

Africa Current Issues

Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 for
Africa's Women Traders: What more can we do?

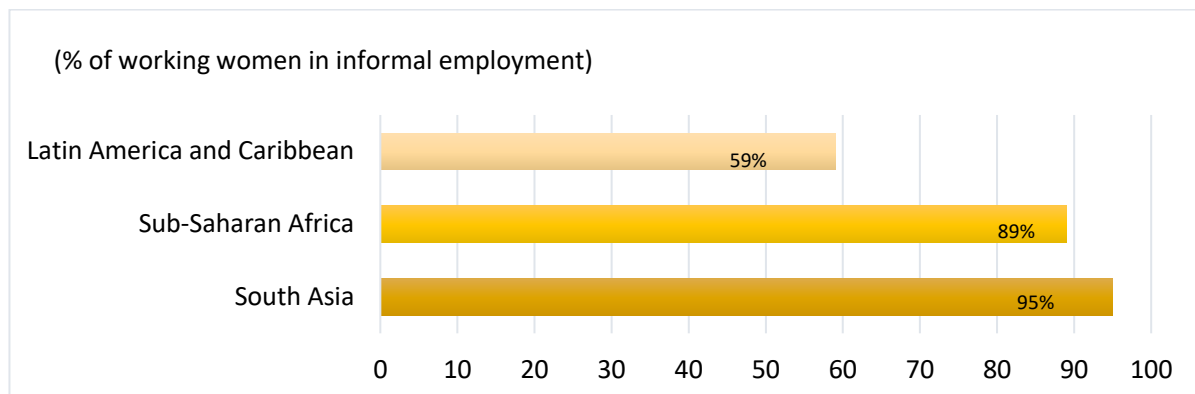
Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 for Africa’s Women Traders: What more can we do?

Introduction

Informal cross-border traders (ICBTs) play an underappreciated but economically important role in Africa. ICBTs provide goods to remote villages, while their informal networks create employment opportunities. ICBTs contribute significantly to their national economies, although policymakers often overlook this fact. USAID estimates that informal cross border trade for the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region accounts for up to \$7 billion annually.¹ Other observers estimate the total at up to a staggering \$17.6 billion.² Data on trade within the continent is scarce, though observers estimate that perhaps 50% to 60% of total intra-African trade is informal.³

Women typically comprise up to 70% of ICBTs across the continent; within Southern Africa they account for at least 80%.⁴ Across Africa, Women Informal Cross Border Traders (WICBTs) often form the backbone of their societies. These women may have very little formal education, but are responsible for supporting their entire households. Many endure great sacrifice and personal risk in their daily commute across borders to procure and sell goods. For example, during the Zimbabwean economic crisis in the mid-2000s, WICBTs played a critical role in procuring manufactured goods and food supplies from South Africa to re-sell in Zimbabwe. Similarly, across Eastern Africa, consumer goods and staple food commodities are the goods most commonly traded by WICBTs. Women in the informal sector play an important role in helping the region meet its food security needs.⁵

Figure 1- Women in developing countries are overwhelmingly employed informally⁶



Despite the vast revenue volume generated by these WICBTs, they remain marginalised, with very little protection from government. They also lack access to skills development or engagement with the private sector, which tends to control formal value chains and supply chains around the world. WICBTs are extremely vulnerable, and highly exposed to sexual abuse. HIV/AIDS is a threat because cross-border areas are high transmission areas for sexual diseases. Transport and accommodation are also a concern for WICBTs. Many cross-border areas have little sanitation and offer poor accommodation facilities.

Informal traders are already marginalised, and the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to completely dismantle trading networks, cut off the main source of income for many small towns and villages, and slash the only economic lifeline sustaining many families.

This Policy Brief begins with a brief overview of the challenges faced by WICBTs under ‘business as usual conditions.’ It then identifies the negative effects of COVID-19 on these traders and their communities, and the broader impacts of reduced trade for the economies of Sub-Saharan Africa. The Brief then identifies potential solutions. These focus on how governments, the private sector and other relevant actors can collaborate to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on WICBTs. Lastly, it briefly explores how regional and continental arrangements, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), can better incorporate and include measures to address the socio-economic needs of this vulnerable sector going forward to a post-pandemic world.

A brief overview of the historical operating conditions of WICBTs

The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) defines informal cross border trade as:

“trade between neighbouring countries conducted by vulnerable, small, unregistered traders. Typically, it is proximity trade involving the move of produce between markets close to the border. The informality refers to the status of the trader (unregistered), not necessarily to the trade itself (captured or unrecorded by the official customs system).”⁷

The distinction between informal and formal traders is often blurred, as many traders have visas to cross borders, engage with border officials and may even complete all required paperwork. The distinction between ‘formal’ or ‘informal’ traders refers to the trade procedures rather than the goods traded or the traders,⁸ and should be distinguished from criminal cross-border trade, as described in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Types of cross-border trade practices⁹

| Category A | Category B | Category C |
|--|--|---|
| Informal (unregistered) traders or firms operating entirely outside the formal economy | Formal (registered) firms fully evading trade-related regulations and duties (for example, by avoiding official border crossing posts) | Formal (registered) firms partially evading trade-related regulations and duties by resorting to illegal practices such as misclassification and under-invoicing. |

Informal cross-border trade is often influenced by the availability of goods, the trust-based networks amongst traders and the quality of road and transport infrastructure. Consequently, informal trade is more likely to occur in situations where there are significant price disparities between formally and informally traded goods; where law enforcement is weak and levels of bribery and corruption are high; or where regulatory costs (such as customs and taxes) act as a significant barrier to entry into the formal trading economy.¹⁰

Women represent the majority of ICBTs. Gender, work in the informal sector, and poverty are linked to a phenomenon known as the ‘feminisation of poverty’. The informal economy is an important source of employment and income for women throughout the developing world.¹¹ The combination of a lack of skills or education, residence in a rural area, and restrictive regulatory and legal environments often pushes women into self-employment in the informal economy.¹² For many women, informal trade represents their only income source. Up to 60% of the non-agricultural self-employment of women in sub-Saharan Africa originates in cross-border trade.¹³

Over the years, governments and donors’ efforts alike have focused on improving the operational realities of women traders in an effort to formalise their systems and incorporate them into the ‘formal

economy.’ These wide-ranging efforts include designing gender-sensitive policies, providing training and education on cross-border trading requirements, delivering market-related information via simple mobile phones, establishing advocacy networks for WICBTs, and educating border officials.¹⁴

Despite these efforts, many WICBTs continue to operate under difficult and arduous conditions. WICBTs earn less than men and have little access to social protection. Thus, their capacity to endure economic shocks – such as the ones likely to be induced by the COVID-19 pandemic – is far less than for those with formal employment.¹⁵ Compounding their already-difficult conditions is the rapid spread of COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus. This virus threatens their health, and is likely to exacerbate the poverty and food insecurity facing this vulnerable group of workers. Without swift action, the pandemic may bring their livelihoods to an indefinite end, with no alternatives in view.

The impact of COVID-19 on Africa and the informal sector

COVID-19 is first and foremost a health pandemic. Addressing this global threat will require far-reaching health and sanitation responses. However, its economic impacts are equally wide-ranging and potentially devastating. To address these issues, policies must respond to the slowdown in the formal economy, and the ways in which decreased fiscal revenues will constrain development, while taking into account the precarious conditions under which rural and informal communities live.

It is equally important to consider the conditions under which African countries will be rebuilding their economies in a post-Covid-19 scenario. McKinsey projects that Africa’s economies could suffer losses between \$90 billion and \$200 billion in 2020. This would result from a combination of supply-chain disruptions, drop in non-oil demands, reduced business expenditure and decreased tourism income due to travel bans.¹⁶ Similarly, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) predicts that GDP growth in Africa will decline from 3.2% to 1.8% as a result of COVID-19.¹⁷ These projections agree that the impact for Africa’s many low-income countries are dire. The economic fallout from COVID-19 could push back the decades of poverty alleviation gains by the continent. In sum, sub-Saharan African countries can expect to experience a ‘triple shock’ from the COVID-19 pandemic:¹⁸

The COVID-19 Pandemic Triple Shock:

1. Economic disruptions from the domestic health shock (i.e. business closures, disruption in supply chains and increased household insecurity);
2. Spill-overs from the global fall-out of COVID-19 (slow-down in international trade, reduced foreign direct investments and rising inflation); and
3. Commodity price shocks, especially for resource-intense African countries.

Action is underway. The African Development Bank’s new \$3 billion “Fight COVID-19 Social Bonds” initiative, designed to alleviate the economic and social impact of the pandemic, is an important step forward. The Fight COVID-19 Social Bond has a three-year maturity. It is the largest ever Social Bond launched in international capital markets to date, with an interest rate of 0.75%.¹⁹ While such efforts certainly address the needs of the formal economy, poverty alleviation efforts must also include provisions for the informal economy to ensure that no one is left behind. IMF data highlights that the informal sector’s share of the economy in sub-Saharan Africa remains comparatively high at 34%, compared to 9% in North America and 5% across OECD countries.²⁰ The majority of Africa’s workforce operate in the informal sector and are employed in small, medium and micro-sized enterprises. These sectors are those most likely to be severely hit by the economic downturn. Therefore, governments must implement short and medium-term measures to mitigate the unintended consequences of COVID-19 restriction measures on this vulnerable group.

Open borders are an essential requirement for cross-border trade. Border closures are one of the first and most obvious negative impacts of COVID-19 on WICBTs. At the time of writing (19 April 2020), a large number of countries had limited cross-border movement or closed borders altogether, as detailed in Table 2 below. For example, South Africa indicated its intent to construct a wall along its northern border with Zimbabwe.²¹ Other countries, such as those in the Great Lakes region, also closed their borders, despite the region's heavy reliance on informal cross-border trade.

Data from Rwanda shows that 59% of its exports to neighbouring countries – the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Tanzania and Burundi – occurs through informal cross-border channels. Informal imports account for only 4% of the total.²² Despite the importance of informal cross-border trade to the country's exports, Rwanda's borders remain closed as of 22 March 2020. This action clearly affects regional trade networks. It may also result in further impoverishment of its border communities, reportedly living well below the poverty threshold of US\$1.9/day.²³ The impact on vulnerable households in the DRC, heavily dependent on informal trade for essential goods and agricultural commodities, could be devastating. Many communities bordering the DRC experience living standards that are 80% below the poverty threshold. They live precariously with high levels of food insecurity even under 'normal conditions'.

Border closures threaten not only the livelihoods of informal traders but also disrupt their supply chains. Generally, the traditional goods traded by WICBTs include non-processed foods (i.e., basic food supplies); low-value manufactured goods; and re-exported goods (including handicrafts and value-added agro-processed foods). Border closures will result in disruptions in the supply of food throughout these informal networks. This is especially true for countries that act primarily as suppliers of goods to a region (for example, South Africa's role in Southern Africa). This will have a negative ripple effect on the financial stability of WICBTs. It will also lead to rising food insecurity for the villages and rural communities that source goods from informal traders. As a consequence, the current crisis is likely to reduce both household expenditure and consumption significantly across these communities.

Table 2 – Restriction measures implemented across select sub-Saharan African countries²⁴

| Country | Restriction |
|-----------------------|--|
| Angola and Zambia | Quarantine measures for passengers and airline crew from select countries |
| Benin | Passengers are subjected to 14 days of quarantine |
| Botswana | No visa on arrival and no non-resident arrivals from certain countries allowed |
| Burkina Faso | International airports and border closed |
| Cameroon | Land air and sea borders closed indefinitely. All international flights suspended, except cargo planes, until 17 April 2020. |
| Republic of the Congo | Borders and airports closed |
| Cote d'Ivoire | The country's borders have been closed since March 25 |
| Djibouti | On March 15, Djibouti said it was suspending all international flights |
| Ethiopia | Land borders shut to nearly all human traffic |
| Gabon | Entry banned for non-residents for list of countries |
| Gambia | Border with Senegal closed for 21 days |
| Ghana | Closed all borders from March 22 |
| Kenya | All international flights to Kenya suspended. |
| Mali | Mali will indefinitely suspend flights from countries affected by the virus starting on March 19, except for cargo flights. |
| Rwanda | Closed borders on March 22, except for cargo and returning citizens |
| Sudan | Closed all airports, ports and land crossings on 16 March 2020. Only humanitarian, commercial and technical support shipments are excluded from the restrictions. |
| Uganda | On March 18, Uganda restricted travel to some of the affected countries and suspended all passenger planes in and out of the country starting from March 22 until April 24. Cargo planes will be exempted. |
| Zimbabwe | All borders closed on March 22, except for returning residents |

Disruptions to informal food supply networks have a cyclical effect. They cause heightened food insecurity in those communities that survive by procuring food and essential goods from WICBTs. Many low-income households cannot afford to buy food in bulk. This, under ordinary circumstances, helps keep WICBTs in business.²⁵ However, in most cases, government-sanctioned lockdowns closed down the public spaces in which WICBTs operate. This prevents WICBTs from earning a living, while shutting down their important service as traders in food and essential goods for the low-income households they service. This loss of venue heightens food insecurity for these households.

Another major challenge facing ICBTs is their precarious financial realities. These circumstances will force many WICBTs to continue to trade in unsafe conditions, putting their own lives and those of their families at risk. Many ICBTs live hand-to-mouth and are dependent on the sales they make to cover their costs. As a consequence, even a week-long closure of markets can have a devastating effect on their savings and heighten their financial insecurities.²⁶ Owing to their informality, they are rarely able to obtain financial assistance from commercial banks. The inability to access finance is one of the primary reasons that force WICBTs to remain informal and are unable to transition to the formal economy. As a result, ICBTs urgently require financial support to maintain their households during the lockdowns.

Efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on informal traders: what can government and the private sectors do?

Mitigation will require a ‘whole of government approach’ to develop and implement support mechanisms to assist small and informal businesses and low-income households. All government departments must work with and coordinate their actions with other stakeholders. These actors will include development institutions, the private sector, chambers of industry and business, and commercial banks. The need for regional coordination reflects the cross-border nature of informal trade. The forthcoming implementation of the AfCFTA affords policymakers an opportunity to shape its implementation and adoption through national policy planning processes. Adopting the above measures will improve the overall operational ecosystem for WICBTs.

As many African countries are low-income and lower middle-income, they face fiscal and other resource constraints to the levels of assistance they can provide to their citizens during this troubled period. The high prevalence of the informal sector also makes it difficult for governments to implement targeted policies. Nevertheless, the onus remains on governments to do as much as possible, and the recommendations below serve as guidelines aimed to ensure that WICBTs and other informal traders are included in governments’ efforts to mitigate the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. United Nations projections based on past experiences (such as the Ebola crisis) and emerging data show the longer-term impact of COVID-19 resulting in a prolonged dip in women’s incomes and labour force participation. These factors will compound the impacts on women already living in poverty.²⁷ It is therefore important that efforts target immediate relief, while providing for longer-term support.

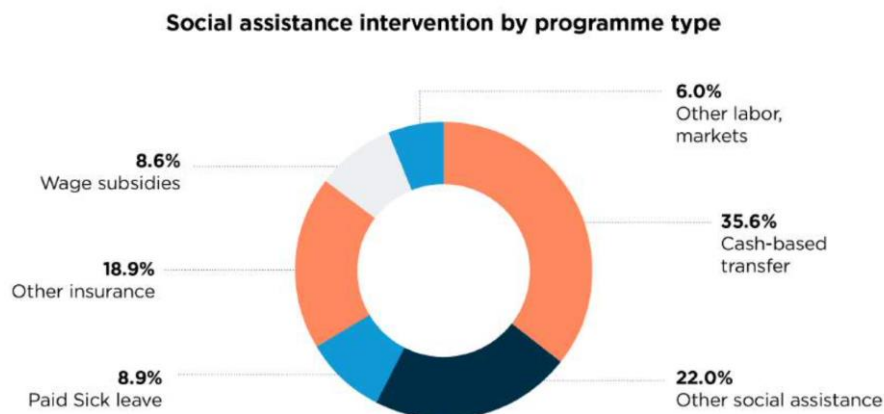
- **At a domestic level: government and private sector working together**

Governments need to focus on targeted fiscal measures that provide relief to the most affected sectors and households. Governments must first engage with local cross-border trade associations and market associations to understand the most urgent constraints and needs facing informal traders and to identify appropriate policy solutions. These solutions must address the needs of households dependent on earnings from the informal economy to survive. Consultations are critical and partnership is essential if WICBTs are to receive support mechanisms that meet their needs. To support WICBTs and other informal workers, African governments can consider implementing the following measures:

1. The first step is to ensure that WICBTs and informal vendors are easily identifiable. This could be done via already-existing trading permits or identification documents that attest to their status as informal traders. For example, in Uganda cross-border traders no longer require passports to cross the border; instead they complete a simplified inter-pass form that facilitates daily crossing.²⁸ Under COVID-19 conditions governments will have to relax registration requirements, and should consider simpler requirements that allow for quick and immediate relief to ICBTs, such as Uganda’s system of proof of receipts that indicate prior sales in informal markets. Another option would be to use market identification cards that indicate the days of the week that sellers are permitted to be in the market, to prevent over-crowding and maintain control over the trading systems in the market.²⁹
2. As illustrated by the South African government’s actions, one low-hanging fruit is to remove value added tax on all household essentials (such as disinfectants and sanitation products) and basic food supplies. It is also important to impose price control measures on these essential items, to prevent suppliers from hiking up prices, owing to supply shortages. These measures will help ease burdens on poorer households, while ensuring that essential goods remain affordable.

3. Governments could provide cash transfers or grants, which are amongst the most popular social support mechanisms currently in use:
 - Facilitating grants via existing social programmes (where they exist), or creating emergency funds that provide social protection for the informal sector. Cash transfers would help alleviate the food insecurity facing vulnerable persons, and are practical if recipients are identified based on readily available socio-economic information.³⁰
 - If cash transfers are not possible, governments could consider providing relief via food subsidies and continuity of targeted in-kind programmes (for example, continuation of free school meal programmes, even if schools are closed).³¹
 - Many WICBTs make use of mobile services to receive trade-related information. Using mobile devices for cash transfers or via mobile banking services at border stations is another option to ensure that WICBTs receive cash relief.

Figure 2 – Number and types of programmes introduced as a response to COVID-19 (global figures)³²



4. Another initiative at a local/municipal level could be creating a controlled environment that allows WICBTs to trade, with controlled crowd movement and appropriate safety mechanisms (such as gloves and masks for informal traders). This would enable WICBTs to maintain their income and provide surrounding communities with access to essential goods and foods. Stall activity could be limited to alternative days only and traders could also be circulated on a roster, to ensure that social distancing and sanitation regulations is adhered to, which is the approach taken in India.³³ In the event that selling from a market place is not possible, governments could also consider temporarily relaxing local by-laws that prevent citizens from selling outside their homes.³⁴ This would enable WICBTs to continue servicing their local communities and to earn an income, while reducing the exposure to COVID-19.
5. The private sector (and where appropriate, civil society organisations) can also play an important role in collaboration with local government:
 - a. Private sector suppliers of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as masks, gloves and disinfectants can coordinate with local/municipal authorities and cross-border

associations to supply informal traders with PPE at their place of work. Despite common misconceptions, market associations are well organised and able to communicate with their members on the safety and health requirements to prevent the spread of COVID-19.³⁵ Scheduling alternative days for market usage will enable disinfecting markets during off days.

- b. In a peri-urban and urban context, local governments can support cooperative arrangements with WICBTs to organise their supply chains.³⁶ Retailers can work directly with market associations to supply their surplus foods at wholesale prices. Informal workers can buy these surplus items to sell on to their customers. Such arrangements would help WICBTs to achieve economies of scale.

- **At a regional level: guidelines, standardization and harmonisation from RECs**

1. Regional economic communities (RECs) such as SADC issued regional cross-border transportation guidelines to harmonise cross-border trade and cater to the health and safety of cross-border truckers.³⁷ Although useful, such guidelines need to provide for ICBTs to continue operations, as far as possible, and to coordinate with national approaches. Therefore, bilateral coordination between local governments at border crossing is essential.
2. Border agencies must coordinate efforts for risk mitigation management to allow low-risk critical supplies – such as food – to pass quickly through customs control.³⁸ This will help customs officials and ICBTs maintain health and safety standards associated with COVID-19 requirements.

- **At a continental level: a forward-looking AfCFTA**

Implementing the AfCFTA provides an opportunity for governments to consider how to operationalise continental responses to future pandemics. Adopting gender mainstreaming in policy design is essential.³⁹ This will enable governments to account for the sector-specific industry impacts on women participants in the formal and informal economy.

Many African countries already incorporate gender mainstreaming via their AfCFTA National Implementation Strategies. These highlight existing barriers to entry, challenges, and other factors that reduce participation by women in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy at a national level. The implementation guidelines propose context-specific interventions to respond to existing inequalities.⁴⁰ The current lull in negotiations is an opportunity to explore improvements in policies and support structures aimed at WICBTs, and in the overarching ecosystem for informal cross-border trade, prior to the implementation stage of the AfCFTA.

In a post- COVID-19 world, efforts should focus on formulating and implementing regulations and policies to create an enabling environment for informal cross border trade. These can include:⁴¹

- The AfCFTA National Implementation Strategies should contain structures and processes for informal cross-border trade and establish minimum requirements to which all countries can adhere.
- Empowering WICBTs to understand cross-border rules and customs procedures starts with simpler and clearer administrative procedures and tax requirements at border crossings. These measures must be accompanied by technical assistance, training, and widespread distribution of the relevant procedures.
- Developing and implementing standards should be harmonized across all countries. Local authorities should disseminate information on non-tradable goods to ICBTs via their cross-border networks and traders associations in a timely manner.

- While Simplified Trade Regimes (STRs) do exist in certain regions, these should be utilised throughout the continent and become easy for WICBTs to access and use.⁴² STRs are important policy mechanisms that provide two key benefits for ICBTs: (i) formalisation of small-scale trade, which leads to increased revenues for governments through tax collections and (ii) access to information on customs procedures for traders, who can then plan and budget for cross-border activities. STRs can play an important role in moving ICBTs towards formalisation. STRs increase their exposure to larger cross-border markets and facilitate market linkages through harmonised export requirements and documentation. The AfCFTA will act as the umbrella framework under which respective RECs can negotiate specific goods and services to be exchanged under a common list, as dictated by local conditions.⁴³
- Once implemented, the AfCFTA will lead to lower tariffs, which may encourage informal traders to operate through formal channels and to join the formal economy.⁴⁴
- Infrastructure at border posts, including the ongoing construction of One Stop Border Posts⁴⁵ across the continent, must become more gender-sensitive. Such efforts can include: designated pedestrian lanes for women traders, faster clearance systems for WICBTs, gender-specific restrooms and overnight accommodations, and all-night lighting at border crossings.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic already illustrates significant negative impacts, only four months on. The virus has profound impact on what we view as 'normal life' and on the ways in which societies function. Governmental capabilities to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 are dependent not only on national resources, but on regional coordination and continent-wide efforts. For the African continent, ensuring that no one is left behind rests on public acknowledgment of the precarious situation in which many individuals, including WICBTs, eke out a living.

Addressing the needs of WICBTs will require training and sensitisation efforts targeting both women traders and customs officials to cultivate a shared sense of rights and responsibilities for both parties. For example, the Regulations on Minimum Standards for the Treatment of Small-Scale Cross-Border Traders⁴⁶ are a useful tool for this purpose. It could be replicated and implemented across the continent.⁴⁷ Even with smoother customs procedures and the possibility of lowered taxes, the gendered nature of cross-border trade persists. There is a significant positive correlation between women traders who use informal crossings and those who have encountered officials threatening to confiscate their goods or soliciting a bribe.⁴⁸

This crisis calls into question the continent's (and the world's) existing measures to support the vulnerable members of society. Ensuring that ICBTs are able to resist and survive the impact of COVID-19 requires immediate financial assistance and measures that will enable them to trade without endangering their lives. In the long run, governments, donors active across the African continent, and the private sector must work towards implementing simpler regulatory frameworks, facilitating WICBTs' access to finance and economies of scale, and improving cross-border trade infrastructure.

Author: Asmita Parshotam

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Editor-in-chief: Prof. Sam Park

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⁴² Developing an STR falls within the World Trade Organisation's requirements for its member states. An STR "targets small traders who regularly transact in low-value consignments and who are exempted from customs duties and other related taxes. The STR consist of four main instruments, namely: a simplified customs document, a simplified certificate of origin, a common list of products and a threshold for the value of the consignment. See The Technical Centre for Agricultura and Rural Cooperation (CTA), <https://www.cta.int/en/article/boosting-cross-border-trade-through-simplified-trade-regimes-sid0bd7ebb23-6c6b-4560-92ec-99a1270f8e74>

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⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ A one stop border post (OSBP) is a 'hard infrastructure' construction located at a port of entry between two neighbouring states' common land border crossing. Its purpose is to improve cooperation between governments sharing the OSBP by simplifying administrative clearance procedures, reducing border crossing times and related logistics costs and improving the sharing of information to mitigate potential risks and related crimes.

⁴⁶ Enshrined in the Charter for Cross Border Traders, developed by the World Bank as part of COMESA's STRs

⁴⁷ A Parshotam & S Balongo, op. cit.

⁴⁸ Siu J, *Trade Costs, Trade Facilitation and Formalisation of Trade: Evidence from One-Stop Border Posts in Uganda*, Working Paper. London: International Growth Centre, April 019.



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Contact Information:

Que Boxi

Email: cas@ntu.edu.sg

Phone: +65 65138089

Address: S3-B1A-35 Nanyang Business School

Nanyang Technological University

50 Nanyang Avenue Singapore 639798