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Abstract

This paper examines how Coordinated Border Management (CBM) can realize the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)'s vision of a united and prosperous Africa. CBM is a strategic framework that promotes joint management practices among border agencies to streamline cross-border flows, encompassing shared risk analysis, joint patrols and controls, information exchange, and joint training and cross-training programs. CBM fosters intra-agency and inter-agency cooperation to enhance legitimate trade while safeguarding national security. The AfCFTA's Protocol on Trade in Goods, particularly Annexes 3 and 4, explicitly embeds CBM provisions, mandating cooperation and harmonization among Customs and other border agencies. By addressing historical inefficiencies and promoting deliberate, structured collaboration, CBM can transform African borders from impediments to trade into conduits for economic growth and regional integration. The effective implementation of these provisions, however, demands sustained political will and continuous capacity building to fully unleash Africa's trade potential and drive the continent towards a future of integrated prosperity.

Key words: AfCFTA, Coordinated Border Management, World Customs Organization, joint controls, information sharing

1. A Definition of Coordinated Border Management

Coordinated Border Management (CBM) refers to the practice by border control agencies to align their respective activities in the context of seeking greater efficiencies over managing trade and travel flows (World Customs Organization, 2024).

While the terminology has evolved over time from “Integrated” Border Management (IBM) to “Collaborative” Border Management, and lastly to “Coordinated” Border Management,¹ its fundamental principles have substantially remained the same. CBM fundamentally involves establishing a comprehensive framework of joint management practices among border agencies aiming at streamlining border crossing procedures. These practices encompass a range of strategic initiatives, including the adoption of common risk analysis frameworks, the execution of joint controls and patrols, the sharing of infrastructure and equipment, the establishment of robust communication and information-sharing mechanisms, and the implementation of joint training programs. Cooperation can occur at two distinct levels:

- a) intra-agency (this involves collaboration between national border agencies within the same country, like Customs, immigration, and police, working together to manage their shared border responsibilities effectively);
- b) inter-agency (this refers to cooperation between agencies of different states. This level of collaboration involves two or more countries working together on cross-border issues to enhance security, facilitate trade, and manage migration flows, among others).

At its core, the CBM approach fosters cooperative relationships among government authorities, particularly those with regulatory oversight over cross-border movement of persons, vehicles and goods. This collaboration seeks to increase operational efficiency by enhancing their capacity to facilitate legitimate flows while simultaneously ensuring an improved protection of national borders and collection of government revenues.

As highlighted in the World Customs Organization (WCO) Coordinated Border Management Compendium,² CBM does not come naturally. It is an engineered process which is the culmination of a series of deliberate activities designed to foster collaboration among border agencies.

¹ Many organizations refer to the concept by using the term “integrated” or “collaborative” border management. In the World Customs Organization (WCO) terminology, the preferred term is “coordinated border management”, as it gives prominence to the principle of coordination of policies, programs and delivery outcomes whilst avoiding any perception of favouring a single solution. Some of the WCO instruments and tools that are particularly relevant to CBM include the Revised Kyoto Convention (RKC) on the simplification and harmonization of customs procedures, the Coordinated Border Management Compendium, the Single Window Compendium, the WCO Data Model and the SAFE Framework of Standard.

² The Coordinated Border Management Compendium is a tool developed by the WCO to help its members to develop and implement a CBM approach between Customs and other border agencies. It does so by describing best practices on different areas of CBM that Members can replicate or adapt to their specific needs and legal environments.

To successfully implement CBM, a comprehensive change management process³ is essential. This process typically begins with an analysis of existing operational and governance models of each border agency, and it is followed by a redesign of workflows to enable the seamless synchronization of their interventions at the border. The ultimate objective is to empower these agencies to act in unison, eliminating process redundancies or repetitive actions.

Generally, establishing a CBM approach requires governments to address six critical areas, to be approached in a sequential order:

1. **Legal and regulatory framework:** a specific framework needs to be developed to define roles, responsibilities and tasks of each agency. Typically, this framework is represented by Protocols, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), cooperative arrangements, bilateral or regional agreements governing the cooperative relationships among the various agencies operating at the border.
2. **Institutional framework:** an institutionalized mechanism is essential for supporting, overseeing, and ensuring both intra-agency and inter-agency coordination. This mechanism can operate at national level (e.g., a lead agency ensuring that all national border agencies present at a border post operate synchronously), or at bi-national level (e.g., a joint border committee made up of representatives of all the border agencies operating at a specific border post that is responsible for joint discussion and resolution of cross-border issues).
3. **Joint management practices and co-operation procedures:** adopted in the form of joint procedure manuals or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), they delineate how each agency's work is conducted, identifying responsibilities and providing step-by-step descriptions for the implementation of their specific tasks.
4. **Communication and information exchange:** Standardized and efficient communication and information exchange between the different agencies at the border and between such agencies and their headquarters is critical for ensuring effective and sustainable cooperation. Adopting a formal agreement or protocol among all participating agencies can clarify what information will be shared, with whom, and how it will be exchanged at both intra-agency and inter-agency levels (e.g., through ad hoc reports, verbal communication, mobile messages). Such agreements should also detail procedures for tracking and tracing shared information to maintain data integrity and accountability.
5. **Sharing of infrastructure and equipment:** The sharing of infrastructure and equipment supports co-ordination and co-operation among border agencies at all levels. It helps to mitigate capacity disparities among agencies by pooling resources such as non-intrusive detection equipment, patrol cars, sniffer dogs, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV), as well as border facilities like buildings and office space.⁴

³ Change management can be defined as the overarching approach taken in an organisation to move from the current to a future, desirable state, using a coordinated and structured approach (Association for Project Management, 2019).

⁴ As described in Section 4, sharing of border infrastructure and equipment is encouraged by article 25.2 of Annex IV on Trade Facilitation of the Protocol on Trade in Goods of the AfCFTA, which urges State Parties to cooperate among themselves,

6. **Human resources and training policies:** Given the highly specialized nature of border management tasks, training plans must reflect this. A common cooperation curriculum, joint trainings, and cross-training of human resources are pivotal for fostering a culture of cooperation among border agencies. Joint training activities promote confidence-building, information exchange, and the more efficient use of training resources. Specifically, cross-training, where two or more agencies provide training to each other in their respective areas of expertise, can significantly enhance inter-agency capabilities.⁵

2. The AfCFTA

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a pivotal initiative within the African Union's Agenda 2063, a comprehensive strategic framework designed to propel Africa's emergence as a global powerhouse. Launched at the 12th Extraordinary Session of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government in Niamey, Niger, in July 2019, AfCFTA's primary objective is to establish a unified continental Free Trade Area to address the historical fragmentation of African markets, which poses a major constraint to investment growth and competitiveness of the continent. This integration is projected to stimulate substantial economic results, including diversification of exports, expanded market access for African goods and services, development of interconnected production processes within Africa (regional value chains) and enhanced capacity to attract foreign direct investment. The AfCFTA entered into force on 30th May 2019, while trade under the continent-wide free trade area officially commenced on 1st January 2021. However, the first trade operations started only after the launch of the Guided Trade Initiative (GTI), in October 2022. This pilot program, which initially involved eight states⁶ representing the continent's five key regions (North, South, East, West, and Central) and a focused selection of commodities, has been designed to accelerate the agreement's implementation. In a strategic move on November 9th, 2024, the AfCFTA Council of Ministers opted to discontinue the GTI, integrating its objectives into a more comprehensive, Private Sector Engagement (PSE) program.

Ultimately, the AfCFTA aims to unlock substantial opportunities for Africa's private sector, enabling more efficient access to the continental market at reduced transaction costs and gaining competitive advantage through leveraging economies of scale and a wider consumer base.

3. CBM Frameworks Developed by African RECs

At level of Regional Economic Communities (RECs), only the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have developed specific frameworks to promote a CBM approach among border agencies in their

to the extent possible and practicable, and on mutually agreed terms, in the development and sharing of common facilities, as well as in the establishment of one stop border post control.

⁵ A study by the Center for the Study of Democracy titled "Better Management of EU Borders through Cooperation" offers an illustrative example of this practice in Finland, where customs officers are periodically trained by the Border Guard to inspect identification documents and visas, among other procedures. Border Guards, in turn, receive from Customs training on the search of vehicles and the recognition of prohibited and restricted goods, such as drugs, alcohol, and counterfeit items.

⁶ Rwanda, Cameroon, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Tanzania and Tunisia.

respective member states.

SADC commitment to CBM is evidenced by its 2011 Guidelines on Coordinated Border Management. These guidelines offer a comprehensive, non-legally binding framework designed to enhance border efficiency, facilitate trade, and deepen regional integration. Their influence is apparent in the development of National Coordinated Border Management Strategies in several member states, notably Namibia (SADC, 2025).

IGAD developed in 2022 a Coordinated Border Management Framework, providing detailed guidance on improving organizational, planning, coordination, and communication processes among customs and other border agencies. This was followed by the development in 2024 of a training manual on CBM which served as the basis for a series of Training of Trainers sessions, which were conducted with stakeholders from all participating IGAD countries. These initiatives were part of a European Union-funded program, implemented by the Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute (HESPI).⁷ The purpose of the IGAD CBM Framework is to ensure smoother, more transparent and efficient customs and border operations, as well as enhanced cooperation among border agencies in the region, addressing persistent challenges related to procedural inefficiencies and constrained resource availability. A key principle of the framework is the establishment of robust information and intelligence exchange mechanisms to secure borders and improve trade flows. Successful border cooperation, as outlined in the framework, also hinges upon strong political commitment, complemented by the strategic adoption of appropriate technology to ensure efficient processes at the borders within the IGAD Region. Specifically, the document identifies six principal areas for member states to consider in implementing and sustaining a CBM approach corresponding to the six dimensions of CBM detailed in Section 1. These areas are the following:

1. **Legal and Regulatory Framework:** The Framework underscores the necessity of harmonizing national laws and regulations pertaining to cross-border operations, particularly those concerning restricted and prohibited goods, to address current inconsistencies among member states.
2. **Institutional Framework:** The IGAD-CBM Framework proposes to classify the border crossing points in the region in three categories (Border Posts, Border Stations and Patrol Bases) to calibrate surveillance activities and identify the government agencies to be deployed at these points. Border Posts are large facilities for comprehensive cargo and person clearance where all border agencies are present; Border Stations are medium-sized, with limited agency presence for reduced volumes; and Patrol Bases are security perimeters primarily for person clearance, manned by customs and security agencies.
3. **Procedures:** The document advocates for a joint review, simplification, and harmonization of border crossing procedures, with the development of publicly displayed flowcharts to provide clear visual guidance for users.

⁷ For further information on the IGAD training of trainers' sessions, see: <https://hespi.org/events/coordinated-border-management-training-of-trainers-tot-sessions/>

4. **Human Resources, capacity building and training:** It highlights the need for adequate human resource deployment at border points. Given that optimal staffing is often unfeasible, the framework promotes empowering officers to handle multiple roles through delegation of power from other agencies.
5. **Communications and information exchange:** Effective communication strategies, both among border agencies and with border users, are indicated as essential to foster a CBM approach. Formal agreements should govern information exchange, with strict confidentiality maintained to prevent illicit trade from intercepting crucial data.
6. **Infrastructure, equipment and utilities:** The framework stresses the importance of adequate border infrastructure, including roads, office accommodations, cargo verification areas, and ICT systems. It also calls for modern equipment such as smart gates, Non-Intrusive Inspection (NII) tools, and x-ray cargo scanners to ensure border safety and efficiency.

In alternative to a comprehensive CBM framework, the East African Community (EAC) has developed a Training Curriculum on One-Stop Border Posts, considered one of the most successful examples of infrastructure-sharing in Africa, which as described above is one of the critical areas of CBM. This curriculum provides modules on the OSBP legal framework and procedures, border security and disaster risk management, coordinated border management, gender mainstreaming, environmental and social safeguards, and additional “support programs” encompassing change management, customer care, ethics and integrity, and international relations. This training curriculum is further complemented by an EAC Trainers' Guide, which aims at ensuring a consistent approach to customs training across the region.

4. Provisions Promoting a CBM Approach in the AfCFTA

The AfCFTA incorporates a robust framework on CBM primarily outlined in its Protocol on Trade in Goods. Key principles and provisions pertaining to CBM are articulated in Annex 3 on Customs Co-operation and Mutual Administrative Assistance and Annex 4 on Trade Facilitation.

Annex 3 on Customs Co-operation and Mutual Administrative Assistance governs the interaction and collaboration among the customs authorities of AfCFTA State Parties. Art. 8 of this Annex mandates that these administrations must co-operate in the prevention, investigation and suppression of customs offences. This cooperation is mostly achieved through exchange of information and joint surveillance of cross-border movements of goods. Specific measures include:

1. **Exchange of prohibited good lists:** State Parties are required to exchange lists of goods whose importation is prohibited within their respective territories;
2. **Monitoring of outgoing products:** to prevent the entry of prohibited goods into other State Parties, customs authorities must exercise surveillance of products leaving their territories; and
3. **Exchange of information on customs offices:** State Parties are required to exchange lists of customs offices situated along shared borders. These lists must delineate each office's mandate and operational hours. Any subsequent amendments to this information must be

made promptly available to the counterpart State Party to ensure its timeliness and accuracy.

Moreover, Art. 8 imposes an obligation on AfCFTA State Parties to align the capabilities and harmonize working hours of customs offices. It further stipulates that they must engage in reciprocal consultations to establish border crossing points and jointly approved routes at their boundaries, taking all the necessary steps to ensure that all trade passes through these officially designated places. Ultimately, AfCFTA State Parties are obligated to maintain special surveillance over:

1. The entry into, sojourn in, and exit from their territories of persons reasonably suspected of involvement in activities that are contrary to the customs laws of any State Party;
2. The movement of goods reasonably suspected of being the subject of illegal traffic;
3. Those places located in proximity to the border where identified stockpiles of goods raise reasonable suspicion of being used for illegal cross-border trade; and
4. Vehicles, ships, aircraft, or other means of transport reasonably suspected of being employed to commit customs offences in any State Party.

Lastly, paragraph 3 of art. 8 outlines the framework for information exchange among customs authorities. It mandates that State Parties, upon request and without undue delay, provide all available information regarding:

1. Operations which reasonably suggest the commission of customs offences in any State Party;
2. Persons, vehicles, ships, aircraft and other means of transport reasonably suspected of involvement in activities that may violate the customs laws of any State Party;
3. Goods known to be subject to illegal traffic;
4. Customs documents relating to importation and exportation of goods which are reasonably suspected of being in violation of the customs laws of the requesting State Party; and
5. Certificates of origin, invoices or any other documents, that are or reasonably suspected to be forged or otherwise fraudulently produced.

Article 25 of Annex 4 (on trade facilitation) serves as the foundational provision for CBM within the AfCFTA. This article directly mirrors article 8 of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, emphasizing the imperative for AfCFTA State Parties to ensure that all their border agencies cooperate with one another and coordinate their activities in order to facilitate trade. The first paragraph of this article addresses intra-agency coordination, stipulating that each State Party must ensure that its domestic authorities and agencies responsible for border control and procedures dealing with the importation, exportation and transit of goods cooperate with each other to facilitate trade. Conversely, Paragraph 2 of article 25 focuses on inter-agency cooperation. It encourages State

Parties to collaborate, where practicable, with neighboring State Parties to coordinate border procedures and enhance cross-border trade. To achieve this, a range of illustrative practices, identical to those outlined in Article 8 of the WTO-TFA, are enumerated. They include: a) the alignment of border agencies' working days, hours, procedures and formalities; b) the development and sharing of common facilities to consolidate border operations (including the possibility to establish One-Stop Border Posts); and c) the implementation of joint controls to reduce duplication and expedite inspection processes.

5. Conclusion

The effective implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) hinges on the seamless movement of goods across borders. As described in this paper, Coordinated Border Management is not merely an aspirational concept, but a fundamental pillar explicitly embedded within the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Goods, particularly in Annexes 3 and 4. The AfCFTA's approach to CBM directly addresses one of the key impediments to the expansion of intra-African trade: the pervasive fragmentation and lack of coordination in border processes that significantly escalate both transit delays and operational costs for traders. By mandating cooperation, information exchange, and harmonization among customs authorities (Annex 3) and between Customs and other border agencies (Annex 4), the Protocol establishes a robust legal framework designed to streamline procedures, reduce redundancies, and enhance efficiency. The emphasis on aligning working hours, establishing joint border crossing points, implementing joint controls, and fostering the exchange of critical operational and intelligence information among border agencies directly addresses the “engineered process” nature of CBM, recognizing that collaboration requires deliberate and structured interventions.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is not just an agreement: it is a bold declaration of intent to unleash Africa's immense economic power. Provisions on CBM are strategically crafted to unlock the continent's huge trade potential. By fostering a collaborative environment among border agencies and promoting the harmonization and simplification of border procedures, the AfCFTA aims to transform African borders from points of friction into conduits for economic growth and integration. However, the successful implementation of these provisions, requires sustained political will, continuous capacity building, and effective inter-agency and international cooperation, which are paramount in realizing the AfCFTA's vision of a prosperous and integrated African market.

The AfCFTA vision of creating a united, dynamic, and self-reliant Africa can only become a reality if persons, goods and services will be able to move freely across the continent. Coordinated Border Management emerges as an indispensable instrument for dismantling pervasive border inefficiencies that have historically constrained competitiveness, economic growth and regional cohesion. This coordinated approach is not merely an administrative adjustment but a fundamental enabler for the AfCFTA to realize its full transformative potential, propelling the continent towards a future of prosperity and opportunity.

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