



United Nations
Office for South-South Cooperation



THIRD UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON LANDLOCKED
DEVELOPING COUNTRIES
AWAZA 2025



Rwanda's implementation of trade facilitation measures and the leveraging of South-South and triangular cooperation

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Acknowledgements: This case study was developed by Cynthia Olouasa (UNOSSC). Invaluable comments and advice were provided by Ms. Dima Al-khatib, Director of UNOSSC and Mr. Denis Nkala (UNOSSC).

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I. Introduction

Trade is a key driver of economic growth in many countries. However, the engagement of the 32 landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) in global trade remains low, accounting, on average, for 1 per cent, owing primarily to the geographical positioning that isolates them from major markets. This isolation, the considerable distances to the nearest seaports and multiple border crossings, which often entail intricate administrative transit and border procedures, lead to higher-than-average trade costs.

These barriers and challenges can be reduced through relevant national and regional policies and strategies to facilitate trade. The World Trade Organization (WTO) defines “trade facilitation” as the “simplification, modernization and harmonization of export and import processes”² with the aims of reducing the import and export times as well as trade costs and increasing trade volumes. Studies³ show that the speed of movement and clearance of goods has a direct bearing on trade volumes, with the impact being greater for time-sensitive perishable goods such as agricultural products. This is particularly relevant to developing countries whose primary exports are often perishable goods. Concerted efforts towards an internationally agreed framework for trade facilitation culminated

2. Data and information on trade facilitation and the TFA are found in various WTO documents available at https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tradfa_e/tradfa_e.htm; <https://docs.wto.org/dol2fe/Pages/SS/directdoc.aspx?filename=q:/WT/L/940.pdf&Open=True>; and https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tradfa_e/tfa_factsheet2017_e.pdf.

3. See, for example, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/761201468175464382/pdf/wps3909.pdf>.

in the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) that entered into force in 2017. The full implementation of this TFA is expected to reduce global trade costs by an average of 14.3 per cent, with Africa being the region expected to benefit the most, with an estimated 16.5 per cent reduction in costs. This TFA has been widely ratified and “is the main framework being used by African LLDCs to foster trade facilitation”, as noted in the 2023 report entitled “Review of the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for the Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024 in the Africa Region”.⁴

For LLDCs, trade facilitation is seen as integral to reducing some of the trade-related barriers and challenges that they experience. For instance, priority area 3b of the Vienna Programme of Action for the LLDCs for the Decade 2014–2024 (VPoA) is on trade facilitation and includes specific objectives pertaining to the reduction of port and border delays and of trade transaction costs. Post-VPoA, the draft new Programme of Action has trade, trade facilitation and regional integration as priority area 2, with one of the trade facilitation targets being to promote the acceleration of the implementation of the WTO TFA in all LLDCs and transit countries. Additionally, the paper by the Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS) entitled “Review of South-South cooperation in the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for Landlocked Developing Countries in the Decade 2014–

4. OHRLLS and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), “Review of the implementation of the Vienna Programme of Action for the Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024 in the Africa Region”, background report, p. xi.

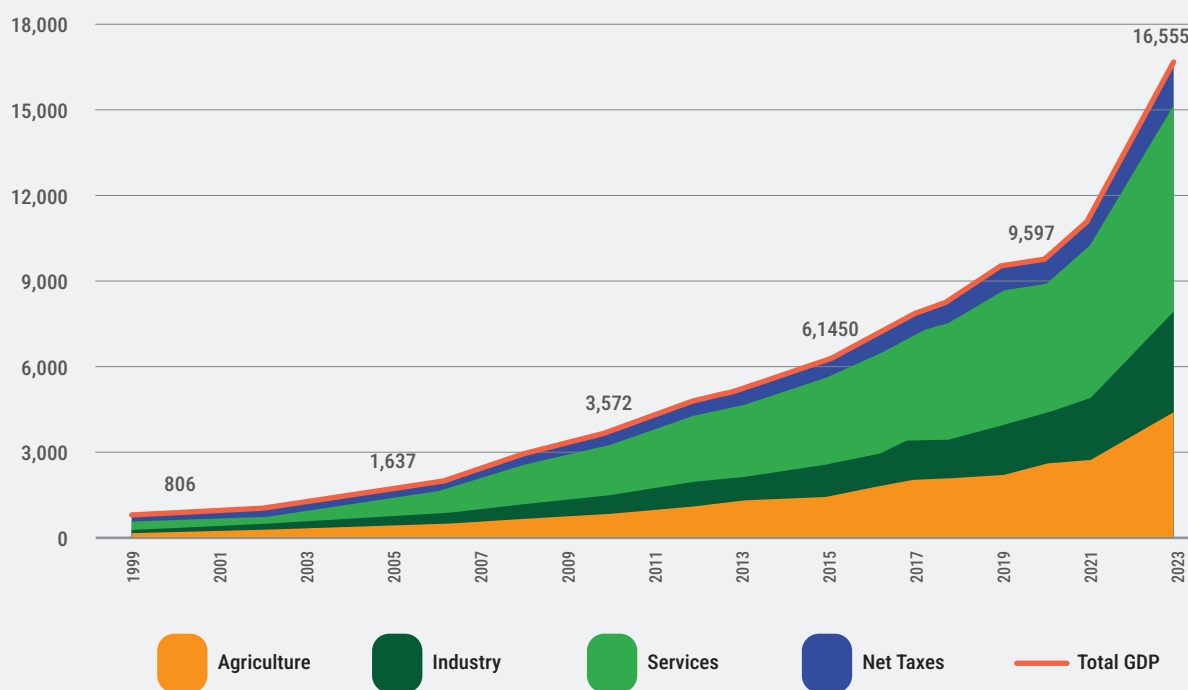
2024” identified international trade and trade facilitation as constituting one of the “top two key VPoA priority areas...likely to attract more involvement of partners in a new Programme of Action” (p. viii).

The present case study thus analyses the implementation by Rwanda of VPoA priority area 3b (trade facilitation) and the WTO TFA and how Rwanda has leveraged South-South and triangular cooperation in the implementation efforts. The study draws upon data from the Government of Rwanda, the WTO TFA database, the Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation Global Reports, and other relevant United Nations trade reports to highlight trade facilitation measures undertaken by Rwanda as an LLDC, drawing attention to how South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation have been leveraged therein. Key lessons and opportunities to further leverage South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation in implementing the trade facilitation targets identified in the new Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024-2034) that is expected to succeed the VPoA are also presented.

II. Economic performance and trade

According to the African Development Bank (AfDB) African Economic Outlook 2024, the growth of real gross domestic product (GDP) of Rwanda stabilized at 8.2 per cent in 2022 and 2023. That economic growth was driven by different sectors, with the services, agriculture and industry sectors accounting for 44 per cent, 27 per cent and 22 per cent of GDP, respectively.⁵ Figure 1 shows the key

5. Rwanda, National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR), GDP National Accounts, 2023.

Figure 1. Key sector contributors to GDP of Rwanda (in billions of Rwanda francs), 1999–2023

Source: Rwanda, NISR, GDP National Accounts,

sector contributors to the GDP of Rwanda from 1999 to 2023.

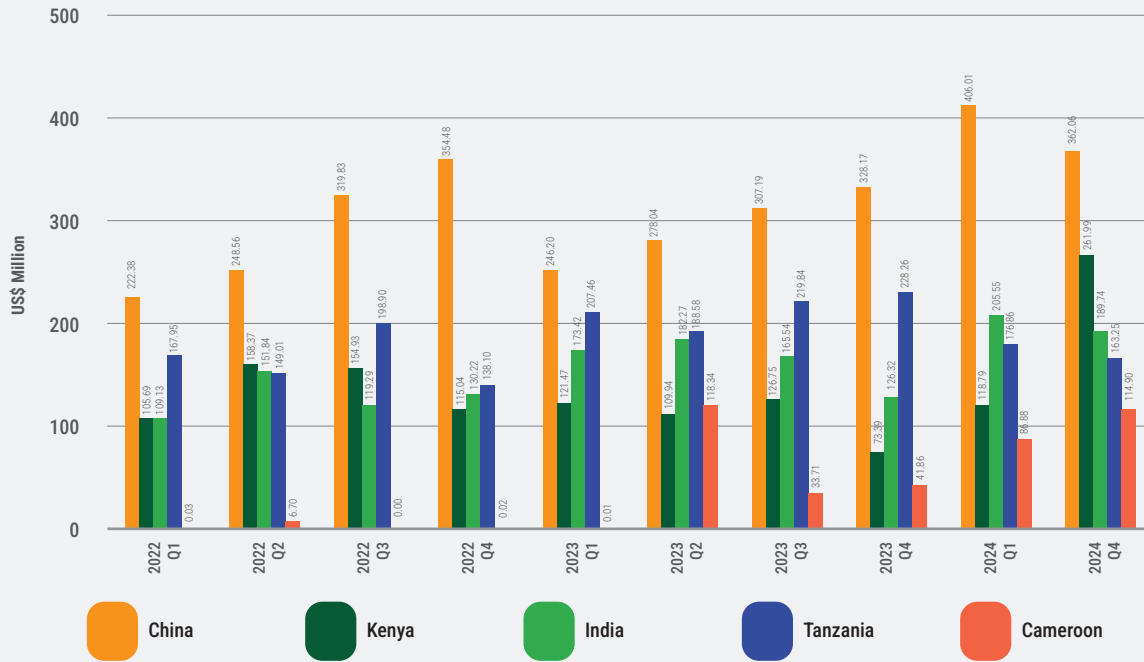
Total trade of Rwanda in the second quarter of 2024 increased by 14.67 per cent over the same period in 2023, with imports outweighing exports, indicating that the country is still an import-dependent country and hence vulnerable to external shocks.⁶ The African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank) 2024 Rwanda Country Brief notes that total trade increased significantly, resulting in an increased contribution to the GDP from 32 per cent in 2022 to 52 per cent in 2023. The dual growth in trade and GDP over the same period demonstrates the positive relationship between trade and GDP growth and highlights

the importance of trade for the economic growth of the country and the need for enhanced trade facilitation efforts. The Rwanda GDP National Accounts, 2023, also highlight the high growth of services sectors such as information and communications technology (ICT), which increased by 35 per cent. Sectors such as ICT are crucial for economic growth, and their consequent high growth could mean greater positive influence on other forms of trade such as digital trade and e-commerce activities. Figures 2 and 3 provide further details on key trading partners for both imports and exports.

Data from figures 2 and 3 show lower levels of regional trade between Rwanda and its immediate neighbours, a trend that is observed across the continent, where intraregional trade accounts for a smaller share of total trade in

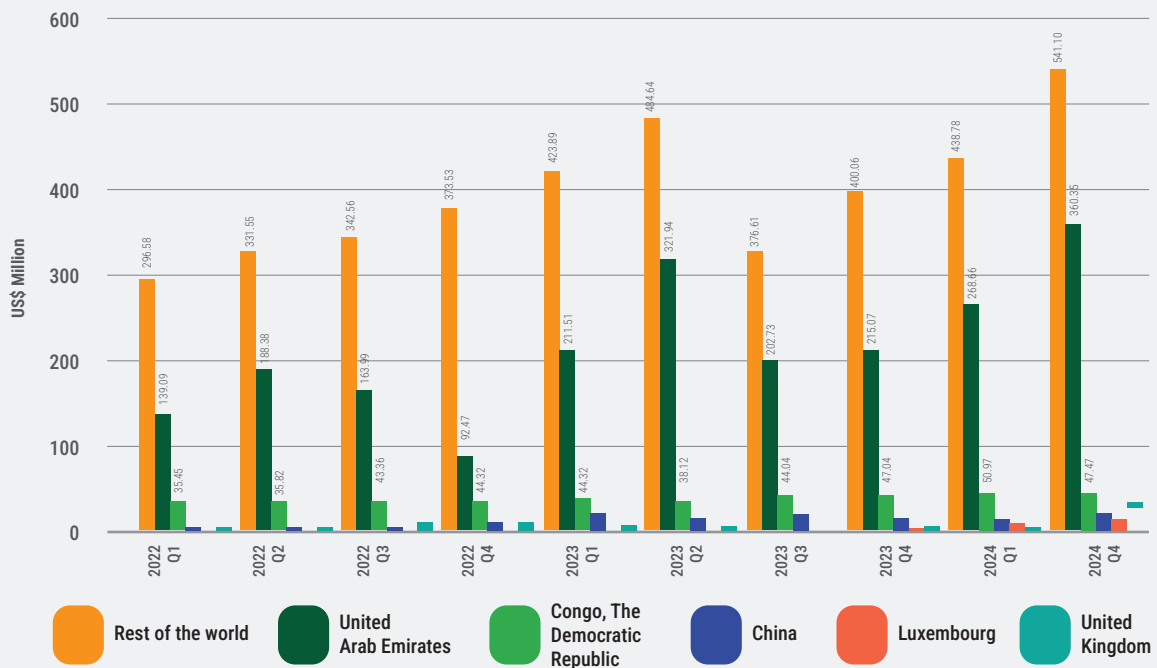
6. Rwanda, NISR, [Statistical report, Formal External Trade in Goods \(Quarter 2, 2024\)](#), p. 5.

Figure 2. Key import partners of Rwanda, 2022, quarter 1–2024, quarter 2



Source: Rwanda, NISR, Statistical report, Formal External Trade in Goods, Quarter 2, 2024.

Figure 3. Key export partners of Rwanda, 2022, quarter 1–2024, quarter 2



Source: Rwanda, NISR, Statistical report, Formal External Trade in Goods, Quarter 2, 2024.

Africa. As noted in a 2021 World Bank Working Paper,⁷ only 14 per cent of African imports and exports are with other African countries, making the continent the least integrated region with regard to trade flows. However, the same report notes that, in the period from 2009 to 2019, Rwanda was one of the top 10 African countries in terms of intraregional trade as a share of total exports, which highlights the issue of disparity across countries regarding intra-African trade. The Afreximbank 2024 Rwanda Country Brief provides additional data on the actual contribution of the intra-African trade of Rwanda to its total trade, noting that in 2023, intra-African trade accounted for 35.4 per cent of its overall trade, a figure considerably higher than continental averages highlighted above. This may be attributed to the membership of Rwanda in three regional economic communities (RECs) – the East African Community (EAC), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, and the Economic Community of Central African States.

The aforementioned 2021 World Bank Working Paper notes that the EAC is one of the two best-performing RECs in terms of boosting intraregional economic community trade, an achievement associated with, among other things, a “high level of investment in trade facilitation”, further making a case for enhanced trade facilitation nationally and regionally. This is an important point to highlight, since African LLDCs belong to multiple RECs and therefore have great opportunities to leverage these memberships to increase their intraregional community trade.

7. Woubet Kassa and Pegdewendé Nestor Sawadogo, “Trade creation and trade diversion in African RECs [Regional economic communities]: Drawing lessons for AfCFTA [Africa Continental Free Trade Area]”, Policy Research Working Paper, No. 9761 (World Bank, 2021).

III. Trade facilitation in Rwanda

Upon the ratification of the WTO TFA by the Government of Rwanda in February 2017, the Rwanda National Trade Facilitation Committee (Rwanda NTFC) was established in line with the WTO TFA. The Rwanda Ministry of Trade and Industry implements the TFA through the Rwanda NTFC, as trade facilitation is seen as critical to ensuring the competitiveness of the imports and exports of the country.

As per the WTO TFA database, the current rate of implementation by Rwanda of the TFA commitments stands at 92 per cent, with a time frame spanning from February 2018 to August 2030 and a rate way above the African TFA implementation-rate average of 42.1 per cent. Rwanda also is the African LLDC with the highest rates of TFA implementation.⁸ Additionally, data on the Africa region from the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation further show that, in 2023, Rwanda was one of the countries with a high trade facilitation score (80.65 per cent) on the implementation of trade facilitation and paperless trade. These data underscore the marked differences in the rates of implementation between countries in the region and even among the LLDCs, which face similar challenges due to their landlocked nature, which in turn provides an opportunity for further review and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning.⁹

8. See “Review of the implementation of the VPoA...in the African Region”, 2023.

9. Data on implementation rates of Rwandan trade facilitation are drawn from various official reports including the [Rwanda Country Profile on the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement Database](#) and the [United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation](#).

To better understand the specific approach and actions of Rwanda in its trade facilitation efforts, table 1 provides a summary of key trade facilitation measures that the country has undertaken as well as some of the key partners involved.¹⁰ Subsequent sections of the case study provide more details on the South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation partnerships that Rwanda has engaged in during the implementation of the TFA.

Table 1. Selected trade facilitation measures undertaken by Rwanda

| Trade facilitation measure | Action undertaken by the Government of Rwanda | Key partners |
|---|--|--|
| Creation of an enabling environment to implement and operationalize trade facilitation measures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Trade Facilitation Roadmap 2019–2024 • National Trade Facilitation Committee (NTFC) • National Strategy for Elimination of Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs), 2020–2025 • National Cross-Border Trade Strategy (NCBTS) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government of Rwanda institutions • Private sector |
| Increase the paperless trade system and reduce the number of import- and export-related documents | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of the Rwanda electronic single window (ReSW) to simplify the submission and clearance of import and export documents and facilitate information access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNCTAD • TradeMark East Africa |
| Reduce import and export time and costs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch and operationalization of the Kigali Logistics Platform • Establishment of the 24/7 Kiyanzi Dry Port for faster clearance of essential and relief goods • Launch of Kigali Cargo Hub • Adoption of the Single Customs Territory (SCT) at the regional level¹¹ • Implementation of the UNCTAD Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs) Initiative | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development Bank of Rwanda • Dubai Ports World (DP World) • Qatar Airways • EAC • UNCTAD |
| Increase transparency in import and export processes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of the National Trade Facilitation Committee website • Launch of the Rwanda Trade Portal • Launch of the online Rwanda Trade Information Portal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNCTAD • TradeMark East Africa • ITC • WTO |

10. The selected list of trade facilitation measures is based on different indicators of trade facilitation as highlighted in the WTO TFA and the United Nations Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation.

11. East African Community, "[Single Customs Territory](#)".

IV. South-South and triangular cooperation in Rwanda

Rwanda is a strong champion of South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation and has demonstrated great support in various intergovernmental forums, highlighting the importance that it places on these modalities of development cooperation. For instance, during the second High-level United Nations Conference on South-South Cooperation, a delegate of Rwanda noted that “South-South and triangular cooperation have been central to Rwanda’s development plans”.¹² To coordinate and facilitate South-South cooperation in the country, Rwanda established the Rwanda Cooperation Initiative in 2018, which is under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Specifically, the country has a unique approach to this form of development cooperation which emphasizes the sharing of its own development solutions including its *Home-Grown Initiatives and Good Practices*, as described in box 1.¹³

Box 1. Rwanda's approach to South-South cooperation

Rwanda is playing an active role in South-South cooperation. Its approach is characterized by respectful engagement, mutual benefit, knowledge-sharing and capacity-building.

Rwanda emphasizes the importance of sharing its own innovative development initiatives, which include *Home-Grown Initiatives and Good Practices* that propelled Rwanda's transformation journey over the past three decades, specifically after the 1994 Genocide. The success of the *Home-Grown Initiatives and Good Practices*, inspired the country to integrate South-South cooperation into its National Development Plans - the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS) and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST1) stemming from the country's Vision 2050. International cooperation and regional integration through promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the African Union Agenda 2063 and the 6th East African Community Vision 2050 are central elements of Rwanda's approach to South-South Cooperation.

To complement other existing efforts, the Government of Rwanda established Rwanda Cooperation Initiative in 2018, which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Its work is rooted in the belief that through knowledge exchange, Rwanda and partner countries can benefit from one another's knowledge, expertise and experiences to support their continued socioeconomic development process. Rwanda Cooperation Initiative works with government agencies, development partners, Academia, the private sector, and civil society organizations to achieve mutually beneficial interests and development objectives.

Box 2. Rwanda Cooperation Initiative in numbers

63

Number of countries hosted by RCI through South-South cooperation

578

Number of delegations received in Rwanda through South-South cooperation

5,088

Number of delegates who visited Rwanda through South-South cooperation

5

Number of trainings to webinars conducted with a South-South cooperation thematic focus

4

Number of regional institutions and non-government organizations that came to Rwanda through South-South cooperation

4

Number of countries with which RCI implements projects underpinning South-South cooperation

¹² See <https://press.un.org/en/2019/dev3392.doc.htm>.

¹³ Data and information on the Rwanda Cooperation Initiative and *Home-Grown Initiatives and Good Practices* were provided by the Rwanda Cooperation Initiative (RCI).

V. Trade facilitation in Rwanda and the leveraging of South-South and triangular cooperation

The VPoA recognized the importance of partnerships and collaboration in its implementation and identified South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation as critical means of implementation. The draft outcome document of the third United Nations Conference on Landlocked Developing Countries also encourages the “promotion of regional and South-South cooperation in drawing lessons, technological catch-up, raising resources, and the systematic exchange of knowledge and experiences for regional infrastructure development and integration”. Rwanda and other LLDCs engage in international cooperation partnerships that include South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation in implementing trade facilitation measures in a bid to increase access to regional and global markets. Ways in which Rwanda has leveraged South-South and triangular cooperation in implementing the TFA are described below.

A. Increasing paperless trade

The movement of goods across customs posts has traditionally been characterized by a significant amount of paperwork to facilitate movement and comply with different Government import and export requirements. However, these paperwork requirements can, and most often do, slow down the clearance and forwarding processes, leading to an increase in the time and costs associated with cross-border trade. For LLDCs, trade sometimes involves multiple border crossings, which translate into higher-than-average trade times

and costs. In efforts to reduce the amount of import- and export-related paperwork and expedite the movement of goods at the border points, Rwanda introduced the Rwanda electronic single window (ReSW).¹⁴ A “single window” is defined as a facility “that allows parties involved in trade and transport to lodge standardized information and documents with a single entry point to fulfil all import, export, and transit-related regulatory requirements”.¹⁵

Since the launch of the ReSW, which was made possible with the support of partners such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), with donor funding being mobilized and channeled through TradeMark East Africa, a not-for-profit instrument for delivering aid-for-trade (AFT) in East Africa, there has been a significant reduction in import and export times, consequently increasing the competitiveness of the country.¹⁶ To further demonstrate the impact of the ReSW, a 2015 evaluation of the ReSW commissioned by TradeMark East Africa and the Rwanda Revenue Authority indicated that “as much as \$18 million has been saved in trade costs and reduction of delays”, with the average clearance time of imported goods falling from 11 days in 2012 to 1.5 days in 2014.¹⁷

14. Rwanda Revenue Authority. See <https://www.rra.gov.rw/en/customs-services/electronic-single-window>.

15. ECE, Recommendation No. 33: Recommendation and Guidelines on Establishing a Single Window, p. 3 (United Nations, Geneva, 2020).

16. Christian Nizeyimana and Luc De Wulf, “Rwanda Electronic Single Window supports trade facilitation”, *World Customs Journal*, vol. 9, No. 2 (2015), pp. 73-84.

17. The report of the 2015 evaluation of the ReSW commissioned by the Rwanda Revenue Authority and TradeMark East Africa is referenced severally including in International Finance Corporation, *SmartLessons*, February 2017. Available at https://www.tfafacility.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/2017_-_rwan-da_single_window_trade_wto.pdf and; Rwanda Revenue Authority. See [English: Rwanda Electronic Single Window report thrilling](#)

These positive observations regarding the ReSW not only showcase the importance of this trade facilitation solution but also the value of cooperation, as evidenced in the successful partnership between Rwanda, TradeMark East Africa and UNCTAD as well as the resulting South-South peer-to-peer learning component observed when delegations from Burundi and Uganda, two neighbouring LLDCs, conducted site visits to Rwanda to learn more about the ReSW.¹⁸ This initiative also highlights the catalytic and facilitative role of the United Nations system in support of Member States in their trade facilitation efforts.

During the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the ReSW, which is in use at different border points, was highly beneficial and effective in ensuring the flow of essential goods and cargo, since it enabled customs clearances with minimal physical interaction in line with the health protocols at the time. Rwanda also utilized other trade facilitation components such as the Rwanda Trade Information Portal to issue new clearance guidelines to traders and other stakeholders and facilitate clearances at border points. In addition, Rwanda established the 24/7 Kiyanzi Dry Port near the border to facilitate faster clearance of essential and relief goods and prevent the spread of COVID-19 in compliance with the EAC Regional COVID-19 Guidelines.¹⁹

18. International Finance Corporation, SmartLessons, February 2017. Available at https://www.tfafacility.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/2017_-_rwanda_single_window_trade_wto.pdf.

19. Rosine Uwamariya, Providence Mukamurenzi and Vincent Safari, "Managing trade facilitation in pandemic times: The experience of Rwanda at the Kiyanzi Dry Port", UNCTAD Transport and Trade Facilitation Newsletter, No. 87, 21 September 2020.

B. Cross-border trade and the one-stop border posts

Inefficient border crossings in Africa are recognized as one of the systemic challenges contributing to the low levels of intra-African trade, with greater impact being observed in landlocked countries since they must navigate multiple border crossings. Well-positioned trade facilitation measures can positively impact the cross-border flow of goods. The issue of cross-border trade is particularly important for Rwanda, which has 50 border-crossing points, 36 of which are informal.

For Rwanda, cross-border trade facilitation measures have been implemented with the support of key partners, including regional international financial institutions (IFIs). For example, in 2023, AfDB approved \$75.35 million in grant funding for Rwanda and Burundi (another landlocked neighbouring country) for a cross-border road construction project. This was done through the African Development Fund, which is the concessional lending arm of AfDB. This proposed project will contribute towards regional integration and trade efforts in the EAC by "bridging vital links to the Central and the Northern Corridors and improving access to the sea for Burundi and Rwanda".²⁰ It is expected to provide temporary job opportunities to the local communities and benefit 2 million people in Rwanda alone.

The one-stop border post (OSBP) is another cross-border trade facilitation measure that aims to integrate the administrative and operational systems of two neighbouring

20. Information on this project can be found at AfDB, "African Development Fund grants over \$75 million to Rwanda and Burundi for cross-border road construction and studies", and AfDB, [MapAfrica, "Rwanda: Cross Border Roads Upgrading Project, Phase I"](#).



Photo by Shutterstock.

countries to reduce border clearance processes and crossing times, which impact traders financially.²¹ Rwanda has several OSBPs, including the Rusumo One-Stop Border Post between the United Republic of Tanzania and Rwanda,²² which is a key border post that accounts for, on average, 70 per cent of imports into Rwanda from the port in the United Republic of Tanzania (one of the neighbouring transit countries) and which has been in operation since 2015. A direct result of the Rusumo One-Stop Border Post is the drastic reduction in clearance time per cargo truck to under 30 minutes. Developed with financial support from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and AfDB and with coordination from EAC and cooperation with national agencies in Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania, Rusumo One-Stop Border Post is an important

triangular cooperation partnership that also showcases the critical role played by transit countries in facilitating trade for LLDCs.

The experience and trade facilitation efforts of Rwanda have been inspirational to other African countries, as highlighted in a 2020 World Bank report which measures the ease of doing business in a country as well as the ease of trading across borders (a key component of trade facilitation measures). That report notes that Togo, one of the most improved countries (as per the 2020 report), was motivated by the progress of Rwanda in the implementation of the World Bank “Doing Business” indicator over a 10-year period, which resulted in delegations from Togo visiting Rwanda to learn about successful reforms.²³ This demonstrates how the sharing of South-South cooperation knowledge and experiences can be leveraged to achieve tangible developments.

21. International Office for Migration (IOM), Rwanda, [“Accelerating regional integration, trade and social cohesion in the East African Community through the one-stop border post harmonized capacity-building programme”](#), 25 March 2024.

22. Rwanda Revenue Authority, [“Rusumo one stop border post and international bridge officially open”](#).

23. World Bank, [Doing Business 2020](#) (Washington, D.C., World Bank).

C. Reduction of import and export times and costs

The time taken for goods to move from producer to consumer is a significant component of trade costs; thus, measures to reduce the time and consequently the trade costs is one of the goals of trade facilitation. To address this issue, Rwanda has leveraged key partnerships and bilateral trade agreements to upgrade and enhance its logistics infrastructure so as to expedite import and export times, increase volumes and decrease costs. For instance, Rwanda, through a 25-year concessional agreement with Dubai Ports World, a United Arab Emirates global logistics provider, inaugurated the Kigali Logistics Platform (KLP) to address logistics challenges in the country. The KLP is an inland facility for handling cargo. Following its operationalization, truck turnaround time using the KLP has been significantly reduced from an average of 2 weeks to 3 days, while 667 direct and indirect jobs were created, with 98 per cent local employment. The KLP is particularly important for Rwanda as a landlocked country, since it is expected to link Rwanda with the ports in Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania, the neighbouring transit countries.²⁴

Additionally, an investment partnership was established between the Government of Rwanda and Qatar Airways for the new international airport in Rwanda.²⁵ Furthermore, Rwanda recently partnered with Qatar Airways Cargo to launch the Kigali Cargo Hub, with technical support offered through Qatar

Aviation Services²⁶ based on the expansive knowledge and experience of Qatar in this sector. This is part of the goal of Rwanda to become a regional cargo hub, enhancing intra-African trade and increasing access to global markets. This partnership will enhance the air cargo capacities of Rwanda, which have grown significantly over the last few years. This is particularly important for the agriculture and horticulture sectors of the country, which contribute, on average, “50 per cent of non-traditional exports” to regional and global markets²⁷ and whose sector products are very time sensitive.

In addition, and related to trade facilitation in the agriculture sector, the Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation: Global Report 2023 highlights good practices in agricultural trade facilitation in which Rwanda is listed as one of the selected African countries involved in a three-year partnership to enhance the capacity of Africa to export to China. This South-South cooperation partnership aims to “enhance economic and trade cooperation between China and Africa by participating in the China-Africa Economic and Trade Expo (CAETE) and using the Distribution, Trading, and Processing Centre (DTPC)” in Hunan Province, China.²⁸

D. Digital trade facilitation and enhancing e-commerce

Although the WTO TFA does not include commitments on digital trade and e-commerce, the exponential growth in e-commerce since

24. Rwanda Development Board, “Rwanda closer to becoming a regional logistics hub with the launch of Kigali Logistics Platform”.

25. Mininfra, “Qatar to take 60% stake in Rwanda’s new international airport”, 9 December 2019.

26. Qatar Airways Cargo, “Qatar Airways Cargo launches Kigali Africa Hub in partnership with RwandAir”, 2 May 2023.

27. Rwanda Development Board, “Horticulture Sector”. Available at <https://rdb.rw/export/export/products-directory/horticulture-sector/>.

28. United Nations, *Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation: Global Report 2023* (2023).



Photo by istock.

2017 when the WTO TFA came into force as well as the interconnectedness of e-commerce and trade facilitation warrants a review. The UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade does, however, include for evaluation, “trade facilitation for e-commerce’ measures. For Rwanda and other LLDCs, e-commerce can be seen as a new trade channel that has fewer barriers to access to local and international markets and can further facilitate integration into global value and supply chains. It can also be viewed as an enabler of capacity to export for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) when leveraged effectively. Among the African LLDCs, Rwanda is one of the countries identified as leading the way in harnessing digital trade through e-commerce. The country also has a vision of transforming itself into a regional e-commerce hub that will, among other things, boost regional and international trade. Its E-Commerce Strategy identifies nine high-level policy priority areas

regarding e-commerce, one of which is trade facilitation.²⁹

To achieve its e-commerce vision, Rwanda has engaged in strategic South-South partnerships, including with developing countries from the Asia and the Pacific and the Arab States regions. Its main e-commerce trading partners are China and the United Arab Emirates, and online ordering typically goes through Alibaba and Ali Express, both of which are trading platforms based in China. For example, in 2018, Rwanda and China formalized their cooperation through the signing of an agreement within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative.³⁰ That same year, Rwanda joined the ElectronicWorldTradePlatform (launched

29. UNCTAD, [Towards an E-commerce Strategy for Rwanda](#) (Geneva, United Nations, 2023).

30. Rwanda in China, “Rwanda sees opportunities in China’s Belt and Road Initiative– Ambassador Kimonyo”.

by the Chinese e-commerce organization Alibaba), becoming the first African country to do so. Platforms such as these facilitate cross-border electronic trade, enabling products from SMEs in Rwanda to access the Chinese market directly.

The Alibaba partnership has also provided capacity-building opportunities, such as through the eFounders Fellowship Programme implemented in partnership with UNCTAD and which has led to enhanced networks through direct and virtual linkages such as through the virtual trade fairs benefiting Rwandan traders. From these partnerships, sales of Rwandan coffee in China via online platforms belonging to Alibaba have increased exponentially, with the Rwanda Development Board reporting that sales volumes have increased by 700 per cent on the Alibaba platforms. Rwandan businesses have continued trading through the Electronic World Trade Platform (eWTP) with great success, as evidenced in the 2022 online live streaming event held through this online platform where a Rwandan coffee brand traded all its stock in less than a minute, demonstrating the immense opportunities for SMEs in Rwanda to harness e-commerce more comprehensively. This is also a demonstration of the impact of technology on global supply chains and increasing market access, something very critical for LLDCs.³¹

31. Data and information on the trading of Rwandan products including coffee via Chinese e-commerce platforms is available on different Government of Rwanda websites and in official reports including the 2023 Rwanda Voluntary National Review report and the Rwanda Development Board, "[Rwandan coffee sells out in seconds at Electronic World Trade Platform livestream event in China](#)".

Beyond investments in digital infrastructure and under the Digital Silk Road, Chinese firms such as Huawei have contributed to Rwandan digital education and capacity-building efforts through initiatives such as the Huawei ICT Academy project for industry-academy cooperation in Rwanda established in 2021 in partnership with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of ICT and Rwandan universities. Furthermore, China and Rwanda expanded their cooperation, targeting the digital transformation initiatives of Rwanda through the signing of a framework agreement for a concessional loan of \$30 million from the Exim Bank of China to support the Rwanda Smart Education project.³² The South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation partnerships of Rwanda also extend to regional IFIs in the Global South in its quest for digital transformation. For instance, the Digital Acceleration Project of Rwanda aimed at boosting digital transformation is co-financed by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).³³

E. Opportunities for South-South and triangular cooperation on Trade Facilitation in the new Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024-2034)

The goals of the new Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024-2034) priority area 2 on trade, trade facilitation and regional

32. Information on China-Rwanda cooperation on digital education and capacity-building efforts can be found at <https://www.minict.gov.rw/news-detail/mou-signed-to-launch-huawei-ict-academies-in-rwanda-as-seeds-for-the-future-2021-program-is-flagged-off> and <https://www.minecofin.gov.rw/news-detail/smart-education-project-to-receive-frw-30-billion-financing-boost>.

33. AIIB, Rwanda: Rwanda Digital Acceleration Project (Digital Investment for Recovery, Resilience and Connectivity). Available at <https://www.aiib.org/en/projects/details/2021/approved/Rwanda-Digital-Acceleration-Project-Digital-Investment-for-Recovery-Resilience-and-Connectivity.html>.

integration are complementary to the goals of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which focus on promoting intra-African trade and the elimination of trade barriers within Africa. Opportunities to synergistically address the needs of African LLDCs while advancing broader continental integration and trade facilitation objectives through South-South and triangular cooperation initiatives can be explored by Rwanda and other African LLDCs in collaboration with various development partners. This would involve (but not be limited to) capacity-building programmes and South-South cooperation knowledge-sharing initiatives focused on best practices regarding trade facilitation measures among African countries. In addition, given the centrality of RECs in implementing the AfCFTA, Rwanda and other African LLDCs can further leverage their multiple REC memberships to advance the implementation of regional trade facilitation measures for enhanced intraregional economic community trade through South-South cooperation in intra- and interregional trade.

The 2023 “Review of the implementation of the VPoA for the Landlocked Developing Countries for the Decade 2014–2024 in the Africa Region” includes several recommendations for consideration after the VPoA, including further exploration of the massive trade facilitation opportunities presented by One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) and automated customs operations. The draft PoA also recognizes the critical role of facilities such as OSBPs in easing trade bottlenecks for LLDCs. However, Rwanda has only four OSBPs, indicating a gap in fully harnessing the benefits of effective and

seamless cross-border trade. Opportunities for South-South and triangular cooperation engagement can be within any of the four pillars of OSBPs.³⁴ An analysis of existing South-South and triangular cooperation funding sources and mechanisms in this sector would benefit Rwanda in line with their specific needs to explore opportunities for new partnerships with the support of key partners such as the African Union Development Agency-New Partnership for Africa's Development.

The draft PoA also recognizes the great potential of digital trade and e-commerce for overcoming the geographical constraints to trade in LLDCs, and although Rwanda has placed great importance on enhancing e-commerce, the Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation: Global Report 2023 shows that the country has only “partially implemented” the trade facilitation measures for e-commerce. Therein lie opportunities for enhanced cooperation in priority areas identified by Rwanda that could include capacity building initiatives as well as support in scaling up initiatives such as RwandaMart, an online marketplace for SMEs. For instance, Rwanda can leverage different opportunities presented by South-South cooperation forums such as the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). This platform offers Rwanda and other African countries an opportunity to enhance their local e-commerce capacities through “Cloud Lectures” on e-commerce, as outlined in the Beijing Action Plan (2025–2027)³⁵ adopted during the FOCAC 2024 Summit, noting that deepening the e-commerce cooperation

34. African Union Development Agency, One-Stop Border Post Sourcebook, 3rd edition, June 2022.

35. [Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan \(2025-2027\)](#).

between China and Africa is one of the action points in the Beijing Action Plan.

Additionally, South-South and triangular cooperation partnerships, tools and initiatives can be leveraged towards supporting SMEs, with a focus on women and youth in Rwanda to enhance their capacity to leverage the promises of e-commerce better and facilitate ease of access to digital solutions. For example, a South-South cooperation partnership with Saudi Arabia could be considered in line with the 2023 Riyadh Declaration: Roadmap of Saudi-African Cooperation³⁶, which identifies support for SMEs as one of the thematic areas for strengthened Saudi-African partnerships. This could be within the Digital Market Initiative (IMPACT) launched under the Saudi Arabia framework for the strengthening of joint efforts to develop the digital economy with African countries to facilitate easier access to digital solutions and for the enhancement of regional cooperation for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Finally, the Rwanda Cooperative Initiative (RCI) has achieved significant momentum in facilitating knowledge- and experience-sharing exchanges among African countries. As an LLDC and in the context of the unique needs of African LLDCs, Rwanda, through this institution, is well placed to facilitate critical South-South peer-to-peer learning on LLDC-specific issues, including the implementation of trade facilitation measures (an area currently untapped). By leveraging its experiences in not only trade facilitation implementation but also in hosting African delegations wishing to learn from the Rwanda experience, South-South and triangular

cooperation initiatives centred on the new Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024-2034), in partnership with other development partners and countries, could be hosted by RCI.

Conclusion

The VPoA is ending, and the focus is shifting to the new Programme of Action for LLDCs (2024-2034) and its implementation. Trade facilitation has been retained as one of the priority areas in the draft PoA, signifying its importance for LLDCs. The experience of Rwanda in implementing various trade facilitation measures has yielded promising results in enhancing its trade, with expectations of continued momentum. The strong performance of Rwanda in implementing the WTO TFA can be attributed to solid leadership and commitment, evidenced by various national policies, strategies and multi-stakeholder institutions, including strong private-sector participation. Additionally, the trade facilitation approach of the country has been very collaborative, leveraging numerous strategic partnerships with key development partners, including with countries such as China, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates as well as with IFIs such as AfDB and the aid-for-trade organization TradeMark Africa. The United Nations system has also supported and facilitated the trade facilitation initiatives of Rwanda through entities such as the International Trade Centre (ITC), IOM, UNCTAD and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Furthermore, Rwanda has made regional integration a key focus area through the alignment of its efforts to those of the RECs to which it belongs, especially the EAC. South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation have been observed to have

³⁶ [Riyadh Declaration of Saudi-African Summit Issued \(spa.gov.sa\)](#).

played a critical role in the trade facilitation efforts of Rwanda, with opportunities for expanded adoption.

The positive trends notwithstanding, more effort is needed for Rwanda to fully implement the TFA and consequently increase its trade volumes within Africa and beyond the continent. To achieve this and to enhance trade facilitation initiatives, efforts can be based on the types of technical assistance requested by Rwanda to implement the TFA and as listed in the WTO TFA database, which include human resources and training, legislative and regulatory frameworks, ICT, awareness-raising, infrastructure, equipment, and diagnostic and needs assessments. With the draft PoA recognizing the critical role of international development cooperation, including within the framework of South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation, Rwanda, in collaboration with various development partners, including the United Nations system, can explore new South-

South cooperation and triangular cooperation partnerships for the implementation of the draft PoA based on these priorities.

In conclusion, the experiences and lessons learned by Rwanda in implementing the TFA provide opportunities for South-South cooperation knowledge exchanges to enhance the capacities of other African LLDCs and neighbouring transit countries to implement trade facilitation measures through South-South cooperation. This can be done in collaboration with the WTO Trade Facilitation Committee, where a South-South cooperation component can be introduced to the existing experience-sharing forum. The proposed South-South and triangular cooperation trade facilitation initiative for African LLDCs would contribute to implementing the draft Programme of Action, since one of the targets under priority area 2 in the draft PoA is to "support LLDCs to accelerate the implementation of the WTO TFA in all LLDCs and transit countries".



**THIRD UNITED NATIONS
CONFERENCE ON LANDLOCKED
DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**
AWAZA 2025



**Rwanda's implementation of
trade facilitation measures and
the leveraging of South-South
and triangular cooperation**

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