

# KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION OF LIBERIAN AGRIBUSINESSES IN THE AFRICAN CONTINENTAL FREE TRADE AREA (AfCFTA)

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**Abstract:** Liberia has signed and ratified AfCFTA. In this context, this paper aims to assess the knowledge and perception of Liberian agribusinesses on AfCFTA and its implications for their operations and the broader economy. Primary data were obtained from four (4) main categories of stakeholders integral to Liberia's economic growth and development. They included (i) agribusiness enterprises/agricultural micro-small- and medium-sized enterprises operating in Monrovia; (ii) apex business entities/associations; (iii) government actors and (iv) trade and development partnerships active in Liberia's economic ecosystem. Findings from stakeholder engagements revealed varying levels of awareness and understanding of AfCFTA. While a minority of respondents had a fair understanding of the Rules of Origin protocol, central to trading under AfCFTA, the majority had only basic awareness of AfCFTA, often associating it with the broader vision of creating a unified African market. Efforts surrounding AfCFTA in Liberia should not only focus on the removal of tariffs, as many agribusinesses view elimination as potentially disadvantageous.

**Keywords:** Ratification of an agreement; African union; intra-African trade; Removal of tariff; Capacity in implementing agreements  
(JEL code: K33)

## INTRODUCTION

AU (2018) sets the objectives of AfCFTA as 1) creating a single and liberalised market in the African continent 2) contributing to the movement of capital and persons and facilitating investment building in state parties 3) laying the foundation for establishing the continental customs union 4) enhancing the competitiveness of state parties economies 5) promoting industrial development and 6) resolving the challenges of multiple and overlapping memberships and expedite the regional and continental integration processes. The aforementioned objectives are intended to be realized at the national level, with active contribution and participation from the business sector.

AfCFTA is not important to nations only but also to businesses who operate in a nation. In a speech by Mene (2022), he stated, "...As it has been emphasized over time, no matter how well grounded the AfCFTA objectives are, they will remain elusive if our businesses, the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), are unable to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the AfCFTA, to trade and invest...". AfCFTA is projected to enhance competitiveness at the industry and enterprise level through opportunities to increase

economies of scale and access to cheaper raw materials and intermediate inputs (AU, 2018; Frimpong, 2021); businesses are mostly impacted by economic liberalisation like the AfCFTA (Massaley, 2019). Udombana (2020) opined that businesses' contribution towards AfCFTA is crucial as they play a major role in economic growth and development.

Luke et al. (2017) state that there are less opportunities for businesses to express with perspectives on the negotiations and ratification of trade agreements of which AfCFTA is part. The viewpoint of various businesses with regard to ratification and benefits gained from AfCFTA is important in a time where AfCFTA is being promoted by various countries in Africa. Even though businesses play a major role in AfCFTA, Apiko et al. (2020) state that much has to be done with regard to sensitisation, advocacy and capacity building to improve the enjoyment of opportunities in the private sector. The issue, however, is which aspect of sensitization and advocacy should be focused on.

Olayiwola (2020) recommends a collaboration of nations with their private sector in conducting sensitization and advocacy on AfCFTA. The perspectives of the private sector must, however, be ascertained to effectively sensitise and advocate for AfCFTA. A study by Adomako et al. (2022) noted that

players in the agriculture sector are less sensitised in terms of AfCFTA. The agriculture sector, however, stands to benefit as agriculture is a major economic sector for Africa and generates about 15% of the continental GDP annually. It is also a critical sector of employment, food security and potential exports and is expected to benefit greatly from the AfCFTA. It has been noted that intra-African trade in agricultural and food products could increase between 20% and 30% with the removal of tariffs on goods alone under the AfCFTA. Additionally, it has been found that AfCFTA would contribute towards the “formalisation of cross-border trade in agricultural and food products by reducing risk and uncertainty for informal traders, and especially women.” (ECA, 2021).

ECOWAS has a Free Trade Area with the establishment of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLs). ETLs trade ratification was fast-tracked as the then president of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was elected as the chairman of West African States. Even though trade liberalization was stipulated in the ETLs trade ratification, Liberia has not fully implemented trade liberalisation (Massaley, 2019). Since AfCFTA is the most recent trade agreement aside ETLs, there is the need to ascertain the viewpoints of grassroots agribusinesses in order to increase the opportunities to be enjoyed by stakeholders in the ratification of AfCFTA.

Most Liberians see their homeland to be American and hence desire trading with the United States of America (Van der kraaij, 1983). Liberians’ local entrepreneurs have a positive perception of AGOA and are willing to export their products to the United States (Yates, 2017). The perception of Liberians on AfCFTA and their willingness to trade with other African countries is not, however, known. Massaley (2019) mentioned that economic liberalisation agreements like AfCFTA and ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLs) in Liberia would result in removing barriers to international investment, unrestricted capital flow, improved stock market performance, reduction of political risks and investor portfolio diversification in Africa. The perspective of Liberians with regard to trade liberalisation has, however, not been assessed. The objective of the paper is to examine the knowledge and perception of Liberian agribusinesses on AfCFTA.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

Primary data were obtained from four (4) main categories of stakeholders integral to Liberia’s economic growth and development. They included (i) agribusiness enterprises/agricultural micro-small- and medium-sized enterprises operating in Monrovia; (ii) apex business entities/associations; (iii) government actors and (iv) trade and development partnerships active in Liberia’s economic ecosystem. The study focused on agribusiness enterprises in the Greater Monrovia area. This was based on the assumption that such enterprises would have better and wider access to knowledge and information on international trade and the impacts of international/development and economic policy on business than enterprises in other parts of the country. Liberia’s economy is referenced as Mon-

rovia-centric, with “large disparities between Monrovia and other parts of the country in terms of wealth, infrastructure, and possibilities for participation in the political process.”

Figure 1. Map indicating the study area



Primary Data Collection

The primary data were obtained from four (4) main categories of stakeholders integral to Liberia’s economic growth and development. They included (i) agribusiness enterprises/agricultural micro-small- and medium-sized enterprises (agro-MSMEs) operating in Monrovia; (ii) apex business entities/associations; (iii) government actors and (iv) partnerships in trade and development in Liberia. The data were obtained from an administration of semi-structured interviews of (ii) apex business entities/associations; (iii) government actors and (iv) partnerships in trade and development in Liberia and a structured interview of 24 agribusiness enterprises conveniently selected in Monrovia. Code for the key informant interview is stated in Table 1.

Table 1. Key informant citation

Key informant citation	Key informant code
MOCI, personal communication, March 09, 2023	KI1
Trade ECOWAS Commission, personal communication, March 03, 2023	KI2
LBBF, personal communication, March 14, 2023	KI3

Agribusiness enterprises are a significant part of the private sector, which is not only expected to benefit from AfCFTA but also to drive its success. The study focused on Liberian-owned MSMEs. This focus is informed by the recognition by expert communities of the significance of MSMEs in the promotion of a competitive and environmentally-friendly industrial structure with the capacity to improve living standards in the West African sub-region (Atsu and Ojong, 2014; ECOWAS Commission, 2016). Field enumerators met with agribusiness enterprise leaders and interviewed their leaders once they were available and willing to participate in the study.

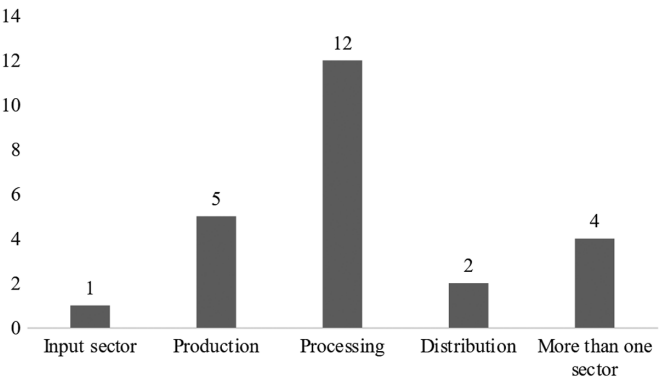
Demography and characteristics of respondent agribusiness enterprises

The twenty-four (24) agribusiness enterprises engaged in the research were comprised of fourteen (14) men-led and ten (10) women-led entities, all Liberian-owned. More than a third (10) of the business leaders were youth (aged below 35 years). Also, all the business leaders had received formal education, with 19 indicating tertiary education as their highest educational attainment. The remaining 5 had secondary school certifications. With one's level of education considered a key determinant of knowledge, it could be assumed that the respondents in this study would have a higher level of knowledge and understanding of the business context and related policy than their cohorts, who may not have such educational attainments.

Most (20) of the agribusiness enterprises interviewed in the study were registered with the Liberia Business Registry. Also, less than half (10) of the enterprises were members of a business association/ cooperative. The enterprises were reported to be members of the Liberia Business Association (LiBA), Pig Value Chain Actors of Liberia, Liberia Chamber of Commerce, Agropreneurs, Liberia Entrepreneur Network, Baker's Union, and the Liberia Women Manufacturers. Other affiliations reported included the African Women Entrepreneurship Program, the National Cassava Sector and Careysburg Vegetable Cluster. It is noteworthy that more than half (14) of the enterprises involved in the study were not represented by any business association in terms of membership.

Half (12) of the enterprises were solely engaged in agri-/food processing and five (5) in production, two (2) in distribution sub-sectors, while four (4) operated in more than one sub-sector of Liberia's agri-/food business value chain. Figure 2 details the sectors of operation of the agribusiness enterprises interviewed.

Figure 2. Agribusiness enterprises interviewed and their sub-sectors of operation



Furthermore, most (17) business enterprises interviewed operated in single agriculture value chains. The others operated in more than one value chain. The dominant value chains of operation were staple food crops, including rice, cassava, as well as, plantain, and maize. Furthermore, the enterprises that operated in more than one value chain (7 of the 24 enterprises) operated in at least one of the identified staple food value chains in addition to other value chains.

On employment opportunities created by the businesses engaged in the research, it was observed that the average number of persons employed in the enterprises was about 9 persons (9.33). Also, four (4) businesses had employees from different African nationalities in addition to the Liberians employed.

Data Analysis and Reporting

Simple quantitative analyses were also important for the data obtained from agribusiness enterprises.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Awareness and knowledge of Private Agribusiness Sector Actors on the AfCFTA in Liberia

**Agribusiness Sector Actors' Knowledge of AfCFTA**  
According to Medden (2021), fewer (25%) agribusinesses are aware of AfCFTA. About two-thirds (15) of the respondents had heard about the AfCFTA. It was also observed that nearly all (15) the respondents who heard of AfCFTA had tertiary-level education. About a third (9) of the respondents were had not heard of AfCFTA.

Table 2. Cross tabulation on hearing about AfCFTA and level of education of respondents

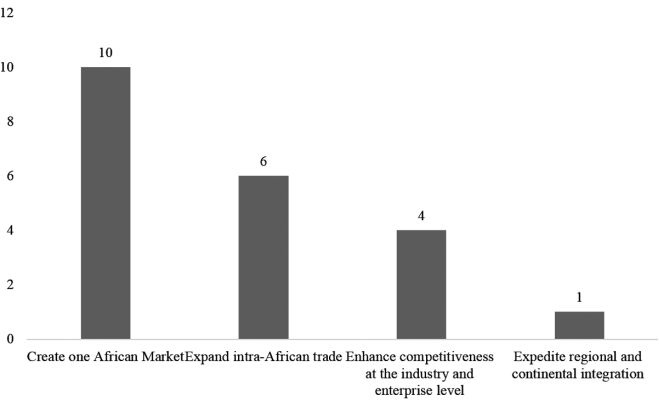
Heard about AfCFTA	Secondary	Tertiary	Total
No	4	5	9
Yes	0	15	15
Total	4	20	24

The main objectives of AfCFTA are to create one African market, expand intra-African trade, enhance competitiveness at the industry and enterprise level and expedite regional and continental integration (AU, 2018). Respondents who had heard of AfCFTA were asked about the objectives of AfCFTA in multiple selection questions. When the respondents who had heard of the AfCFTA agreement (15) were asked to indicate what the AfCFTA agreement sought to achieve, creating one African market (10) was the most referenced objective of the AfCFTA. Gottschalk (2022) cited one African market as the first story highlight for AfCFTA. The expansion of intra-African trade and the enhancement of the competitiveness of African industries and enterprises were also referenced with some high frequency. There was also one reference made to AfCFTA's objective to expedite continental integration processes. Perhaps it is no wonder that agro-MSME leaders may be focused on the trade orientation and not the political one.

There has been an argument by Kuhlmann and Agutu (2019) and Nwankwo and Ajibo (2020) that AfCFTA objective of expediting regional and continental integration is not clear as the implementation of the regional economic commission (REC) has been non-linear and overlapping. They argue that even though AfCFTA provides a framework for REC,

there is no binding and established structure for the REC. This may explain why only one person mentioned that AfCFTA objective was to expedite regional and continental integration.

Figure 3. Frequency distribution of AfCFTA objectives referenced by respondents

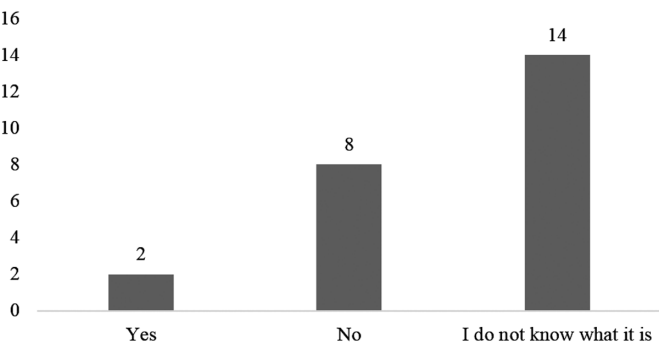


Only 3 of the respondents who had heard of AfCFTA had a fair understanding of the Rules of Origin protocol that guides trade under AfCFTA. Most respondents (11) were not aware of the protocol. There is also low awareness and knowledge of the Rules of Origin protocol in Ghana (Obeng and Adomako, 2020). One respondent who mentioned that they understood the Rules of Origin protocol captured their understanding as having the certification of products produced in Africa. Another respondent mentioned selling production from an AU membership state while the last respondent mentioned benefiting from trade under AfCFTA.

AfCFTA in Liberia

In assessing respondents’ knowledge of Liberia’s progress related to the AfCFTA, the study found that a majority (14) did not know whether AfCFTA was being implemented in the country. While about a third (8) of the respondents knew that Liberia was not implementing AfCFTA, two (2) of them indicated that Liberia was already implementing the AfCFTA. For one of those two respondents, once the agreement was being discussed, it meant that it was being implemented, indicating a deficit in the knowledge of the processes related to

Figure 4. Respondents’ knowledge on whether implementation of AfCFTA had commenced in Liberia



international trade agreements and particularly the AfCFTA in Liberia. Low knowledge on AfCFTA is in line with studies by Adomako et al. (2022) where they reported low knowledge of SMEs on the existence of AfCFTA as 48% did not know the benefits of AfCFTA.

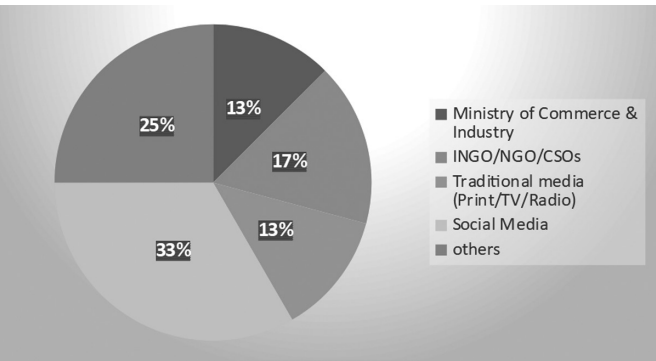
The low knowledge on the implementation of AfCFTA might be because of low engagement as even the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI) has yet to engage the Legislature fully. KII said

*The House of Parliament has not been fully engaged when it comes to the agreement. Some of them [members of the House] have heard about it, but we have not fully engaged them. We have to engage the public in general, and the House of Parliament. We have to dissect the agreement: this includes going into the agreement, doing a presentation to them [sic]; explaining to them everything that is in this agreement – the benefits and all the opportunities that are available. We have not yet done this even though the document is before them... The act [bill introduced to the Senate] is at the stage of presentation and awareness creation. (Interview with the national focal point on ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (AfCFTA – Rules of Origin), MOCI)*

Sources of Respondents’ Knowledge of AfCFTA

The paper explored the sources of respondents’ knowledge of AfCFTA. The 15 respondents who had heard of AfCFTA most frequently cited social media as the source of their knowledge. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MOCI), (international) non-governmental organisations (INGOs/NGOs), civil society organisations, and traditional media outlets were also mentioned. Other sources, mentioned, included the consultant working on the Liberia national AfCFTA strategy and the Embassy of the United States of America in Liberia.

Figure 5. Sources of respondents’ knowledge of AfCFTA



Perception of Private Agribusiness Sector Actors on the AfCFTA in Liberia

Apiko et al. (2020) posit that the immediate benefit of AfCFTA is the removal of tariffs. This benefit is, however, not appreciated by agribusiness as the majority (15) respondents strongly agreed that it would be bad for Liberia’s economy if there were no or fewer tariffs on imports. Liberia has had no tariff with countries like the United States under the African



Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and China under a bilateral trade agreement (Privacy Shield Framework, n.d.). Liberia will lose in terms of customs revenue and dumping of goods. Massaley (2019) mention that importation into Liberia comes with different tariffs; Liberia is the 20th country in Africa with the highest duties on intra-African trade (Fofack, 2020). There is a similar concern in Ghana where SMEs are worried about tariff removal as removal of tariffs is seen as a way to lower imported goods to favourably compete with locally manufactured goods (Adomako et al., 2022).

AfCFTA's removal of the tariff will lead to the dumping of African goods in the Liberian market which might kill the infant industry. Ghanaian and Nigerian SMEs have the notion that the removal of tariffs would lead to the dumping of goods and destroying of infant industries (Madden, 2021; Adomako et al., 2022). Adomako et al. (2022) attest that Ghanaians are also concerned with the dumping of goods on the market with regard to the implementation of AfCFTA while Medden (2021) argue that AfCFTA would lead to foreign competition due to cheaper imported goods competing with local products which have a threat the to local industries. Fofack (2020) argue that it will be more difficult for African countries to remove tariffs even though the removal of tariffs will enhance cross-border trade in Africa. Experts indicate that in the short term, countries would experience a loss of revenue because of the progressive elimination of the tariffs under the AfCFTA. In this regard, relevant actors within the AfCFTA policy would focus on reducing the impacts of the losses for the countries.

Gebremariam (2020) posits that the focus of AfCFTA should be less focused on tariff removal but more focused on industrialization and capacity building in the country. From the research, a huge majority (21) of the respondents strongly agreed that AfCFTA could create opportunities for the industrialisation of businesses in Liberia. The finding of AfCFTA leading to industrialisation is in line with the World Bank's (2020) research findings that AfCFTA will increase intra-African manufacturing trade by 110%.

Also, most (17) respondents strongly agreed that AfCFTA was significant for Liberia's trade integration with its neighbours.

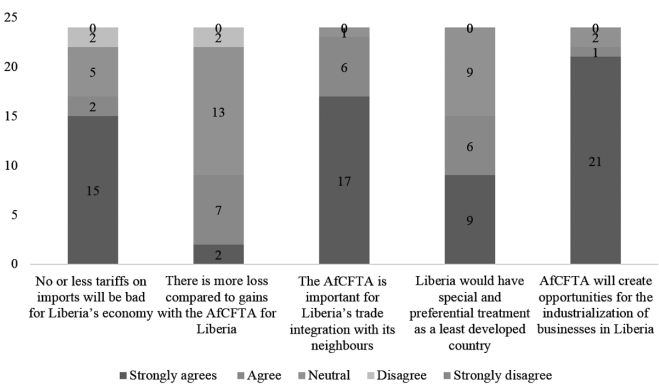
Further, more than half (13) of the respondents neither disagreed nor agreed that there would be more losses than gains for Liberia in the AfCFTA.

Albert (2019) states that AfCFTA promotes preferential treatment for especially low-income countries. From the study, only over a third (9) of the respondents were confident that Liberia would have special and preferential treatment under the AfCFTA as a least-developed country. This finding particularly points to a deficit in knowledge on the AfCFTA and the phase 1 negotiations on trade and services. Unsurprisingly, all the respondents mentioned that they did not know what Liberia had agreed to in the AfCFTA agreement. KI2 said

The benefits of the AfCFTA agreement can only be achieved with its (effective) implementation. Therefore, the study explored Liberia's planned approach to the post-ratification phase and the issues to be prioritised in this phase. As intimated by one of the experts interviewed

*"Having an agreement is only the first step. Countries taking advantage of it is the next... [Through the negotiations] Liberia would have ensured that its issues were taken into consideration and then adopted as part of the overall consent as formulated [but] it is not just having the agreement but taking advantage of it. That is why member states are advised to develop national implementation strategies... It is the countries that ensure that they develop these plans in order to take an advantage of the agreement. The agreement by itself does not necessarily mean it will be implemented."*

Figure 6. Respondents' perceptions on the significance of AfCFTA for the Liberian economy



In addition to respondents' acknowledgement of the significance of AfCFTA for Liberia's regional trade integration, and the industrialisation of Liberian businesses, more than two-thirds (17) of the respondents strongly agreed that their businesses could greatly benefit from the AfCFTA. This notwithstanding, half (12) of respondents expressed high confidence that Liberia could still trade favourably with other African countries outside the context of AfCFTA.

It is noteworthy that the respondents were generally not confident that they were informed about how AfCFTA would affect businesses in Liberia. Also, about two-thirds (16) of the respondents suggested that they did not know whether implementing AfCFTA in Liberia would benefit agribusinesses in the country. They neither disagreed nor agreed that agribusinesses in Liberia would be negatively affected by implementing AfCFTA. KI1 said,

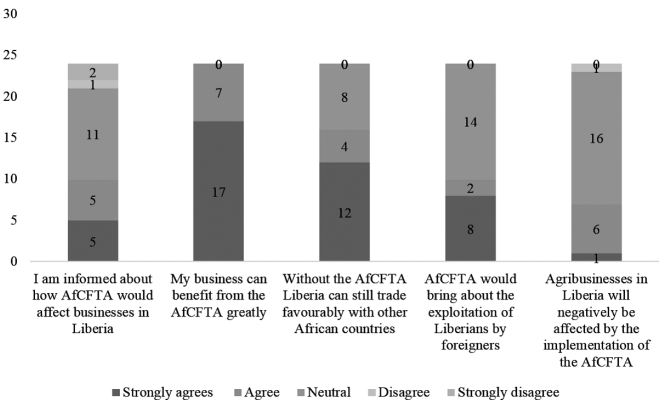
*As an apex body responsible for businesses, LiBA wants to be in the know from the beginning of all trade agreements that will affect them. LiBA thinks Liberia is not really strong for industrialisation, and as such countries that have advanced processes, knowledge, and resources and [are] more industrialised will take over Liberia [the Liberian market].*

LiBA said this during the only engagement that was carried out. (Interview with the national focal point on ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (AfCFTA – Rules of Origin), MOCI)

Udombana (2020) mentioned that enterprises that are major players in AfCFTA are constrained with information and communications infrastructure. Additionally, 7 others opined that Liberia's agribusiness sector would be affected negatively by the implementation of AfCFTA in the country.

Even though Massaley (2019) states that business in Liberia stands to benefit from trade liberalisation most respondents (16) were neutral to the statement that agribusinesses in Liberia will negatively be affected by the implementation of the AfCFTA. This paints a rather dire picture of the confidence that private agribusiness sector actors have in the role of AfCFTA for the sector’s development. Considering that the same respondents agreed that AfCFTA would create opportunities for the industrialisation of Liberian businesses, the issue might be with the notions of the particularity of the agri-/food business sector, including existing sector-specific challenges.

Figure 7. Respondents' perceptions on the significance of AfCFTA for Liberian businesses



K3 said,

*“...what steps are required [after the ratification], that is; the outcomes, outputs and activities. A commercial economic case has not been made or laid out for AfCFTA for people to roll in... Agriculture is the dominant sector in Liberia and monetary laws and licenses are not moving towards that. We have to move commerce towards that and how does that happen? We can start to align a pilot or a few businesses that are interested towards crops like cocoa or rubber...I think these are issues that we can unravel as we go from the ratification. The main goal is to let people understand the advantage and disadvantages of AfCFTA for Liberians.” (Interview with the Coordinator of LBBF)*

Ratification process/activities and implementation capacity

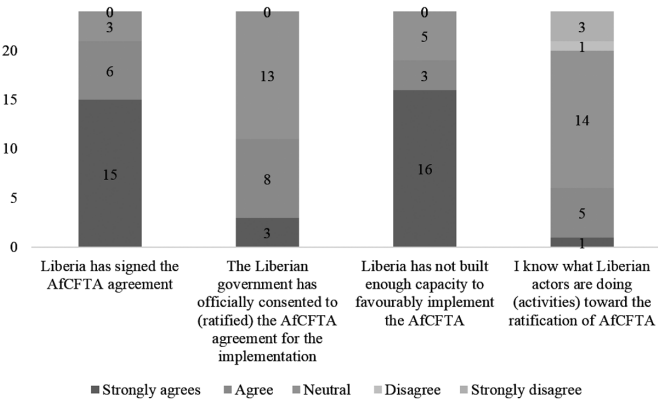
Only one (1) respondent indicated strongly that they knew about the activities Liberian actors were undertaking towards the ratification of AfCFTA in the country. That respondent mentioned that the Senate Committee had already had a discussion on the agreement. Luke et al. (2017) state that encouraging participation in AfCFTA becomes meaningful when participation stakeholders know the decision taken on their behalf. Awareness and dissemination of information about AfCFTA processes and proposed content must thus be spread to stakeholders

Also, while a few (4) of the respondents indicated that they did not know anything about the activities in the rati-

fication process, most (14) of the respondents were not sure whether they knew anything or not. What this means, however, is that three-quarters of the respondents did not know of the activities national actors were taking towards AfCFTA’s ratification in Liberia. There is low consultation, participation and transparency with regard to AfCFTA and its ratification in Liberia. Luke et al. (2017) state consultation, participation and transparency with regards to AfCFTA needs further efforts. This agrees with the findings as most agribusinesses are not aware of AfCFTA and do not know whether AfCFTA has been ratified or not.

The low capacity of low-developed countries makes ratification of agreements very slow (Tura, 2015). Relating to Liberia’s capacity to favourably implement AfCFTA, two-thirds (16) of the respondents strongly agreed that Liberia had not built enough capacity to favourably implement the AfCFTA, with about a fifth (5) of the respondents suggesting that they were not sure of Liberia’s capacity for implementation. This echoes the position of experts who have evaluated the preparedness of countries more advanced than Liberia. For instance, Luke et al. (2017) state that there is progress in capacity building on AfCFTA but it requires further efforts. This is because AfCFTA concentrates on building capacity at the national level but does not make funds available for the capacity-building of potentially vulnerable groups. Political, institutional and economic capacity is a limitation for AfCFTA (Nwankwo and Ajibo, 2020). For agribusinesses, most agree that Liberia has not built enough capacity to favourably implement the AfCFTA. Not only Liberia, but other countries in Africa have not built capacity in terms of infrastructure with regard to the implementation of AfCFTA (Fofack, 2020; Hailu, 2014).

Figure 8. Respondents' perceptions on the legal aspects, ratification activities and Liberia's capacity for implementation



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Findings from engagements with agribusinesses revealed that even though few (2) respondents had a fair understanding of the Rules of Origin protocol, central to trading under AfCFTA, most of the respondents (16) knew or had heard about the AfCFTA and mostly associated AfCFTA with creating one African market. It is surprising to note that none of the

agribusiness enterprise leaders knew about Liberia's AfCFTA ratification status with only one knowing about the progress made on the process involved. Concentration on AfCFTA in Liberia should not only be on the removal of tariffs as the removal of tariffs is perceived by agribusiness as bad. The focus of AfCFTA should be on industrialization and the development of Liberia.

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