Positioning Testing For Trade Under AfCFTA

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Africa’s Trade Crossroads – The Urgency for Transformation

Continental Trade Reality: Despite AfCFTA, intra-African trade remains <18%, compared to 68% in the EU—highlighting structural barriers in quality, logistics, and regulatory trust

AfCFTA Promise: Covers 54 countries, $3.4T GDP, 1.4B citizens—an economic block poised for self-sufficiency and global competitiveness

Development Impact: AfCFTA implementation could lift over 30 million Africans out of poverty and increase wages by 10%, especially in manufacturing and agri-value chains (World Bank, 2023)

Strategic Imperative: Robust testing infrastructure is not a side issue—it is fundamental to enabling access to regional markets, ensuring compliance, and eliminating NTBs

What is Testing in a Trade Context?

Testing = Conformity, Trust, and Market Access.

Definition

The scientific process of evaluating products using microbiological, chemical, physical, and molecular techniques to ensure compliance with market and regulatory expectations

Core Functions:

- Detects contaminants, hazards, and substandard materials
- Supports conformity to health, environmental, and safety standards
- Acts as a gatekeeper for product certification and labelling

Trade Linkages:

Enables implementation of SPS (Sanitary & Phytosanitary), TBT (Technical Barriers to Trade), RoO (Rules of Origin), and traceability requirements

Message:

Testing serves as the bridge between scientific credibility and commercial viability

Testing Embedded in AfCFTA Protocols

Legal Mandate

- Annex 6 (TBT): Promotes harmonized conformity assessment systems and cross-border MRAs (Mutual Recognition Arrangements)
- Annex 7 (SPS): Advocates for science-based testing as the basis for food safety and phytosanitary decisions
- Annex 8 (Trade Facilitation): Mandates efficient, risk-based border testing to reduce delays

Operational Enablers

- NTB Reporting Mechanism: Enables businesses to report trade-related testing bottlenecks
- Adjustment Facility: Provides financial tools for countries to upgrade labs and inspection systems
- National Implementation Plans: Embed quality infrastructure priorities in national trade agendas

Conclusion: AfCFTA recognizes testing not just as a policy tool, but as an operational pillar of seamless trade.

The Testing Value Chain

Sampling

Representative and contamination-free collection

Transport

Secure, temperature-controlled chain of custody

Testing

Conducted in ISO/IEC 17025-accredited labs ensuring technical reliability

Certification

Issuance of results or compliance marks (e.g., EcoMark, Q-Mark)

Border Decision

Automated clearance or detention, based on digital evidence

Notification

Regional alerts through RAPEX, RASFF, ePing to prevent risk proliferation

Call-out: The entire chain must be digitised, trusted, and synchronised with Customs and trade portals for real-time decisions

Challenges in Africa's Testing Ecosystem

- **Accreditation Gaps:** Only ~30% of Africa's labs are accredited; many operate below international standards or without recognized scopes.
- **Access Inequality:** Labs are overly concentrated in South Africa, Kenya, Egypt—leaving vast regions underserved, especially in agri-export zones.
- **Cost Barriers:** High testing costs discourage MSMEs, limiting their ability to meet export-grade quality standards.
- **Protocol Disharmony:** Absence of harmonized testing methodologies results in duplicated tests, mistrust of results, and trade delays.
- **Disconnect from Trade Ecosystems:** Many labs operate in isolation from customs, trade ministries, and export agencies.

Message:
Weak lab infrastructure = weak trade competitiveness.

Cost of Inadequate Testing

Case 1	Kenya-Uganda maize ban due to aflatoxin levels—resulting in months of trade disruption and farmer income loss	**Case 3**	EU rejection of African cosmetic and food products due to microbial and chemical contaminants—damaging Africa's brand image
Case 2	Somalia's livestock exports halted over unmet OIE testing protocols—impacting livelihoods of over 5M people	**Quantified Impact**	**EAC loses $700M+** annually due to preventable NTBs, many of which stem from poor or unrecognized testing

Conclusion: The cost of poor testing is far greater than the cost of quality investment

Strategic Shift – Reframing the Testing Narrative

Old Mindset	Testing Priorities
Compliance cost	Market assurance asset
Fragmented Lab Landscape	Interconnected regional lab networks
Manual Reporting	AI-enabled, blockchain-based traceability
Public-only Infrastructure	PPPs with private innovation and mobile labs
Capacity as fixed	Capacity as scalable and adaptive through STI

Message: Let's position testing as an economic enabler—not a regulatory burden.

STI in Testing

Science as a Trade Accelerator

Outcome: STI is transforming quality infrastructure from static compliance to dynamic competitiveness

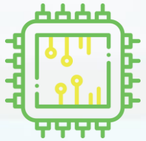
Innovations Driving Impact:

DNA-based diagnostics for faster contaminant detection

AI for predictive analytics at border control (e.g., flagging high-risk shipments)

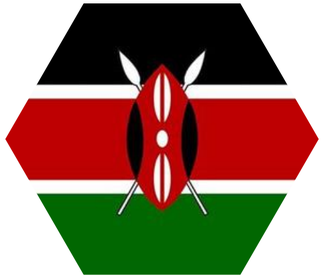
Mobile and solar-powered mini-labs for remote communities

LIMS and blockchain tech for immutable testing records



IoT-enabled equipment for real-time lab monitoring

Examples of Tested Success in Africa



Kenya

Implemented aflatoxin management and ISO 17025-accredited labs, increasing maize export acceptability.

Somaliland

Strategic lab investments helped test 90% of trade flows, sustaining access to Gulf markets

Uganda

UNBS “Q-Mark” certification raised product trust across regional buyers.

Ethiopia

:=ISO-recognized petroleum lab attracted foreign investment and increased compliance

Lesson: Lab quality = export access = economic gains

Continental and Global Frameworks

Africa

- AU Quality Policy anchors continental quality systems and lab development
- ARSO and AFRAC support harmonization and cross-border result recognition
- AUDA-NEPAD's Reference Labs Initiative is creating continental nodes of excellence

Global

- WTO SPS/TBT enforce science-based border measures
- Codex, IPPC, OIE set sectoral testing protocols
- ISO/IEC 17025 provides lab competence baseline

Alignment Goal: One test, many markets.

Sectoral Priorities for Testing under AfCFTA

Sector	Testing Priorities
Agro-Food	Aflatoxins, GMOs, pesticides, mycotoxins, heavy metals
Pharmaceuticals	API purity, bioequivalence, dissolution, counterfeiting detection
Fisheries	Histamine levels, hygiene indicators, microbiological testing
Cosmetics	Microbial load, preservatives, allergens, pH, regulatory toxins
Industrial	Electrical safety, structural testing, labeling, hazardous materials

Ask: Prioritize harmonized testing SOPs, aligned to both AfCFTA and global regulations

Action Plan

5 Game-Changing Moves

1. Regional Testing Protocols: Co-create validated and cross-sectoral SOPs across RECs.
2. Reference Laboratories: Build and designate labs as regional hubs of trust and excellence.
3. Mutual Recognition: Expand MRAs across AU member states to reduce re-testing at borders.
4. Implementation Scorecards: Embed testing readiness indicators in national AfCFTA KPIs and dashboards.
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Result: A functional, scalable, and trusted testing ecosystem across the continent.

The Vision – A Tested, Trusted, Trading Africa

'Africa must test to trade—and trade to thrive.'

Reliable

Recognised

Responsive

Outcome: A testing ecosystem that fuels Africa's journey toward diversified, inclusive, and resilient trade-led growth.

Call to Action

Governments: Elevate testing to a national trade priority—fund, legislate, and integrate it into policy

Development Partners: Mainstream testing in trade, health, environment, and STI programming

Private Sector: View testing as a strategic investment, not an operational cost

Labs & Academia: Drive accreditation, innovation, and speed-to-service

RECs & AU Bodies: Harmonize regional protocols, build MRAs, support shared labs

Thank You

To trade confidently, the world must test—and trust—Africa.

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