Entrepreneurs and trade stakeholders convened on Friday for a virtual training designed to equip small and medium enterprises (SMEs) with the knowledge and tools needed to tap into opportunities under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

Organized by the Trade Policy Training Centre in Africa (TRAPCA) in collaboration with local partners, the session focused on enhancing export readiness and competitiveness, enabling Rwandan businesses to confidently expand beyond domestic markets and access the broader African marketplace.

Opening the training, Rwandan finance consultant and organizer, Adeodata Marie Ange underscored the need to equip African enterprises with practical skills to compete in an increasingly integrated continental economy.

She described AfCFTA as a historic opportunity for producers to access new markets but said success will depend on understanding trade rules, standards and regional value chains.

Trade expert Amos Akandwanaho, who led the technical session, outlined the scope of the agreement, describing it as a landmark initiative launched in Kigali in 2018 and now ratified by 49 African Union member states.

He said AfCFTA aims to create a single market of more than 1.3 billion people with a combined gross domestic product of about $3.4 trillion.

“With a combined GDP of $3.4 trillion and 1.3 billion consumers, AfCFTA is poised to boost Africa’s economies and strengthen the continent’s role in global trade,” Akandwanaho said.

He said the agreement seeks to gradually eliminate tariffs and non-tariff barriers, enable the free movement of goods and services, and provide a dispute settlement system to manage trade conflicts.

Addressing a participant’s question on trade flows between Rwanda and Uganda, Akandwanaho said Uganda remains a key trading partner, with exports to Rwanda significantly outweighing Rwanda’s exports.

He cited 2024 estimates showing Uganda exported more than $269 million worth of

goods to Rwanda, including sugar, maize and ceramics, while Rwanda exported about $10.6 million to Uganda, mainly scrap materials and manufactured products.

The trade relationship, he added, is driven largely by regional supply chains and proximity within the East African Community.

Participants also questioned whether Africa can realistically build a self-sustaining market in which locally produced goods dominate consumption.

Akandwanaho said sustained political commitment will be critical, pointing to progress in regional integration, including improved mobility frameworks and harmonization efforts in East Africa.

“Political will is fundamental in any development framework. Without it, implementation becomes difficult,” he said.

He added that growing cross-border trade and logistics activity between Rwanda and Uganda signals gradual recovery in regional trade ties.

Participants also raised concerns about insecurity, corruption and recurring trade disruptions across borders.

In response, Akandwanaho highlighted enforcement mechanisms within AfCFTA, including systems for reporting non-tariff barriers and a dispute resolution framework under the African Union. He also pointed to the African Development Bank’s Adjustment Fund, designed to support countries that may face revenue losses during the transition to freer trade.

On opportunities for SMEs, he highlighted the role of AfCFTA Trading Companies, which help small producers access international markets by aggregating goods from multiple suppliers.

He cited Rwanda as an example where collective export models are enabling farmers and small enterprises to reach regional markets despite limited individual capacity.

The session closed with a consensus that AfCFTA’s potential will depend on deeper political alignment, sustained investment in infrastructure, and stronger inclusion of small businesses in cross-border trade.