

Developing Trade Corridors for Fish and Fish Products in the Context of the African Blue Economy

Executive Summary

Development of Trade Corridors, including One stop Border Post (OSBP) is one of the key strategies which African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) have adopted in order to ensure that planning and implementation of regional infrastructure is done with the aim to decrease costs and favour internal and external trade, so as to increase economic benefits to the populations. In the context of the Blue Economy, fisheries are one of the major economic components; and integrating fisheries trade corridors in the Blue Economy Strategy will contribute towards Africa's food security and nutrition, economic development, poverty reduction; and raise the overall return on investments in Blue Value Chains. This Policy Brief aims to show the role of trade corridors in connecting fishing communities to local, regional, continental and international markets, within the broader blue economy strategy.

1. Background and Context:

The Lomé Declaration of the First Specialised Technical Committee (STC) on Transport, Transcontinental and Inter-Regional Infrastructure, Energy and Tourism (March, 2017), made a strong political initiative underscored and recommended the concept of Integrated Corridor Approach for infrastructure development in Africa (African Union, 2020). Planning and implementation of regional infrastructure is done with the aim to increase economic benefits to the populations, so as to decrease costs and favor internal and external trade, amongst others (African Union, 2020). The intra-regional fish trade in Africa is vital for food security, livelihoods, and economic growth, yet it faces systemic challenges. Informal cross-border trade (ICBT) dominates, with complex routes spanning thousands of kilometres, such as Senegal-to-Mali (1,300 km) and Malawi-to-Mozambique (900 km) corridors. These corridors handle significant volumes: for example, women processors in Senegal move 10 metric tons monthly, but only 6% cross borders

formally due to bottlenecks (WorldFish, 2017).

Africa's fish trade is characterised by marine exports (e.g., tuna from Ghana, small pelagic from Namibia) and freshwater flows (e.g., Nile perch and farmed tilapia from Uganda), with Tanzania, Madagascar, and Seychelles leading export volumes (AU-IBAR, 2018). However, infrastructure gaps, fragmented policies, the low level of training of those involved, and border inefficiencies constrain trade potential. Fish trade corridors across Africa are critical for food security and nutrition, livelihoods, and economic integration (as envisaged by the African Continent Free Trade Agreement- AfCFTA), yet face divergent regional dynamics. Intra-regional trade is dominated by informal cross-border flows, with marine exports (e.g., tuna, small pelagic) and freshwater products (e.g., Nile perch, tilapia, dagaa) moving through complex networks. Key challenges include infrastructure gaps, policy fragmentation, and informality. Regional initiatives such as the One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) and above all, the free movement of goods and persons (AFCFTA) implementation aim to streamline trade. In the 2000s the OSBP concept began to be applied across Africa; OSBPs play a role in facilitating joint control and trade at border crossings at any stage of regional integration (AUDA-NEPAD-JICA, 2022). An OSBP is a border crossing where travelers, goods, and means of transport stop only once to undertake exit formalities from one country and entry formalities into the other (IOM, 2015).

2. Scope of Policy Brief

The scope of this Policy Brief covers the development of the main fisheries trade corridors across West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, and North Africa within the context of the blue economy, with particular attention to the causes, impacts, and mitigation of post-harvest losses. It shows the role of trade corridors in connecting fishing communities to local, regional, continental and international markets, the integration of trade in fish and fisheries products into the broader blue economy strategies, and the systemic approaches to addressing challenges that undermine food security, livelihoods, and economic growth (AU-IBAR, 2018).

3. Rationale and Justification

The African Blue Economy Strategy endorsed as a blueprint by the AU Summit heads of States in February 2020, stipulates that Africa's potential in oceans, seas, lakes, rivers as source of wealth and livelihoods is not fully tapped, yet could increase jobs, improve GDP and climate change benefits. Africa's structural transformation in blue economy transcends fisheries, mining, shipping, tourism, and trade, creating institutional and sectoral linkages supporting emerging and frontier sectors, and integrating social considerations, gender, youth, food and water security, poverty alleviation, wealth and job creation (AU-IBAR 2019b). The Nairobi Blue Economy Global Conference in 2018 brought to bear the opportunities that can accrue from harnessing the economic potentials in the oceans, seas, lakes, rivers among others (ISSD, 2018). The Blue Economy constitutes the Goal 6 of the AU-Agenda 2063 and Goal 14 of the UN SDG-Agenda 2030. The Blue Economy is a tool for economic diversification, innovation, investment in human capital, regional and international trade integration. It is an integrated management tool for Africa's aquatic resources and ecosystems including safeguards against pollution and overexploitation as well as strengthening governance, enhancing the quality of public services and improving the business climate for trade related activities (AU-IBAR, 2022).

In the context of the Blue Economy, fisheries are one of the major economic components. In this regard, integrating fisheries trade corridors in the Blue Economy Strategy may contribute towards Africa's food security and nutrition, economic development, and poverty reduction; and raise the overall return on the Blue Economy investments. Fish and fish products are among the most traded agricultural commodities, supporting millions of livelihoods, especially in coastal and riparian communities. In addition, structural challenges across the borders lead to informal trade, making it difficult to document and appreciate the contribution of fisheries to the blue economy.

The blue economy framework emphasises sustainable and equitable exploitation of aquatic resources, integrating fisheries, aquaculture, and value chain development. Strengthening trade corridors and

reducing post-harvest losses are essential for realising the full potential of Africa's blue economy, ensuring resilient supply chains, and supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) objectives (AU-IBAR, 2018).

4. Regional Fish Trade Corridor Diagnostic Analysis:

A synoptic description of Africa's major fish trade corridors is provided below (supported by Figure 1) followed by a diagnostic analysis of the key issues constraining an African efficient trade.

West Africa

- ***Trade Corridors:*** The West African fish trade is dominated by the Dakar-Bamako corridor (1,300 km), linking Senegal's processing hubs to landlocked Mali and Burkina Faso. Ghana's small pelagic fish products flow to Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and the DRC via informal routes (FAO, 2006). Furthermore, in Cote d'Ivoire, distribution begins at wholesale fish markets in large urban centres such as Abidjan, with access to modern harbours, storage and processing centres (Anoh et al., 2017). Intermediaries and retailers source fish from these wholesale markets and processing centres, including imported frozen products (largely from Mauritania). Processed fish, mostly smoked, is imported over-land from Senegal and Mali, and re-exported by road to Burkina Faso and by canoes to Ghana (Anoh et al., 2017).
- ***Key Products:*** Sardinella, frozen shrimp, and artisanal smoked/dried fish. Women-led groups (e.g., Pencuum-Senegal Women Fish Mongers Association) process ~10 metric tons monthly, but only 6% crosses border formally (FAO, 2006). In addition to marine fish smoked products, freshwater dried salted fish from Mopti at the Niger Delta -Mali also enter the informal cross border trade (Anoh et al., 2017).
- ***Challenges:*** Challenges: High transport costs due to multiple checkpoints (e.g., 26-hour Dakar-Bamako transit), non-harmonised sanitary standards, and racketeering at borders, inadequate cold chain infrastructure, and border tariffs (taxes) (Aliyu et al., 2016).

East Africa

- ***Trade Corridors:***
  - *Lake Victoria Basin:* Supplies Uganda/Kenyan tilapia and Nile perch to South Sudan, DR Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi (AU-IBAR, 2018).
  - *Mombasa-Goma corridor:* Channels Kenyan marine products to DR Congo and inland neighbours (FAO, 2013).
  - *Kenya-South Sudan-Uganda-DRC corridor:* Channels Tilapia and Lamere from White Nile through Uganda to DRC (MAAIF, Uganda, 2025). Tilapia, Nile perch and Laboe from Lake Turkana through Uganda to DRC.
- ***Key Products:*** Fresh/dried tilapia, Nile perch by-products (e.g., frames, skins), and Somali lobster (exported to Kenya/Yemen) (AU-IBAR, 2018).
- ***Challenges:*** Insufficient or lack of infrastructure at border points for sanitary checks, trade in immature fish which threatens sustainability of stocks in places of origin, illegal routes bypassing formal posts, informal but powerful trade associations controlling trade operations outside official procedures, man power gaps and poor systems in inspection and certification, inappropriate transport vehicles and packaging.

Central Africa

- ***Trade Corridors:*** The Libreville-N'Djamena corridor (Cameroon-Gabon-Chad) facilitates marine/freshwater fish flows, with Cameroon as a regional hub (AUDA-NEPAD, 2015). In the case of Lake Chad, the cross-border trade involves a complex arrangement of contract fishing and processing (Meke et al., 2018). Fishers are mostly from Chad and Cameroon, who hold fishing licenses. Fish processors are predominantly from Cameroon and sell via contracts with traders, of whom around 80% are Nigerian wholesalers (Meke et al., 2018).
- ***Key Products:*** Frozen horse mackerel (Namibia to DRC), smoked catfish, and aquaculture products.
- ***Challenges:*** Weak compliance with sanitary standards, high transport costs, and limited data on informal trade. OSBPs are being piloted to reduce delays (UNIDO, 2024).

North Africa

- ***Trade Dynamics:*** Minimal intra-regional corridors; focused on global markets. Egypt imports for domestic demand, while Morocco/Algeria export canned sardines to Europe (FAO, 2015)
- ***Key Products:*** Marine species (sardines, anchovies) and aquaculture imports.
- ***Challenges:*** Dependence on imports (~60% of fish expenditure), with new initiatives aiming to redirect funds to local aquaculture (Gordon et al., 2013).

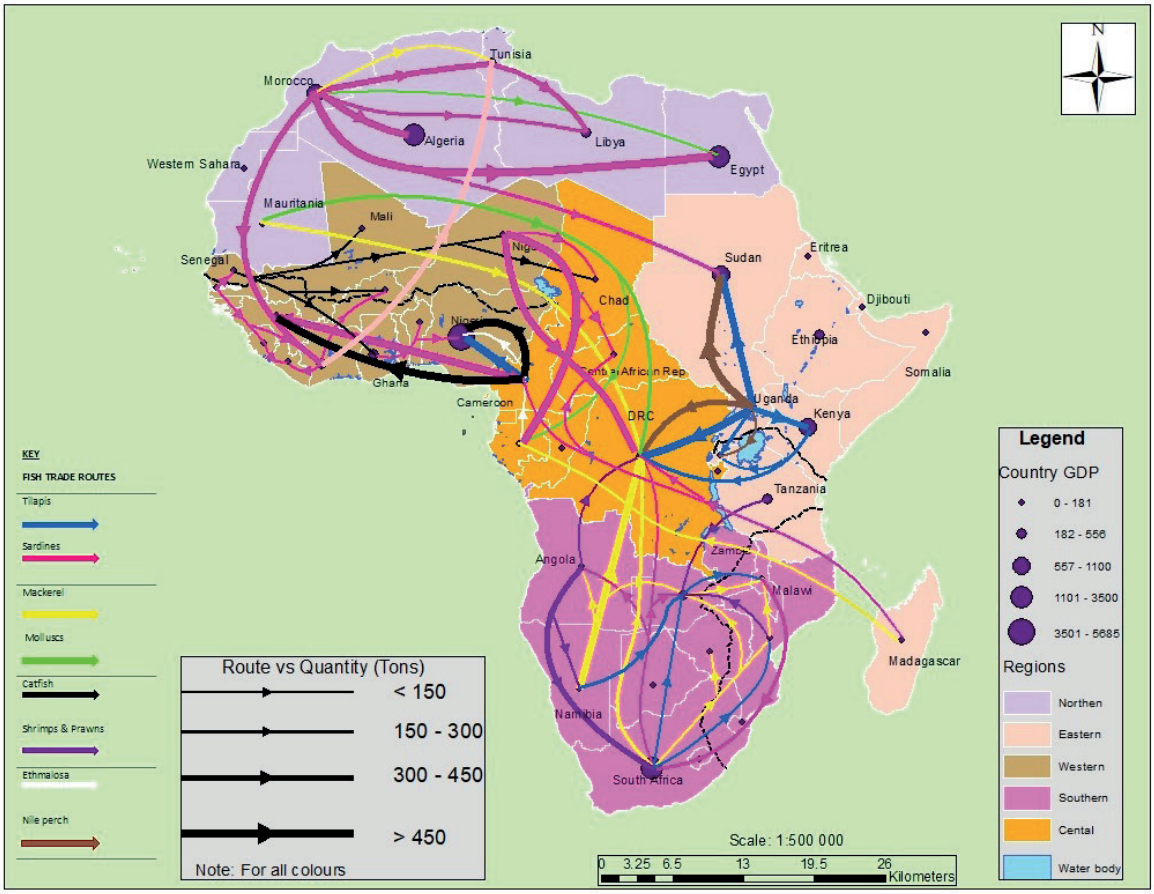


Figure 1: *Common Species traded formally in the corridors (graphic from: AU-IBAR, 2019)*

Cross-Cutting Initiatives

- ***Continental Programs (CAADP):*** The Kampala Declaration on Building Resilient and Sustainable Agrifood Systems—adopted under the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) framework—provides a transformative, continent-wide vision for fisheries, aquaculture, and fish trade corridors in Africa (AU, 2024).
- ***Regional Programs:***
  - *PROFISHBLUE (SADC):* Enhances governance and trade corridors across 16 Member States.
  - *FishTrade for a Better Future:* Supports AU's Malabo Declaration (tripling intra-African agri-trade by 2025) via trader capacity-building in 21 countries.

Issues and Challenges

- *High Post-Harvest Losses:* Physical and quality losses (30–60%) due to poor handling, inadequate cold chains, and logistical delays (Worldfish, 2020).
- *Infrastructure Deficits:* Lack of refrigeration, poor road networks, and inefficient border crossings increase spoilage and transit times (AU-NEPAD, 2015).
- *Transport costs:* fish production centers are often far from major markets and even when they are close, the service roads are frequently in poor condition; making transport the major cost of doing business for cross border traders.
- *Policy and Regulatory Inadequacies and Fragmentation:* Weak or absence of robust quality management systems, Non-harmonised standards, complex documentation, and inconsistent enforcement at borders hinder trade and encourage informality.

- *Taxes and bribes along the fish trade corridor:* many informal cross border traders reported various fees and taxes, including bribes, imposed by the cross-border administration and the assembly market cities, where traders pay daily and monthly municipality fees. Multiple forms of harassment were listed by traders from, customs officers, gendarmes (armed police), regular police officers, anti-drug squads, water and forest inspectors and fisheries officers (Ayilu et al., 2016; Anoh et al., 2017; Kawala, M. 2018; Falaye et al., 2018).
- *Informality and Illicit Practices:* A significant share of trade remains informal, with traders facing harassment, bribes.,
- Insecurity along highways in areas with political instability
- *Limited Access to Finance and Training:* Small-scale traders, especially women, struggle to access credit and training in best practices.
- *Climate Change and Environmental Threats:* Overfishing driven by high market demand, IUU fishing, and climate impacts threaten the sustainability of fish stocks and trade corridors (FA0, 2022).
- *Data Gaps:* Inadequate monitoring and information systems limit evidence-based policymaking (AU-IBAR, 2018).
- *Policy Fragmentation:* Non-harmonised tariffs, complex documentation, and rent-seeking at borders.
- *Gender Dynamics:* Women dominate processing/ trading but face barriers in formalisation and decision-making.

5. Conclusions

Africa's fisheries trade corridors have significant potential to drive economic growth and food security within the blue economy framework. However, persistent post-harvest losses, poor infrastructure, regulatory fragmentation, and informality constrain this potential. Addressing these challenges through robust policy harmonized strategies, targeted investments, and capacity building support, youth development and women empowerment is essential for sustainable and inclusive trade. African Member States need to promote regional cooperation through concepts such 'Blue Corridors', which are designed to enhance sustainable resource management along shared water bodies through investment in stronger governance and infrastructure, in order to achieve improved food and nutrition security and realise the full potential of Africa's blue economy through integrated, cross-border approaches.

6. Recommendations

- ***Infrastructure Investment:*** Upgrade cold chain facilities, transport appropriate packaging and networks, and border infrastructure to reduce post-harvest losses and facilitate efficient trade.
- ***Policy Harmonisation:*** Align regional standards, simplify documentation, and implement One-Stop Border Posts (OSBPs) to streamline cross-border trade in line with the policy framework and reform strategy for fisheries and aquaculture in Africa (PFRS). In addition, governments should put in place common conformity assessment procedures to be used by all countries to test, inspect and certify fish products for imports and exports. This will ensure that the products being placed on the market comply with all legislative and food safety requirements.
- ***Capacity Building:*** Provide training and financial support to small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), especially women empowerment and youth development, through capacity building and training.
- ***Monitoring and Data Systems:*** Operationalise the AFADATA system a centralised data platform developed by AU-IBAR and AUDA-NEPAD with EU backing to strengthen policymaking, trade monitoring, and governance in Africa's fisheries and aquaculture sectors, promoting sustainability and food security continent-wide, conduct data surveys on informal fish trade to bridge data gaps.
- ***Sustainable Practices and value addition:*** Promote ecosystem-based management, sustainable fishing and value addition to fish and fish products to increase economic benefits, and climate resilience to protect fish stocks and trade corridors.
- ***Public-Private Partnerships:*** Encourage collaboration between governments, the private sector, and NGOs to develop sustainable infrastructure and practices; arrange trade missions and negotiation ventures.
- ***Awareness and Advocacy:*** Raise awareness

among traders and communities about the benefits of formal trade and hygiene standards. Create awareness about the need to adhere to trade rules to reduce congestion at the borders. This can be done through community radio stations at the border towns. Similar radio awareness campaigns have been conducted by the FishTrade Program at the border between Kenya and Uganda.



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