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The Impact of AGOA Suspension on Leather, Textile & Apparel Export in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) suspension on Ethiopia's leather, textile & apparel industry. The analysis is based on panel data from 2020 to 2023. Data has been sourced from the websites of the US trade representative, UNCOMTRADE, Trade Map, and AGOA info. Countries were selected based on the large export value of textile, apparel & leather and the rate at which they were utilizing AGOA. The textile and apparel control group consist of Kenya, Madagascar, and Lesotho whereas Kenya and Mauritius have been designated as the leather product control group. 2020 and 2021 are the pre-suspension periods, while 2022 and 2023 are the post-suspension years. The study used a triple difference-in-differences approach. The findings indicate that the AGOA suspension led to a significant reduction in the export values of textiles and leather. But the impact is more pronounced in the textile and apparel sector than the leather sector. To mitigate the impact of AGOA's suspension, the study recommends that Ethiopia must diversify its export destinations and improve the productivity of textile and apparel products.

Keywords: *AGOA, textile &, apparel, leather, export, Triple Difference-in-Difference*

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Introduction

Ethiopia has consistently sought to advance the export sector of the economy in both GTP I and II (PDC, 2015), and it has carried out these efforts in the recently endorsed ten-year development plan (PDC, 2021). The contribution of the manufacturing sector to the total GDP is less than seven percent (PDC,2021). To increase the sector's economic contribution, a particular emphasis has been placed on the highly labor-intensive manufacturing subsectors. Among these, the two manufacturing subsectors that have been given the utmost attention have been textile and clothing and leather and leather products.

The textile and leather sectors have entertained a high flow of foreign direct investment. One of the factors that contributed to such a high flow of FDI was linked to the country's preferential trade agreement with the USA under AGOA. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) was launched by the United States in 2000 and grants duty-free and quota-free access to the U.S. market for a wide range of products from eligible Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. To utilize this opportunity and to attract foreign direct investment, the country has also massively invested in industrial parks. The government constructed over 13 industrial parks across the country, designed to house manufacturers targeting the U.S. market. These parks, developed at a cost of more than $1.5 billion, became key hubs for textile and garment production, with nearly 30 of the 33 businesses operating within these zones utilizing AGOA benefits to export apparel to the U. S (Shibru,2022). The industrial parks attracted 66 foreign firms investing about US$740 million since 2014/15,

A remarkable achievement has been achieved in Ethiopia's export growth performance of the textile and leather sectors. In less than a decade, Ethiopia's exports to the US increased from US$29 million to US$525 million in 2020, 45.3% of it under AGOA. Textile and garment exports that up to 2014 accounted for just 10% of the trade grew steadily to 69% over the period (Luke, 2023). During the Ethiopian fiscal year 2020/21, The Hawassa Industrial Park, which is the largest in the country, was boosting over $95 million. 90% of Hawassa tenants exported to the United States; about 35,000 direct jobs in Hawassa apparel manufacturing and an additional 400,000 indirect jobs were attributed to AGOA (USITC, 2023).

Ethiopia's eligibility under AGOA has been suspended in January 2022. It has created a significant setback in the emerging manufacturing sectors. This is evidenced by the fact that exports from the country's industrial parks declined by 24% in 2023. Many multinational companies began scaling down their operations and some even have left the country (Shemsu, 2023).

While much attention has been focused on the textile and apparel sector's decline, Ethiopia's leather industry has also been adversely impacted by the loss of AGOA benefits. Although the sector managed to generate $23.4 million in export revenue during the last nine months of the fiscal year, this figure fell short of its target. Ethiopia's leather and footwear sector relied heavily on the U.S. market, with 78% of its exports directed to the U.S. of which 91% was under AGOA in 2020. The leather sector has shown some degree of competitiveness locally by withstanding competition from Chinese imports (Brautigam et al., 2016). This entails that the sector may be successful enough to explore new markets by looking for new destinations.

One of the solutions proposed to withstand the negative impacts of AGOA suspension has been to explore new markets. Though both industries have faced setbacks in reaching their ambitious targets, their responses and resilience vary due to differences in market dynamics. As a result, some research questions require meticulous assessment. Is Ethiopia successful in terms of withstanding AGOA suspension? Have the two sectors been impacted in a similar pattern? What lessons can we draw from these sectors for future policy directions? There have been researches conducted so far on the area. However, these researches didn't examine the effect of AGOA suspension on a particular manufacturing sector such as textile and leather. This article explores the impact of AGOA's suspension on Ethiopia's textile and apparel industry compared to the leather sector.

Review of Related Literature

There are a couple of literature that showcase the impact of preferential and free trade agreements on export performance. Baier et al. (2019) analyzed FTAs from 1986 to 2006 and found an FTA increases the value of trade flows by an average of 34 percent. Likewise, Johannes and Zaurino (2023) asserted that trade preferences foster export-led growth in developing countries by unilaterally reducing tariffs and other import barriers. The tale is a bit different for developing countries where only a few firms benefit from preferential trade agreements (Freund and Pierola, 2015). Sub-Saharan African countries have entertained preferential trade agreements from the USA since 2000 under AGOA. Following these, studies have been conducted on its impact on the economy of eligible countries and how SSA countries can harness the benefit to improve their sectors. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that AGOA has boosted trade flows between beneficiary countries and the US (Tadesse, 2024). AGOA has significantly increased total merchandise exports, particularly apparel, textiles, and light manufacturing. However, the effect on trade has varied across countries, with some SSA nations benefiting more than others. Countries like Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritius, Madagascar, Ethiopia, and Ghana have witnessed substantial growth in apparel exports and FDI inflows under AGOA.

Empirical investigations also shed light on the preconditions that must be fulfilled to utilize AGOA. Towards this end, Fayissa and Tadesse (2008) indicated that the success of AGOA depends on the ability of African policymakers to build on the trade-initiation momentum generated by the Act. These may include building networked communications and efficient transportation hubs that enable SSA countries to overcome the negative effect of geographic distance and lack of access to a seaport, training, and capacity building, and promoting their openness both in their product and foreign exchange markets.

Some AGOA beneficiaries lost AGOA benefits after they fell short of meeting the required eligibility criteria. A report by USITC (2023) shows that every instance from 2000 to 2021 of a country losing its AGOA benefits by failing to meet the eligibility criteria resulted in a significant decline in U.S. imports of apparel from that country. A study by Edjigu, Hakobyan, & Kassa (2023) finds that AGOA suspension has a considerable negative impact on the level of exports to the US. On average, AGOA suspension is associated with a 39% decline in exports to the US following the suspension. The study suggests that the impact of AGOA suspension was the largest for exports of textiles and clothing. Apart from the reduced levels of exports, they find that the suspension of AGOA eligibility has resulted in a limited variety of goods being exported to the United States. In particular, the probability of exporting textiles and clothing products decreases by 1.25 % points compared to the average probability of 9.4 % for AGOA-eligible countries exporting these products before the suspension. The AGOA suspension had a disproportionate impact on countries with a high pre-suspension utilization rate. The study finds that the withdrawal of AGOA benefits induces a 65% drop in exports with pre-suspension utilization rates above 30%.

Similar research has been carried out in Ethiopia. In this regard, Ejigu, Tilahun, & Gedefe (2023) reveal that 28% of firms experienced a reduction in exports to the U.S. market after the AGOA suspension, and the share of exports going to the U.S. market declined by 14 percentage points in 2022. Moreover, 24% of firms have diverted their exports to the domestic market, and 14% to other foreign countries than the US due to the suspension. The data also shows that 16% of firms laid off workers following the AGOA suspension. It becomes apparent that AGOA-utilizing firms were more severely affected, with 63% of them reporting a decrease in exports to the US market in 2022. In contrast, AGOA-non-utilizers were less impacted, with only 13% reporting reduced exports. This variation suggests that AGOA-dependent firms faced greater challenges in adapting to the suspension.

Numerous studies have been carried out regarding the impact of sanctions on global trade. The detrimental impact on the targeted nations has been demonstrated by Hufbauer et al. (2007) and Caruso (2003). Some researchers, such as Afesorgbor and Mahadevan (2016), have investigated the relative effectiveness of imposed vs threatened punishments. While studies by scholars like Bryan et al. (2022), Belay et al. (2022), and Daniel et al. (2022) demonstrate that AGOA has a favorable effect on SSA's trade performance, Busani et al. (2018) also assess a detrimental impact. According to research by Habtamu et al. (2023) on the impact of AGOA suspension on SSA exports, the suspension of the agreement resulted in a 39% decrease in exports.

While these studies have examined the broader economic effects of AGOA’s suspension on exports, a clear understanding of its impact on the textile and apparel industry remains limited. This article seeks to bridge that gap by offering an in-depth exploration of the textile and apparel industry’s unique position as a primary beneficiary of AGOA. Given its significance in Ethiopia’s export portfolio and its representation of broader trends in labor-intensive manufacturing, focusing on this sector provides a more precise lens through which to assess the repercussions of AGOA’s suspension.

The Data and Estimation Strategy

Data Type and Sources

The study uses secondary data sources based on country-level macroeconomic data on the export value of textile& apparel and Leather products in selected countries for the pre and post-suspension periods. AGOA info, UNCOMTRADE, Trade Map, and the United States trade representative's websites have been used as sources of data. Countries were selected based on the high export value of products and their AGOA rate of utilization. In this regard, Kenya, Lesotho, and Madagascar have been used as control groups for textiles while Kenya and Mauritius have been considered as a control group for leather products. The pre-suspension periods include 2020 and 2021 while the post-suspension years enclaves 2022 and 2023.

Model Specification

The empirical approach to identify the impact of the AGOA suspension exploits the variation in country and product and the timing of suspension in the treatment and controlled countries. Accordingly, the research uses a triple difference-in-differences regression model to identify the impact of AGOA suspension on Textile and Apparel exports in Ethiopia.

$$\begin{aligned} Export_{ijt} = {} & \beta_0 + \beta_1 Treatment_i + \beta_2 Product_j + \beta_3 Post_t + \beta_4 Treatment_i Product_j \\ & + \beta_5 Treatment_i Post_t + \beta_6 Post_t Product_j + \beta_7 Treatment_i Post_t Product_j \\ & + E_{ijt} \end{aligned}$$

Where $Export_{ijt}$ is the export value of textile and leather for country i in a dollar, in year t, and for product j, while $Treatment_i$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 for the treatment country and 0 for control countries. The variable $Product_j$represents a dummy variable equal to 1 for Treated products and 0 for Controlled products. $Post_t$ is a dummy variable equal to 1 for the post-suspension period (2022 and 2023) and 0 for the pre-suspension period (2020 and 2021). The interaction term $Treatment_i Product_j$ Captures the interaction between being in the treatment country and the treated product while $Treatment_i Post_t$signifies the interaction between being in the treatment country and the post-suspension period. The $Post_t Product_j$ interaction term captures the interaction between the post-suspension period and the treated product. $Treatment_i Post_t Product_j$ is the key triple interaction term that is crucial for understanding the specific effect of the AGOA suspension. It Captures the triple interaction between being in the treatment country, the post-suspension period, and the treated product.

Method of Data Analysis and Estimation Techniques

The study uses both descriptive and econometric methods of data analysis. The econometrics analysis uses a triple-difference-in-difference model to isolate the specific effect of the suspension on Textile and apparel exports. The triple difference estimator can be computed as the difference between two difference-in-differences estimators. Using the triple-differences approach to estimate the impact of AGOA suspension has certain advantages over the standard difference-in-differences approach. While the standard difference-in-differences approach is useful for comparisons, it has limitations when analyzing the impact of AGOA suspension on exports. Looking only at product types within a suspended country or comparing a suspended country to another based solely on AGOA eligibility might misinterpret results. Other events (shocks) happening at the same time could be mistakenly attributed to the suspension. The triple-difference approach tackles these issues by introducing a control group of non-suspended countries. This allows us to isolate the true effect of the suspension by comparing how the difference in exports between different products in a suspended country changed, compared to the same difference in a non-suspended country.

This method takes advantage of variations in exports across countries, products, and time. It also allows for more powerful statistical models that account for a broader range of influences beyond the suspension itself. These models can include fixed effects that consider characteristics specific to each country-product combination, each country over time, and each product across different periods. By employing this more sophisticated approach, we can gain a clearer understanding of how AGOA suspension truly impacted exports. Note that all diagnostic tests are satisfied.

Results and Discussions

Descriptive Analysis

The textile and apparel sector became a top priority for Ethiopia as part of its goal to become a middle-income country by 2025. The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) played a significant role in the development of this sector, offering duty-free access to the U.S. market and driving industrial growth. Ethiopia strategically capitalized on this preferential trade agreement by focusing heavily on textile and apparel production, which led to the establishment of multiple industrial parks, increased foreign direct investment (FDI), and the creation of thousands of jobs. However, with the suspension of Ethiopia from AGOA in 2022 due to political concerns, the industry faced considerable setbacks. The textile and apparel sector, which heavily depended on U.S. market access, experienced a sharp decline in exports, leading to reduced investments, factory closures, and job losses.

The US accounted for 70% of all textile exports from Ethiopia in 2020 under AGOA. Although the sector has tried to conquer the Asian and European markets, with increasing exports to China, Sweden, and the United Kingdom with shares of 13.9%, 5.45%, and 5.36% respectively in 2022, the United States remains its highest export partner covering 68% of total exports. This is because products are mostly tailored to the satisfaction of American customers aiming to use the AGOA opportunity.

With the suspension, Ethiopia's textile exports to the US fell immensely. The resulting reduction in profits due to the loss of preferential access to the US market has led many foreign companies to progressively disinvest from Ethiopia. In 2023, Export earnings from Ethiopian industrial parks have dropped by nearly 25% from the previous year, with manufacturers unable to sustain operations due to rising costs. In the same year, exports totaled $118 million, reflecting a 24% decline compared to the same period a year before, according to a nine-month report from the Ethiopian Investment Commission to Parliament. This decline in exports was accompanied by the failure to meet the adjusted Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) target of $4 billion, achieving only $2.7 billion. The World Bank report anticipates that the full impact of the suspension from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) has yet to materialize, even though, in 2020, before being expelled from AGOA, exports from industrial parks contributed only 5% to the export sector.

A World Bank report on Ethiopia's industrial parks from November 2022 indicated that 95% of exports from these parks were textiles and garments, which are labor-intensive products. The suspension of Ethiopia from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) in 2022 put the livelihoods of 56,000 employees at risk. The suspension of AGOA has also severely affected Ethiopia's footwear and leather industries, which exported about 78% of their products to the US. In 2016, Ethiopia was the AGOA beneficiary with the largest volume of exports to the United States, accounting for almost two-thirds of leather and allied exports shipped. Ethiopia's growth in AGOA exports in this sector began in earnest in 2012 and saw a steep trajectory. Ethiopia is struggling to find markets for 64% of its hides and skin products. Until new market linkages are established, a significant decline in production and export earnings is expected.

Despite the challenges, the leather industry's better market diversification has been instrumental in weathering the storm. leather exports had significant shares going to European and Asian markets. In 2022 Netherlands, Kenya, and Italy were the three top importers of footwear from Ethiopia. Although the lack of quality input and unstable political environment remains a bottleneck for the sector, creating alternative markets has had immense advantages in getting through the tough times caused by the loss of AGOA.

Ethiopia's expulsion from AGOA not only its immediate economic prospects but also its status as a viable investment destination, particularly for Western investors. AGOA was a significant draw for foreign investment, and its suspension undermines efforts to attract new investors. The suspension exposes existing investors to unforeseen costs, making them less likely to maintain or increase their investments in Ethiopia. The suspension creates uncertainties that could deter US investors from investing in other African countries, potentially extending the impact beyond Ethiopia's borders.

Econometric Analysis

The regression analysis on the impact of AGOA suspension on Ethiopia's textile and apparel export performance shows that the coefficient for the treatment group indicates a 43.9% decline in exports regardless of the product or suspension period, suggesting that treated textiles and apparel segments were already at a disadvantage compared to the control group. In the post-suspension period, exports across all products registered a 33.0% decline, reflecting the broader economic shock such as a global recession. The specific products considered in the analysis had 62.9% lower exports than the baseline, reinforcing the vulnerability of this sector. This is understandable as the products are the two high AGOA utilizers in the manufacturing sector.

Table 1:

Results of Triple DID Estimation

VARIABLES	Logexp(textile& Apparel)	Logexp(leather)
1. Treatment	-0.578	2.179
	(0.537)	(1.649)
1. Post	-0.401	0.126
	(0.526)	(1.205)
1. Product	-0.991	2.693***
	(0.714)	(0.826)
1.TreatmentPost	-0.673	-1.194
	(0.848)	(2.485)
1.TreatmentProduct	2.741***	0.582
	(0.798)	(1.701)
1.PostProduct	3.752***	-0.248
	(0.758)	(1.485)
1.TreatmentPostProduct	-2.783***	0.671
	(1.023)	(2.636)
Constant	15.66***	10.06***
	(0.350)	(0.711)
Observations	176	36
R-squared	0.086	0.413

N.B: - Robust standard errors in parentheses, *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The interaction effects reveal more detailed insights. The interaction between treatment and the post-suspension period shows a 49.0% reduction, highlighting the compounded effect of losing AGOA preferences for Ethiopia. Interestingly, the interaction between treatment and specific products shows an increase of 1508.6%, indicating that certain treated products saw significant growth before the suspension, potentially driven by AGOA benefits. The interaction between the post-suspension period and specific products shows a 4221.4% increase, which could be explained by the high value of exports.

Finally, the triple interaction effect (treatment × post × product) indicates a drastic 93.8% decline in exports, clearly demonstrating the severe negative impact on Ethiopia's textile and apparel exports due to the suspension of AGOA. This finding underscores the significant dependency of this sector on preferential market access.

Another regression analysis is also conducted on the impact of the AGOA suspension on Ethiopia's leather exports. The coefficient for the treatment group suggests a significant 787.2% increase in Ethiopia's leather exports throughout the period, reflecting the sector's strong performance under AGOA. However, in the post-suspension period, leather exports across all products and countries show a modest 13.5% increase, which contrasts with the sharp declines seen in other sectors like textiles and apparel. This could be seen as evidence of the impact of the sector's market diversification during the suspension period.

When examining the product-specific effect, leather exports exhibit an extraordinary 1381.2% increase compared to the baseline, underscoring the lucrative nature of this sector in all the countries. However, the interaction between treatment status and the post-suspension period indicates a steep 69.8% decline in treated leather exports, highlighting the severe impact of losing preferential access. Additionally, the treatment-product interaction shows a 44.1% decrease, suggesting that some leather exports were already facing challenges before the suspension. The Ethiopian leather sector has had a challenging experience with Labor strikes and COVID-19 during the pre-suspension period.

Interestingly, despite these declines, the triple interaction effect indicates a 95.5% increase in treated leather exports during the post-suspension period. This finding suggests that some treated leather products managed to adapt or even benefit during the AGOA suspension, perhaps due to shifts in market dynamics.

Conclusion and Implications

The suspension of Ethiopia's AGOA eligibility in 2022 has had far-reaching implications for the country's industrial ambitions, particularly within the textile and apparel sector, which has been heavily reliant on the U.S. market for its growth. As the analysis shows, the decline in exports from this sector was more pronounced than in the leather industry, reflecting its greater dependency on preferential trade access. The textile and apparel industry, supported by substantial government investment in industrial parks, had become a cornerstone of Ethiopia's job creation and export strategies. However, the sudden loss of AGOA benefits exposed vulnerabilities in this approach, leading to significant job losses, reduced export volumes, and a decline in foreign direct investment (FDI). The suspension led to a substantial decrease in export levels, with a notable 42% drop in US apparel imports from Ethiopia in the first two months of 2023 compared to a 5.8% decrease for AGOA members overall. This sharp decline in exports illustrates the profound effect of losing AGOA benefits, exacerbating the broader trend of US imports decreasing by $8.52M (-22.1%) between April 2023 and April 2024. the leather sector, although impacted, demonstrated a comparatively better capacity to adapt by exploring alternative markets and diversifying its export base.

The findings underscore the importance of sustainable development policies that reduce dependency on preferential trade agreements. While AGOA has undeniably provided increased trade and investment opportunities for Sub-Saharan African countries, including Ethiopia, the challenges of trade diversification and poverty reduction persist. Moving forward, Ethiopia should focus on broadening its export destinations, investing in value addition across sectors, and strengthening regional trade ties to reduce its reliance on a single market.

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