

**THE ROLE OF HARMONISED STANDARDS IN REDUCING TECHNICAL BARRIERS TO
TRADE AND IN PROMOTING FAIR AND JUST TRADE WITHIN THE INTRA-AFRICAN
AND GLOBAL TRADE.**

Information of the author

Names: Colins Chediel Thomas

University: University of Dar es Salaam(UDSM), College of Engineering and Technology (CoET).

Course: Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering

Year of study: Final-year (4th Year)

Town and country: Ubungo Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Postal address: B.O Box 35091, CoET UDSM

Email and Telephone: colinsthomas1206@gmail.com, +255 782 656 536

LinkedIn profile: www.linkedin.com/in/colins-c-thomas

I am emerging electrical and software engineer passionate about empowering Africa's energy and technology future through innovation, AI, cybersecurity, and entrepreneurship. Also, committed to standardising renewable-energy solutions for MSMEs and developing practical technical measures to boost intra-African and Global trade.

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List of Abbreviations

AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AFSEC	African Electrotechnical Standardisation Commission
APA	American Psychological Association
ARS	African Regional Standards
ARSO	African Organisation for Standardisation
EAC	East African Community
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation
MSMEs	Micro, Small, and Medium-Sized Enterprises
NTBs	Non-Tariff Barriers
RECs	Regional Economic Communities
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
TBS	Tanzania Bureau of Standards
TBTs	Technical Barriers to Trade
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
US\$	United States Dollar

Title: Reduction of Technical Barriers to Trade (TBTs) through Harmonised Standards

Africa is a continent of extraordinary productivity potential by hosting 1.4 billion people and a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion, the continent trades more with the rest of the world than with itself such that intra-African commerce represents barely 16% of total African trade compared to 60% in Asia and 68% in Europe within themselves (Brookings Institution, 2024). This is not merely a statistical shortfall but it is a symptom of deep structural fragmentation that denies African enterprises access to their own markets, constrains industrial development, and perpetuates poverty. Ironically, as traditional tariff walls have come down through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a subtler but equally corrosive obstacle has taken their place: Technical Barriers to Trade (TBTs). Differing product standards, incompatible testing requirements, and duplicative certification procedures have emerged as the invisible tariffs of the twenty-first century by costing African exporters more than traditional duties ever did. Harmonised standards are not a bureaucratic luxury; they are the moral and economic foundation upon which fair, just, and integrated African trade must be built.

Technical Barriers to Trade: A Fragmented Landscape and Its Costs

TBTs arise when countries impose technical regulations, standards, and conformity assessment procedures that differ from those of their trading partners. In Africa, this challenge is compounded by the continent's regulatory architecture: eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs), each with its own standards framework,

create a patchwork of overlapping and sometimes contradictory requirements. A Tanzanian manufacturer seeking to export processed food to Cameroon must navigate not only different labelling regulations but potentially different permissible additive levels, packaging specifications, and testing protocols for the same product. Research by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that non-tariff barriers in Africa carry an ad valorem equivalent of approximately 18%, making them as economically burdensome as tariffs themselves. Moreover, addressing these barriers could generate annual gains of US\$20 billion for AfCFTA member states which is three to four times the gains expected from tariff elimination alone (UNCTAD, 2021).

The burden falls most heavily on micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) which provide over 80% of employment (UNCTAD, 2024), yet they are least equipped to absorb the costs of duplicative testing, multiple certifications, and regulatory compliance across different jurisdictions. A small-scale agri-processor in Dar es Salaam, for instance, may be fully compliant with Tanzania Bureau of Standards (TBS) requirements but still be unable to access the Kenyan or Rwandan market due to unresolved standards alignment gaps or differing national interpretations of the same East African Community standard. Tanzania's SME Development Policy (2003) already recognises standards compliance as a critical market access issue for MSMEs, yet the institutional and financial capacity

to support small enterprises in navigating cross-border regulatory requirements remains limited.

The root causes of this problem are structural and historical. Colonial-era regulatory systems established in isolation were never systematically harmonised. The proliferation of RECs with each pursuing its own standards agenda, has deepened fragmentation rather than resolved it. Institutional capacity gaps mean that many National Standards Bodies lack the resources to implement, enforce, or adopt harmonised standards at scale. Furthermore, African producers have historically been excluded from global standard-setting forums, meaning that international standards often reflect the technical and economic realities of industrialised countries rather than Africa's productive landscape. The consequence is a continent-wide standards deficit that suppresses trade flows, discourages investment in cross-border value chains, and locks African producers into peripheral roles in the global economy.

Harmonised Standards as an Instrument of Integration and Justice

Harmonised standards offer a strategic and proven pathway out of this impasse. The African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO), established in 1977 under the mandate of the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), is central to this transformation. ARSO coordinates the development of African Regional Standards (ARS) through inclusive technical committees that draw on national expertise, industry knowledge, and

international benchmarks. By aligning ARS with ISO and Codex Alimentarius norms, ARSO ensures that African products can satisfy both continental and global market requirements simultaneously, eliminating costly re-testing and regulatory duplication.

Within the AfCFTA legal framework, the TBT Annex (Article 5) and the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Annex (Article 8) explicitly mandate State Parties to base technical regulations on harmonised African standards developed by ARSO and the African Electrotechnical Standardisation Commission (AFSEC), promote mutual recognition of conformity assessment results, and cooperate on reducing regulatory divergences (AfCFTA Secretariat, 2019). These provisions transform standards harmonisation from a voluntary aspiration into a legally enforceable continental obligation.

Several concrete policy actions are required to translate these commitments into tangible outcomes. First, governments must invest in upgrading National Standards Bodies and quality infrastructure including accredited testing laboratories and calibration facilities so that harmonised standards can be implemented with credibility and consistency. Second, targeted capacity-building programmes for MSMEs are essential because SMEs cannot comply with standards they do not understand thus awareness campaigns, subsidised testing services, and dedicated standards advisory clinics must be integrated into national SME development policies. Third, digitalisation of standards information

and e-certification platforms can significantly reduce administrative burdens for traders. The UNCTAD-supported AfCFTA Non-Tariff Barrier online reporting mechanism at trade barriers in Africa already demonstrates how digital tools can accelerate barrier identification and resolution. Fourth, stronger coordination between ARSO, RECs, and AfCFTA institutions is needed to eliminate duplication and accelerate harmonisation timelines. Finally, Africa must increase its active participation in ISO, Codex Alimentarius, and other international standard-setting bodies to ensure that new global norms reflect African productive realities and do not inadvertently exclude African producers from global value chains.

In conclusion, the opportunity before Africa is historic and the stakes are immense. With 54 nations committed to the AfCFTA, a continental standards body in ARSO mandated to deliver harmonised frameworks, and a legal architecture that places standards at the core of the integration agenda. Harmonised standards are instruments of economic justice which dismantle the invisible walls that fragment African markets, empower small producers to compete fairly, and establish Africa as a credible and respected participant in global trade. For Africa's youth, who will constitute over 40% of the global youth population by 2030, building a standards-driven trading future is not an abstraction; it is the indispensable foundation of the prosperous and just continent they deserve to inherit. The time for incremental progress has passed so now Africa must harmoniously standardise to rise.

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