTA may pose significant challenges to public health, particularly in relation to tobacco control. Central and West Africa—home to 25 countries within the ECCAS and ECOWAS blocs—is at a pivotal crossroads. The liberalization of trade may inadvertently increase the affordability, availability, and consumption of tobacco products, potentially undermining progress toward achieving the goals of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Conversely, AfCFTA also offers opportunities for harmonized policies, stronger regional collaboration, and coordinated responses to illicit trade and industry interference. This brief examines the key challenges, opportunities, and policy options for integrating robust tobacco control measures into the AfCFTA framework to safeguard public health while supporting regional economic growth.

1. Introduction

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a culmination of decades of efforts towards African economic integration, building upon earlier initiatives such as the Lagos Plan of Action, the Abuja Treaty, and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). It was launched in 2018 after 44 countries became signatories to the agreement and became a force in 2019 after 22 countries ratified.[1] The agreement seeks to address persistent economic challenges, including low intra-African trade, limited industrialization, and high unemployment rates.[2] The AfCFTA aims to create a unified continental market that can compete effectively on the global stage. The AfCFTA protocol on trade in goods drives this integration by eliminating tariffs on 90% of goods traded across the continent. This tariff reduction lowers trade barriers and encourages economic integration among African nations. The protocol also includes rules of origin, customs cooperation, and trade facilitation measures designed to streamline cross-border trade and reduce transaction costs.[3,4] Through these harmonized trade policies, AfCFTA can foster a more efficient and integrated market, leading to increased industrialization and economic diversification across the continent.

While the AfCFTA has many benefits, it may inadvertently have some unintended negative effects that could emerge during the implementation of free trade, especially in the health sector. One particular area where the AfCFTA has the potential to exacerbate health challenges is the tobacco epidemic in Africa. Over 1 billion people use tobacco globally, and approximately 80% of them reside in low and middle-income countries, including Africa. [5–7] It is the most preventable cause of death, yet it kills approximately 8 million people annually, including 1.3 million non-smokers. This challenge is more critical for Africa as a continent, facing a potential 39% increase in tobacco use by 2030 - the highest projected regional growth worldwide.[8]

The intersection of tobacco control policy and the AfCFTA presents a complex policy environment. Past experiences, such as the surge in tobacco consumption after trade liberalization in some Asian countries during the 1980s and 1990s, highlight the potential risks.[9] On the other hand, the AfCFTA offers opportunities for collective action on tobacco control. It could pave the way for harmonized regulations, enhanced cross-border collaboration to combat illicit trade, and the pooling of resources to strengthen the implementation of control measures.

This policy brief examines the implications of the AfCFTA on tobacco control in Central and West Africa, with a focus on affordability, cross-border trade, health outcomes, fiscal revenue, and industry interference. It also provides actionable recommendations for aligning AfCFTA implementation with WHO FCTC objectives.

2. Emerging Challenges and Opportunities

Affordability of Cigarettes

Cigarette affordability is a key factor for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), measured by the Relative Income Price (RIP), which compares cigarette prices to per capita income. Disparities in income levels among member countries may complicate tobacco control efforts, as lower-income nations may struggle to impose necessary sin taxes. Figure 1 indicates that in five Central African countries, cigarettes became less affordable in the lead-up to AfCFTA, requiring a larger share of income in 2022. Conversely, four other countries experienced increased affordability, requiring a smaller percentage of income for purchases.

The forecast of cigarette affordability by 2030 applied an average retail price of USD 2.5 per pack of 20 cigarettes, representing the 2012–2022 average of the two subregions, and incorporates country-specific 3-year average income growth rates. For comparison, a higher bound of USD 3.5 and USD 4.5 was also computed. The three projections, which represent the least, moderate, and high price bounds, reflect the dynamics of cigarettes' affordability in Central and West Africa, and the disparities among the countries are highly noticeable.

If not countered by harmonized excise tax measures, AfCFTA's tariff reductions could make tobacco products cheaper relative to income growth.

Policy Recommendations:



Introduction of minimum tobacco taxes across AfCFTA member nations: Establish a unified minimum excise tax to increase the retail price of tobacco products and reduce affordability.



Adopt progressive taxation: Implement tax structures that automatically adjust for inflation and income growth to sustain the reduced affordability of tobacco products.



Remove tax exemptions: Eliminate exemptions for tobacco manufacturers or importers to block loopholes.

Cross-Border Trade

An examination of the tobacco trade balance in Central Africa from 2004 to 2023 reveals that ECCAS countries heavily rely on imports from neighboring African regions, which could undermine efforts to strengthen regional self-sufficiency. Similarly, trade deficits with non-African countries, which peaked at 47.62 million USD in 2023, point to ECCAS countries' persistent dependence on global markets for tobacco products, further limiting ECCAS's ability to regulate tobacco trade within its borders. In the case of West Africa, the trade balance exhibits intermittent surpluses and deficits, reflecting the fluctuating dynamics of intra-regional trade. In the global markets, ECOWAS consistently faces large deficits, with the trade balance for non-African countries remaining profoundly negative across the 2004-2023 period.

The AfCFTA has the potential to address these imbalances/deficits by fostering greater regional integration and promoting intra-African trade. Strengthening tobacco control measures under the AfCFTA framework

can help ECCAS and ECOWAS countries to align trade policies to reduce reliance on external markets while advancing public health goals.

Policy Recommendations:



Standardize tobacco taxation and pricing: Align tax rates and pricing systems across member states to reduce price disparities that encourage cross-border shopping.



Establish a common tariff structure: Set harmonized import/export tariffs for tobacco products under the AfCFTA to simplify regulation and reduce smuggling incentives.



Implement a continental surveillance system: Use digital tools to track the movement of tobacco products and ensure compliance with trade agreements.

Health Outcomes

A quick glance at the tobacco-induced deaths in ECCAS and ECOWAS countries (from 2012 to 2021)¹ shows that in Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo recorded the highest number of tobacco-induced deaths at 142,727, followed by Angola with 69,847, and Cameroon with 47,157 deaths. In the case of ECOWAS countries, Nigeria stands out with the highest number of deaths at 169,522, followed by Cote d'Ivoire with 57,294, and Ghana with 53,487. The findings reveal public health disparities and challenges, with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria bearing the heaviest burdens.

The implementation of AfCFTA could have implications for these findings due to its potential impacts. Trade liberalization may increase accessibility and consumption, particularly in areas where tobacco control is weak. Conversely, AfCFTA can facilitate tax harmonization and cross-border cooperation to reduce mortality disparities.

Policy Recommendations:



Mandate comprehensive health warnings: Require standardized and pictorial health warnings on all tobacco packaging, with harmonized designs across AfCFTA countries.



Strengthen smoking cessation services: Include cessation services as part of primary healthcare, funded by increased tobacco taxes.



Promote public awareness campaigns: Coordinate regional efforts to educate the public about the health risks of tobacco use and second-hand smoke exposure.

Fiscal revenue

The AfCFTA aims to eliminate up to 90% of tariffs on goods traded within Africa, thereby boosting intra-African trade and increasing economic activity across the continent. That way, the tax base would expand, yielding more revenue for the participating governments. Nonetheless, countries that rely heavily on customs duties may experience a reduction in fiscal revenue in the short term due to a decrease in tariffs and duties.

1. Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) - <https://www.healthdata.org/research-analysis/gbd>

In ECCAS countries, the average cigarette tax percentage steadily increased over the years, starting from 26% in 2008 and reaching 36% by 2022². Meanwhile, in ECOWAS countries, cigarette tax rates followed a similar upward trend, starting at 20% in 2008 and rising to 29% by 2022. Despite the consistent increases in both regions, ECCAS countries generally maintained higher average tax rates than ECOWAS throughout the observed period (2008 – 2022).

AfCFTA may likely face harmonization challenges as the higher average tax rates in ECCAS (36% by 2022) compared to ECOWAS (29% by 2022) suggest that some ECCAS countries may be resistant to aligning their tax policies with their ECOWAS counterparts, and if taxes are not harmonized, disparities could incentivize cross-border smuggling from low-tax to high-tax regions, which will eventually undermine the revenue goal.

Policy Recommendations:



Earmark tobacco tax revenue: Dedicate a portion of tobacco tax revenue to fund health systems, public health programs, and enforcement of tobacco control laws.



Enhance tax collection systems: Invest in digital tax collection tools to improve efficiency and reduce leakages.



Negotiate revenue-sharing mechanisms: Develop models to distribute tax revenues fairly among AfCFTA member states to promote cooperation.

Tobacco Industry Interference

Tobacco industry interference refers to the tactics and strategies employed by tobacco companies to undermine public health policies and influence government decisions in their favor. These efforts often aim to weaken tobacco control measures, delay implementation of health regulations, and promote the industry's interests at the expense of public health. The Tobacco Industry Interference Index, which measures the extent of such interference across selected African countries from 2020 to 2023, shows that Chad's impressive rank in 2023 signals a strong resistance to tobacco industry interference. This represents a notable achievement compared to Cameroon and Gabon, which show more significant challenges. Burkina Faso was the regional leader in resisting the influence of the tobacco industry in its 2023 ranking. The persistent decline in Ghana and Nigeria highlights the need for stronger regulatory and advocacy measures to address industry interference. AfCFTA could harmonize policies and share best practices to counter industry interference from highly ranked countries to assist countries with weaker resistance facing increased interference to enforce strong governance standards.

Policy Recommendations:



Adopt and enforce WHO FCTC Article 5.3: Prohibit tobacco industry participation in policy development processes.



Strengthen conflict of interest policies: Mandate disclosure of any affiliations between policymakers and tobacco companies.



Create a regional oversight body: Establish an AfCFTA-level watchdog to monitor and mitigate industry influence.

2. HO Global Health Observatory Data Repository

3. Illicit Trade Implications of AfCFTA

An essential extension of the FCTC is the protocol to eliminate illicit trade in tobacco products, which was adopted in 2012. It provides detailed guidelines for combating the illicit tobacco trade through the establishment of a global tracking and tracing system; encouragement of stronger law enforcement collaboration across borders; and imposition of sanctions and penalties on those engaged in counterfeiting and smuggling of tobacco products (WHO 2013)¹. With the implementation of AfCFTA, regulatory and administrative gaps

that could exacerbate illicit trade include porous borders and weak enforcement, inconsistent regulatory standards, a lack of harmonized standards, and overlapping membership among multiple regional economic communities.

Policy Recommendations:



Ratify the Protocol to eliminate illicit trade in tobacco products: Encourage all AfCFTA member states to implement this WHO protocol.



Enhance border controls: Use technology such as digital tax stamps and track-and-trace systems to detect and deter illicit trade.



Promote continental cooperation: Facilitate information sharing and joint operations among customs authorities to combat smuggling networks.

4. AfCFTA and WHO-FCTC framework

AfCFTA can reinforce the WHO FCTC principles by embedding public health safeguards into trade and investment protocols. Key alignments are included in Table 1.

Table 1: Integration of WHO FCTC into AfCFTA framework

WHO FCTC		AfCFTA		Remark
Component	Article	Component	Article*	
Price and Tax Measures	6	Tariff Liberalization and Investment Regulations	7 (<i>Goods</i>), 6 (<i>Investment</i>)	Encouragement of higher tobacco taxes to reduce consumption. AfCFTA tariff reductions should exclude tobacco products to support FCTC objectives. Investment regulations should prevent promoting investments in tobacco production.
Protection against Tobacco Industry Interference	5.3	Regulation of Investments and Competition Policy	6 (<i>Investment</i>), 6 (<i>Competition</i>)	Mandatory protection from tobacco industry interference. AfCFTA investment protocols should regulate tobacco-related investments, and competition policies should prevent monopolistic practices by tobacco companies.

1. WHO (2013), The Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/80873/9789241505246_eng.pdf?sequence=1

WHO FCTC		AfCFTA		Remark
Component	Article	Component	Article*	
Packaging and Labelling of Tobacco Products	11	Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and IPR Protection	17 (<i>Goods</i>), 12 (<i>IP</i>)	Plain packaging and graphic health warnings on tobacco products are required. AfCFTA TBT provisions and IPR protections should not obstruct these requirements.
Ban on Tobacco Advertising, Promotion, and Sponsorship	13	Market Access and Competition Policy	16 (<i>Services</i>), 12 (<i>Competition</i>)	Ban of advertisement and promotion of tobacco products. AfCFTA should prohibit advertising services that promote tobacco products, and that consumer protection measures prevent deceptive marketing strategies.
Control of Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products	15	Trade Facilitation, Transit, and Dispute Settlement	15, 19 (<i>Goods</i>), 8 (<i>Dispute Settlement</i>)	Prevention of illicit trade in tobacco products. AfCFTA trade facilitation measures should incorporate safeguards to prevent smuggling. Dispute settlement mechanisms should support anti-illicit trade efforts.
Regulation of the Content of Tobacco Products	9	Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures	16 (<i>Goods</i>)	Regulation of tobacco contents to reduce harm. AfCFTA should ensure that tobacco products adhere to public health regulations.
Protection from Exposure to Tobacco Smoke	8	Domestic Regulations and Market Access	18 (<i>Services</i>), 16 (<i>Services</i>)	Mandatory protection from second-hand smoke. AfCFTA's should incorporate public health exceptions to restrict tobacco use in public places and services.
Alternative Livelihoods for Tobacco Farmers	17	Investment Regulations and Patents (IP)	10 (<i>Investment</i>), 18 (<i>IP</i>)	Promotion of alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers. AfCFTA should prioritize investments that promote sustainable agriculture and patent protection for alternative products.
International Cooperation on Tobacco Control	22	Mutual Recognition and Development of Infrastructure	19 (<i>Services</i>), 24 (<i>Services</i>)	Encouragement of research and data-sharing opportunities. AfCFTA's provisions should facilitate collaboration in tobacco research and training.
Research, Surveillance, and Exchange of Information	20	Transparency and Development of Infrastructure	23 (<i>Services</i>), 24 (<i>Services</i>)	FCTC mandates research and surveillance on tobacco use. AfCFTA transparency provisions can be harmonized to ensure that data and research on tobacco are shared freely across borders.

* AfCFTA Protocols are in parentheses

5. Conclusion

The AfCFTA framework presents both opportunities and challenges to ECCAS and ECOWAS countries. On one hand, it provides an opportunity for both ECCAS and ECOWAS to tap into broader African markets and expand trade footprint beyond their immediate region. On the other hand, implementation of AfCFTA may likely lead to an increase in affordability and consumption of tobacco, short-term revenue loss for member countries that rely heavily on customs duties, a rise in industry interference, and illicit tobacco trading. However, with regional collaboration and harmonization of taxes, AfCFTA can facilitate cross-border cooperation to combat smuggling, counter industry interference, expand and regulate trade, and align public health policies with the WHO FCTC, leading to better tobacco control outcomes.

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Note

This Policy Brief was prepared by the staff of the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). It is based on original research commissioned by ACBF, conducted by the Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA), titled *“The Challenges and Implications of Implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) on Tobacco Control Policies in Central and West Africa,”* completed in **December 2024**. The analysis, findings, and recommendations presented herein draw substantially from that research, with additional inputs and contextual analysis by ACBF staff. The research and related knowledge products are part of the Capacity Building for Sustainable Tobacco Control in Africa (TC3) Program implemented by ACBF and supported by the Gates Foundation.



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