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Systematic Review

A Systematic Review of Institutional Quality as a Potential Catalyst of Intra-Regional Trade Performance

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Institutional quality; trade performance; intra-regional trade; systematic review

Abstract

This study explored the potential of institutional quality as a driver of intra-regional trade performance, particularly in the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The aim was to synthesise the evidence on the critical role institutional quality plays in enhancing trade performance. We used a systematic review of 45 relevant articles, selected from an initial pool of 185 articles published between 2011 and 2024. The articles were rigorously chosen through a well-defined selection process to provide comprehensive insights into the relationship between institutional quality and trade performance. The review highlights significant gaps in the literature, especially concerning the sensitivity of trade performance to institutional quality. Weak institutions are identified as major constraints on intra-African trade, limiting the growth of regional trade networks. The findings suggest the need for more research on how institutional quality can be enhanced to improve intra-regional trade, with a focus on the newly established AfCFTA. This study provides valuable recommendations for policymakers, emphasising the importance of improving governance, reducing corruption, and enhancing regulatory quality. The findings offer actionable insights for formulating policies and institutional reforms aimed at stimulating intra-regional trade and promoting sustainable economic development.

1 Introduction

Institutional quality is widely recognised as a critical catalyst for international trade performance and the subsequent economic growth of the trading countries, depending on how good the quality of institutions is (Alvarez et al., 2018; Borrmann et al., 2006; Levichenko, 2007; Méon and Sekkat, 2008; Rezaee and Karimi, 2023). Economists, policymakers, and practitioners consistently underscore its importance (Barbero et al., 2021;

Heo et al., 2021). In this regard, institutional quality encompasses elements such as contract enforcement, property rights, political systems, and investor protection (Levchenko, 2007). Kaufmann et al. (1999) further conceptualise institutional quality through six World Governance Indicators: government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, voice and accountability, control of corruption and political stability.

From a theoretical perspective, institutional quality shapes trade flows and patterns by enhancing export productivity through robust contracts, property rights, and shareholder protection (Levchenko, 2007). Conversely, weak institutions increase transaction costs and disrupt trade logistics (Kaufmann et al., 1999). Following the substantial significance of institutional quality on international trade performance and economic growth, a great attention in the empirical literature has been given. A varied body of knowledge, consistent with the theoretical assertion (N. Ali and Mingque, 2018; Falkowski et al., 2019; Feenstra et al., 2012; Francois and Manchin, 2013), provides evidence of foreign trade's dependence on the quality of institutional structures, particularly in terms of contract enforcement, property rights as well as trade infrastructures. Moreover, scholars have evidenced the sensitivity of trade performance to institutional quality in terms of government effectiveness, regulatory quality and rule of law stability (Abreo et al., 2021; Doyle and Zarzoso, 2011; Iwanow and Kirkpatrick, 2007; Lin et al., 2020; Oshota and Wahab, 2022; Riker, 2022). Empirical literature (Jama, 2020; Kalim et al., 2022; Oshota and Wahab, 2022) has also reported that control of corruption, political stability and voice, and accountability significantly influence trade performance. Yet, the similarity in institutional quality between the trading countries has been observed to have a significant impact on foreign trade performance (Barbero et al., 2021; Bojnec and Ferto, 2015; Chishti et al., 2021; Razaee and Karim, 2023). All these dimensions of institutional quality impact trade flows and patterns through the production and transaction costs of both export and import goods (Hou et al., 2020).

In Africa, where intra-regional trade remains low, understanding the relationship between institutional quality and trade performance is crucial (Oparanya et al., 2019). Although there is an empirical consensus on the influence of institutional quality on trade, inadequate knowledge persists regarding the status of institutional quality within African trading blocs and its association with low intra-regional trade. This issue requires intensive debate, especially as African leaders push toward transforming the continent into a unified and powerful trading bloc. As in other African economies, institutional quality plays a critical role in fostering Tanzania's intra-regional trade performance and, consequently, its economic development. Despite the country's trade potential and strategies aimed at promoting investment—particularly in adding value to primary products to enhance their regional and global competitiveness—Tanzania has experienced relatively low intra-regional trade performance, especially in the manufacturing sector (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022). This weak performance is partly attributed to low export competitiveness, driven by poor manufacturing and industrial performance, which hampers access to global markets (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022). While Tanzania has made progress in improving governance, corruption control, and regulatory quality— alongside implementing various institutional reforms to promote investment and trade in line with regional agreements—significant institutional bottlenecks remain, particularly in areas such as contract enforcement and property rights (World Bank, 2022). Poor governance and corruption continue to constrain production, investment, and transactions, ultimately hindering trade performance. Similar to many African countries, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), both public and private institutional frameworks in Tanzania are observed to be weak (Aron, 2000). Given the challenges of low trade performance and fragile institutional structures, there is limited knowledge of the link between trade performance and institutional quality. This highlights the importance of further research to understand how domestic and trading partners' institutional frameworks influence trade outcomes. A deeper exploration with sufficient and accurate evidence is necessary to comprehensively assess how and to what

extent foreign trade relies on the institutional quality of respective trading countries.

Thus, this study addresses these gaps by systematically reviewing the literature to explore the sensitivity of trade performance to institutional quality. It poses three questions: Does the quality of domestic institutions matter in foreign trade performance? Do differences in institutional quality drive bilateral trade flows? Does the impact of institutional quality vary across trading countries? This investigation aims to provide policymakers with actionable insights to strengthen institutions and enhance trade within the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

2 Literature Selection Methods

We conducted a systematic literature review which was the best approach for a broader and deeper understanding of the relationship between institutional quality and international trade performance. This approach allowed researchers to identify, select, and critically assess relevant studies, collect data, and synthesize the best evidence from the research pertinent to the correlation between institutional quality and trade performance (Siddaway et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003). The rationale for using the systematic review lies in its capacity to examine the phenomenon comprehensively by synthesizing research in a transparent, unbiased, and replicable manner (Siddaway et al., 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003; Waddington et al., 2012). The appropriateness of the approach relies on the researchers' purpose to comprehensively synthesize the available evidence and draw a wide and strong conclusion from a variety of published articles. Considerably, the systematic approach offers a well-defined approach of describing the extent, nature and quality of the evidence from literature on a certain matter and discovering what future studies are supposed to investigate (Cronin et al., 2008; Davis, 2014; Tranfield et al., 2003). However, it is important to note that a systematic review does not generate new empirical data but rather provides deeper insights into the extent and nature of the phenomenon based on high-quality evidence synthesised from diverse studies. Prior to initiating the review, selection and inclusion criteria were established based on guiding questions to ensure a well-scoped, organised, and integrated analysis (Kraus et al., 2022; Rhoades, 2011). The systematic search focused on empirical, peer-reviewed articles published in English from reputable journals between 2011 and 2024, relevant to the correlation between institutional quality and trade performance.

a. Search and identification process

To conduct a comprehensive literature review, we systematically searched multiple databases, including Springer, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, Emerald, and Scopus. Additional sources such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were also consulted. To obtain relevant studies, we used the keywords "institutional quality", "intra-regional trade" and "trade performance" for an effective search of the most relevant and useful published articles. At the initial search, 185 records were identified from these databases. Initially, 185 records were retrieved. After excluding 60 duplicate and non-English articles at the initial stage, a total of 125 studies were retained for further suitability assessment.

b. Suitability assessment and selection of articles

The article selection process prioritised empirical academic journal articles relevant to the correlation between institutional quality and international trade. The 125 identified

articles were initially screened by their titles and abstracts to evaluate overall relevance. At this stage, 64 articles were excluded—30 due to their non-empirical nature and 34 for being outside the review period's scope. This left 61 articles, which were then subjected to a full-text review for a more thorough relevance assessment. During this phase, an additional 16 articles were excluded due to limited relevance or insufficient detail. Ultimately, 45 articles were deemed suitable for deeper investigation, focusing on their methodologies and findings.

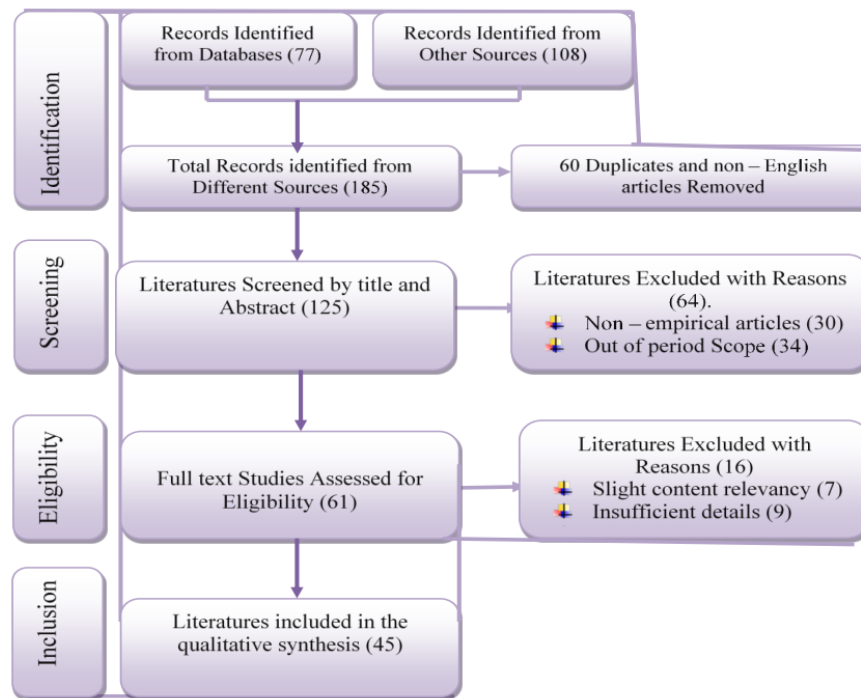


Figure 1: A Flow Diagram for the Article Selection Process

c. Data extraction and synthesis

A quality assessment was conducted on the 45 selected articles, integrating specific characteristics aligned with the review's guiding questions (Karunanathan et al., 2009). This assessment was performed alongside data extraction, which focused on the year of publication, title, author(s), purpose, methodologies applied, publication details, and key findings of each study. The extracted information was synthesised using a narrative review approach, summarising findings and presenting them within the existing body of knowledge (Tranfield et al., 2003). The narrative review highlights and elucidates the findings, offering a clearer understanding of the relationship between institutional quality and trade performance.

3 Results and discussion

Despite minor differences in applied methodological approaches, the literature shows institutional quality as a substantial determinant of inter- and intra-regional trade performance. However, the modified gravity model was mostly applied by researchers to assess the relationship between institutional quality and trade performance using panel

data with differentiated estimation techniques. In spite of the differences in their geographical contexts, most articles have revealed the trade impact of institutional quality in both exporting and importing countries, in line with theoretical assertions (Alhassan and Payaslioglu, 2019; Alvarez et al., 2018; Assane and Chiang, 2012; Feenstra et al., 2012; Heo et al., 2021; Hyun, 2018; Lin et al., 2020; Lipuma et al., 2013; Méon and Sekkat, 2008; Rehman et al., 2020; Salatin and Eslambolchi, 2014). Furthermore, numerous studies (A. Ali and Rahman, 2014; Bustaman et al., 2022; Fakher, 2014; Ojeaga et al., 2014; Song et al., 2019; Yushi and Borojo, 2019) have found a similar trade impact of institutional quality. Regionally, institutional quality determines the effectiveness of aid for trade and raises the quantity and quality of information needed during the bargaining phase of a trade agreement by potential member countries, which consequently affects trade flows and patterns (Baccini, 2014; Tadesse et al., 2019).

Similarly, the long-run significant impact of trade openness on economic growth is conditional on the quality of institutions (Agyei and Idan, 2022; Akpan and Atan, 2016; Omoke and Charles, 2021). Though the trade impact of institutional quality varies across the trading countries depending on the nature of the traded goods and level of development (Barbero et al., 2021; Heo et al., 2021; Hyun, 2018). Whereby, the trade impact of institutional quality is bigger in countries with high income than the countries with low income (Alhassan and Payaslioglu, 2019; Barbero et al., 2021). Thus, suggesting that countries with higher institutional quality have a comparative advantage in institution-intensive goods. In particular, the review offers robust evidence that improvement of institutional quality greatly encourages new domestic firms to export goods (Briggs, 2013), and consequently reduction of poverty in the trading countries depending on how quality of institution is, in terms of control of corruption and accountability (Bergh et al., 2015).

Figure 2 shows an assortment of studies which show the trade effect of institutional quality based on institutional dimensions and institutional similarities among the trading countries. Contract enforcement and property rights were reported to be significant ways in which the institutional quality of the trading countries influences trade performance (N. Ali and Mingque, 2018; Falkowski et al., 2019; Faruq, 2011; Feenstra et al., 2012). Countries with enhanced contracting institutions gain from international trade by producing contract-intensive goods and specializing in exporting high-quality and competitive goods (Falkowski et al., 2019). Thus, supporting the theoretical assertion derived from the Ricardian view and hypothesized by Levichenko (2007). The theory describes the sensitivity of international trade to institutional quality in terms of the ability to write and enforce better contracts and property rights. Therefore, the countries with good quality contract enforcement and security of property rights, significantly facilitate trade flows and patterns depending on the number of contracts that can be written and enforced. Unlike the countries with lower institutional quality where fewer contracts can be written and enforced consequently reducing trade flows (Levichenko, 2007) as indicated on Figure 2.

The review has also revealed the significant impact of political stability and voice and accountability of both exporting and importing countries on trade performance (Jama, 2020; Kalim et al., 2022; Munemo, 2021). Thus, democratic accountability and political stability promote trade, while external conflicts negatively affect trade. On the other hand, the rule of law and control of corruption have been evidenced as a fundamental determinant of trade performance (Abreo et al., 2021; Munemo, 2021; Oshota and Wahab, 2022). Though government effectiveness and regulatory quality are confirmed to be relatively more significant in facilitating favourable trade regulations that promote trade (Abreo et al., 2021; Iwanow and Kirkpatrick, 2007; Yusuf et al., 2021). Therefore, supporting the theoretical hypothesis that trade is sensitive to institutional quality dimensions of the trading countries. However, Jama (2020) found an insignificant association between export performance and institutional variables except political stability. In addition, the institutional quality in terms of border and transport efficiency, physical and communication infrastructures robustly determines intra-Africa's trade (Yushi and Borojo, 2019).

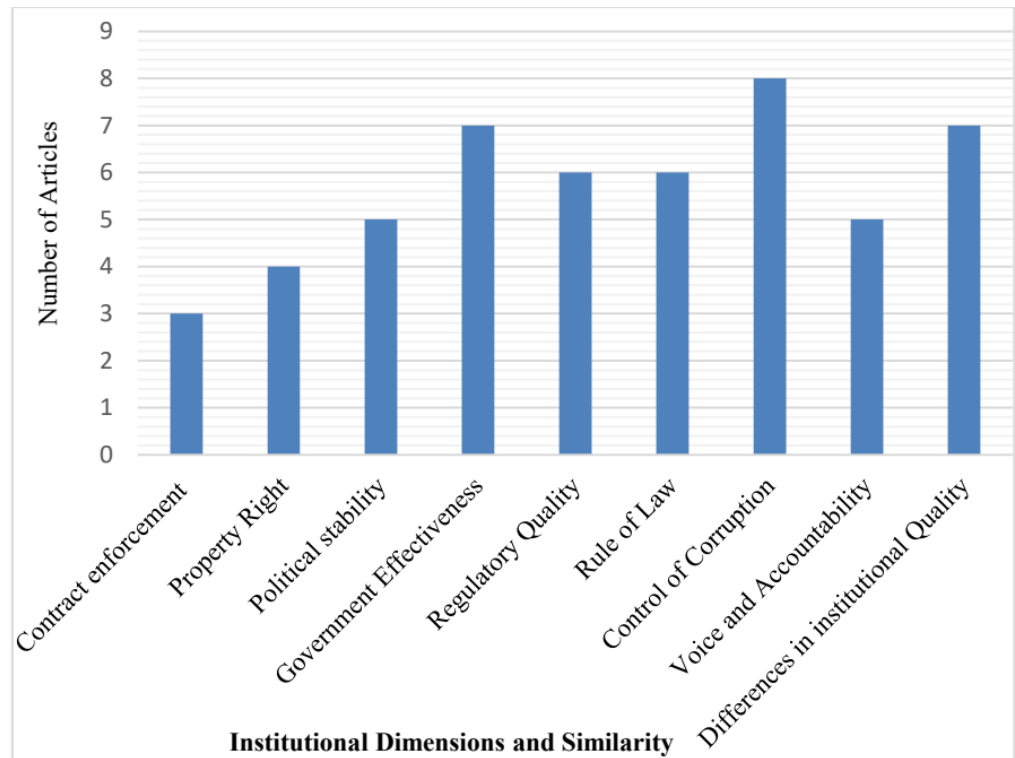


Figure 2: Trade effect of institutional quality based on institutional dimensions and differences

Finally, differences in institutional quality among the trading countries were observed as significant determinants, though the correlations with trade performance vary in a similar institutional context. The similarity of institutional quality is revealed to be significant, thus the countries that have the same level of institutional quality boosts bilateral trade more than countries with different institutional quality (Bojnec and Ferto, 2015; Chishti et al., 2021; Rezaee and Karimi, 2023). Furthermore, Abreo et al. (2021), Barbero et al. (2021), and Hyun (2018), confirmed that the trade is highly influenced by differences in regional institutional quality of the trading partners. In this perspective, countries with similar institutions are likely to trade more than those with differences in institutional quality. This contradicts the findings of Lin et al. (2020), who found no clear trade impact of institutional quality similarities between the trading countries. However, the findings are consistent with the theoretical hypothesis that institutional differences across the trading countries are an important determinant of trade flows and patterns (Acemoglu et al., 2007).

4 Conclusion

This study systematically reviewed the empirical literature to assess the role of institutional quality in shaping intra-regional trade performance, particularly within the context of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The review addressed three central research questions: the dimensions of institutional quality explored in existing studies; the methodological approaches commonly applied; and the nature of the evidence regarding the influence of institutional quality on trade flows within African regions.

A total of 45 peer-reviewed articles published between 2011 and 2024 were rigorously

selected from an initial pool of 185 publications. The synthesis of findings indicates that institutional quality, typically measured through indicators such as regulatory effectiveness, rule of law, control of corruption, and government efficiency, plays a substantial role in determining trade performance. Although the reviewed studies applied varying methodological approaches, particularly different forms of the gravity model using panel data techniques, the consensus across the literature is clear: robust institutional frameworks significantly enhance both inter- and intra-regional trade. Moreover, institutional similarity between trading partners was also identified as a positive factor influencing trade integration, affirming theoretical expectations in this domain. Despite methodological diversity and geographical variation, the reviewed literature revealed consistent empirical support for the importance of institutional quality in trade performance. However, the study also identified key gaps, particularly in the analysis of how institutional reforms—especially those aligned with AfCFTA implementation, affect trade flows over time. There is limited evidence on the differentiated impacts of specific institutional dimensions and on the mechanisms through which institutional changes influence intra-African trade dynamics.

Based on these findings, the study offers several policy recommendations. First, there is a critical need for African governments and regional bodies to strengthen governance frameworks and institutional accountability. Second, investment in regulatory reform is essential to reduce trade-related transaction costs and inefficiencies. Third, efforts should be directed at enhancing transparency and implementing anti-corruption mechanisms to build investor and trader confidence. Finally, regional integration efforts under AfCFTA would benefit from greater institutional convergence among member states, particularly in legal, regulatory, and administrative domains.

5 Limitations and future research directions

Despite the exposed evidence on the trade impact of institutional quality derived from the review of a variety of articles, there is limited knowledge on how low intra-regional trade performance in African trading blocs, particularly in the East African Community and South African Development Community, has been associated with low institutional quality. So far, most studies have focused on the institutional dimensions through which institutions affect trade, but few of them have shown the trade impact of institutional differences of the respective trading countries. Thus, it is reasonable to conduct further research, particularly in the areas that have not yet undergone extensive examination. Accordingly, we suggest some potential areas that have not been intensively examined and that further research should focus on. Firstly, the review revealed that there hasn't been a thorough exploration of the trade effects of institutional similarities, hence, further research should take this into account, particularly in the East African Community and South African Development Community. Second, the reviewed articles focused on the impact of institutional quality on trade flow, but the determination of institutional quality on trade patterns hasn't been well thought out, which opens up an avenue for further research for a deeper understanding of how the trade patterns between the trading countries are determined by institutional quality.

6 Contribution of the Study

A broader and deeper understanding of how and to what extent trade performance is sensitive to domestic institutional quality and institutional similarities based on sufficient

and up-to-date data is crucial for sound trade policy analysis and informed decision-making. Having sufficient, up-to-date, and accurate information, provides a good foundation for trade policy formulation and analysis. Our study provides a robust foundation for economists and policymakers for sound and informed decision-making. The contributions of this study are twofold: first, it provides valuable knowledge on how and to what extent the institutional quality of an individual country affects foreign trade. Second, the study offers a comprehensive and in-depth comprehension of how the similarities in institutional quality among trading countries influence trade flows and patterns based on the latest and adequate data from published empirical articles. The broad knowledge gained from this review would be helpful to policy analysts and decision-makers in analysing the significance of the existing policies and institutional reforms made to boost investment and trade flows and utilise effectively the available regional trade potentials.

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Data Availability

Data can be made available on the behavior of the request

Declaration of interests' statement

The author declare no competing interests.

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