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Economic Diplomacy and Fisheries Trade Prospects under the 2026 Nigeria–UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement: Production Capacity, Financial Constraints, and Institutional Readiness

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Abstract

Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on 13 January 2026, following an earlier period of bilateral tensions involving aviation services, visa restrictions, and competing policy responses. This article examines what the new economic-diplomacy framework could mean for Nigeria's fisheries trade and why formal market access may not automatically translate into exports. It applies qualitative documentary analysis to the 2023 Nigeria–UAE diplomatic relations thesis by Okhogbe, Nigerian and UAE official statements, treaty-status records, and four supplied Nigerian fisheries and aquaculture publications. An evidence matrix distinguishes documented policy commitments, prior domestic empirical findings, and untested sectoral propositions. Nigeria's official communication identifies fish and seafood among products covered by the proposed duty-free UAE market access, while UNCTAD lists the agreement as signed but not yet in force in the consulted record. Studies of Lagos fish processing, cooperative-supported aquaculture, Kogi inland fishing, and aquaculture learners identify financing, resource-use, institutional, and skills issues relevant to export preparedness, but do not measure Nigeria–UAE fish exports. The analysis proposes a sequential market-readiness framework linking legal implementation, product eligibility, sanitary compliance, reliable supply, working capital, logistics, and buyer relationships. The main conclusion is conditional: the CEPA establishes a prospective policy opportunity whose fisheries benefits depend on implementation and enterprise capability. Product-level bilateral trade statistics and firm-level export-readiness data are necessary to test whether the agreement ultimately improves market participation.

Keywords: *economic diplomacy; Nigeria–United Arab Emirates; fisheries trade; comprehensive economic partnership agreement; export readiness; aquaculture; value chains*

1. Introduction

The signing of a trade agreement does not, by itself, put fish on an export vessel. Between a tariff concession and a completed seafood shipment lie eligibility under the agreement, sanitary controls, reliable processing, transport, documentation, finance, and a buyer prepared to accept the product. These conditions are especially consequential for aquatic products because spoilage, temperature management, and traceability can determine whether an apparently profitable transaction is commercially feasible.

Nigeria and the UAE signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement on 13 January 2026. Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Industry, Trade and Investment describes the arrangement as covering goods, services, investment, and business mobility; a presidential statement explicitly lists fish and seafood among the goods anticipated to receive duty-free access in the UAE (FMITI, 2026; State House, 2026). Those statements identify a policy opening, not proof that Nigerian seafood exports have subsequently expanded. The agreement's legal status

is equally important: the UNCTAD treaty listing consulted for this article classifies the Nigeria–UAE CEPA as signed but not in force (UNCTAD, 2026). The distinction between negotiation, signature, entry into force and practical utilisation shapes the article's claims.

The bilateral setting has a history. Okhogbe's 2023 doctoral thesis investigated the Nigeria–UAE diplomatic dispute through flight restrictions, visa bans and public confrontation, drawing on a reported survey of 400 participants and 10 interviews (Okhogbe, 2023). That study supplies the foreign-policy context for understanding why business mobility and transport connectivity are not peripheral to economic cooperation. Its respondents were not a fisheries-sector sample, however, and the thesis cannot establish effects on fish exports or aquaculture investment. This study instead asks whether the trade opening described in 2026 policy documents has a plausible route through the production and institutional conditions observed in Nigerian fisheries research.

Four supplied publications make that sectoral question concrete. They concern cooperative-based aquaculture support in Lagos, the financing of roadside fish processing in Lagos, artisanal fishing efficiency in Kogi State, and digital-learning resilience among aquaculture learners in southwest Nigeria (Awolumate & Ashiedu, 2026; Awolumate & Muyiwa, 2025; Awolumate & Fregene, 2025; Awolumate et al., 2025). These are distinct populations and outcomes. Their collective relevance lies in identifying capabilities and constraints that exporters may need to address not in measuring the CEPA's impact.

The article has three objectives: to identify the legally and publicly documented economic-diplomacy commitments relevant to fisheries; to examine what the supplied fisheries studies imply about possible supply-side readiness; and to propose a testable framework for evaluating actual participation in the UAE market. It deliberately does not estimate export growth, tariff savings, treatment effects, or fisheries-specific bilateral investment flows.

2. Analytical framework and literature

2.1 Economic diplomacy, market access, and implementation

Economic diplomacy comprises government action to shape conditions for trade, investment, and cross-border enterprise. In this case, its operative instruments include negotiated tariff treatment, services and investment commitments, and the facilitation of business engagement. A distinction is needed between the legal margin—what an agreement promises or permits—and the commercial margin—whether an exporter can satisfy requirements and supply the market at a competitive delivered price. Both are necessary for realized market access.

The Nigerian ministry's private-sector note reports commitments to eliminate UAE tariffs on 7,315 products originating in Nigeria and to eliminate Nigerian tariffs on 6,243 UAE products, alongside commitments on specified services (FMITI, 2026). These are agreement-wide counts; they are not a count of fisheries lines. The public statement identifies fish and seafood, but the exact tariff treatment of each product, implementation date, and origin requirement must be checked against the operative tariff schedule and the relevant customs classification. No product-specific preference utilization rate is established by the available material.

Because UNCTAD lists the treaty as signed but not in force, this analysis refers to prospective or announced preferential access rather than asserting that preferential treatment is currently enforceable (UNCTAD, 2026). Official statements are primary sources on governments' intentions, but statements about expected jobs or exports are projections, not outcome evaluations.

2.2 Diplomatic disruption and trade capability

Okhogbe (2023) examines a bilateral dispute shaped by aviation and visa restrictions and other sources of diplomatic strain. These events are analytically relevant because exporters may depend on travel for negotiation, supplier verification, trade promotion and market intelligence; reliable transport services may also matter for time-sensitive products. Yet the existence of aviation restrictions does not show that fish exporters used the affected services, incurred additional freight costs or lost orders. Demonstrating such effects would require shipment routes, periods, freight rates, cancellations or enterprise interviews tied to fisheries businesses.

The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently describes investment and commercial activity between the two countries, including a 2023 Dubai Chamber trade mission to Lagos and renewed cooperation thereafter (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). This provides evidence that diplomatic relations encompass more than the specific dispute examined in the earlier thesis. It does not establish a seafood supply contract or fish-sector investment.

2.2.1 Fisheries trade, domestic nutrition, and market allocation

Market access should be assessed against competing uses of fish, not merely the possibility of higher export sales. Belton, Bush, and Little (2018) challenge the assumption that farmed fish in the Global South are primarily destined for wealthy export markets, highlighting domestic consumption and affordability. Golden et al. (2021) establish the nutritional significance of diverse aquatic foods. Together, these studies raise a distributional question for a Nigeria–UAE seafood initiative: which species and

product forms could feasibly enter an export channel without assuming that additional exports necessarily improve domestic nutrition or producer welfare? Neither study estimates Nigeria–UAE trade effects; their contribution is to prevent an unqualified export-growth narrative.

An export-readiness assessment should therefore record species, domestic-market destination, farm-gate and retail prices, quantities available beyond local demand, and who retains the additional value. The agreement creates a possible market-access channel; whether processors can meet foreign requirements at a remunerative price remains an empirical question.

2.3 Financing and the processing margin

Export market entry is particularly demanding when processors operate on short cash cycles. Expenses for procurement, labor, processing, certification, packaging, and transport can arise well before a foreign buyer pays. Awolumate and Muyiwa (2025) studied 150 roadside fish processors in Lagos and reported statistical associations involving credit access ($p = .025$) and inadequate capital ($p = .002$) and profitability indicators. Their operating-cost variable was reported with $p = .097$, which is not significant at the conventional five-percent threshold. This evidence supports attention to financing and cash-flow constraints. It does not identify export finance needs, determine causality, or prove that the processors were ready to trade internationally.

The key economic distinction is between the capacity to produce a saleable fish product and the capacity to finance an export transaction. Trade preferences may reduce a border charge while leaving enterprise-level working capital, quality control, and payment risk unresolved. That possibility is a proposition for further empirical work, not a measured outcome of the Lagos study.

2.3.1 Financing, market organization, and Nigerian fisheries enterprises

Awolumate, Okwuokenye, Agbo, and Akinbani (2022) examined the marketing of smoked and dried fish among 135 respondents in Lagos State, identifying business profitability and practical marketing constraints. That evidence concerns domestic processors and traders, not verified exporters to the UAE. Its relevance lies in the additional costs that formal export contracts could entail: grading, packaging, traceability, cold storage, and longer working capital cycles. The empirical question is whether the expected sale price, net of those costs, is commercially worthwhile.

Awolumate and Okoronkwo (2026) investigated youth participation in urban fish entrepreneurship in Lagos State. Their study links enterprise engagement to experience, training, and enabling conditions while identifying infrastructure and cold-storage problems. It suggests that a preferential trade agreement will not automatically expand participation among smaller or younger firms. This proposition should be tested with enterprise-level records, rather than inferred from the presence of tariff concessions.

2.4 Productive capacity, cooperation, and resource constraints

Awolumate and Ashiedu (2026) focus on cooperative-based institutional support and aquaculture productivity and profitability in Lagos State. The article's identified subject makes it germane to producer coordination and institutional support; the material provided for the present review establishes its publication and title, but does not contain a verified complete set of underlying results. It should therefore not be used to assert a specific cooperative effect size. Organized groups may assist in aggregating volume, distributing information, or coordinating quality management, provided their governance and commercial capacity are suitable.

The contrast with capture fisheries matters. Awolumate and Fregene (2025) surveyed 235 artisanal fishing households along the Niger and Benue in Kogi State and employed a stochastic frontier framework. Their abstract reports mean technical efficiency of 0.785 for River Benue fishers and 0.643 for River Niger fishers, alongside environmental and infrastructural constraints. These observations concern inland capture fisheries, not commercial aquaculture in Lagos, and not an export supply chain. They demonstrate why the phrase "Nigerian fisheries capacity" conceals diverse resource conditions: wild-capture catches depend on stock and environmental constraints that are not equivalent to managed pond output.

2.4.1 Production sustainability, energy dependence, and standards

Naylor et al. (2021) review the expansion and evolving resource requirements of global aquaculture and demonstrate why rising output must be considered alongside feed, production systems, and sustainability. Gephart et al. (2021) show substantial variation in environmental performance across aquatic-food production systems. For prospective Nigerian exporters, these studies justify considering species-specific supply reliability and environmental performance rather than assuming that any growth in production is equally suitable for international markets.

International market participation can also depend on documented production practices and conformity assessment. Bush et al. (2013) examine the governance role and limitations of sustainability certification in aquaculture.

Their analysis is relevant to the distinction between tariff eligibility and private- or regulatory-market access requirements. It does not establish that any particular certification is mandatory for shipments covered by the Nigeria–UAE CEPA; applicable UAE requirements must be checked on a product-by-product and transaction-by-transaction basis.

Awolumate, Shani, and Okhogbe (2026) analyze energy–water–profit trade-offs and economies of scale across urban aquaponics systems in Lagos and Abuja. Their findings point to electricity reliability and capital intensity as operational considerations for technology-dependent production. Aquaponics is only one production system and cannot be treated as representative of Nigerian seafood exports, but the study illustrates why energy and infrastructure costs should be included in any commercial-readiness assessment.

2.5 Skills, access to information, and market readiness

The southwest Nigerian study by Awolumate, Agbo, Alabi, and Akure (2025) addresses 400 aquaculture learners and reports that educational attainment, rather than financial access alone, was the most consistent predictor of digital-learning resilience. It also discusses unequal access to formal credit. This is an education and financial inclusion study; it cannot directly assess seafood exporters' documentation skills or certification performance. It nevertheless motivates the hypothesis that producer training and the ability to interpret market requirements may influence whether firms take advantage of a formal trade opportunity.

2.5.1 Information access and differentiated livelihoods

Awolumate (2018) studies the suitability of information and communication technologies for fish farming in Lagos State. This is relevant to whether producers and entrepreneurs can receive timely buyer specifications, technical advice, and price information, although digital access does not itself establish export participation. Awolumate and Fregene (2023), studying fisher households along the Niger and Benue in Kogi State, investigate livelihood diversification. Their findings concern capture-fisheries households rather than export-oriented aquaculture firms; they help identify why gains and risks from a new trade opportunity may be distributed unevenly across fish-dependent livelihoods.

These five additional Nigerian studies, read with the global evidence, suggest that readiness should be disaggregated by enterprise function: capture, culture, processing, trading, and export intermediation. Each group faces different capital, information, quality, and regulatory requirements.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Design and documentary corpus

The study uses qualitative documentary policy analysis rather than a new field survey or a statistical impact evaluation. Its primary diplomatic sources are: Okhogbe's October 2023 doctoral thesis on Nigeria–UAE relations; Nigeria's January 2026 CEPA private-sector information note and State House statement; the UAE government's accounts of bilateral and economic cooperation; and UNCTAD's treaty-status database. Its sectoral sources are the four research-related PDFs supplied with this study. The sources were selected to answer different questions: diplomatic history, proposed agreement provisions, formal implementation status, and sectoral capacities.

3.2 Extraction and interpretation

The documentary review recorded the source type, geographic coverage, population or legal subject, relevant claims, and limits on inference. Statements about agreement terms were separated from treaty status; published empirical results were separated from proposed commercial mechanisms. The article compares those strands through an export-readiness sequence rather than pooling incomparable sample statistics. No interviews or trade data extraction were carried out for this paper. Available official statements may change after the review cutoff, so the date of the treaty-status check matters.

3.3 Evidentiary safeguards

The 2023 thesis is a historical background and is not reanalyzed as fisheries evidence. Statistical statements from the fisheries articles are attributed to their original studies and not combined into national estimates. The CEPA cannot be credited with a demonstrated increase in Nigerian fish exports in the absence of an appropriate before-and-after dataset, product-specific series, and an identification strategy. Documentary gaps are reported explicitly in Table 2.

4. Findings from the documentary review

4.1 A policy opening with a legal-status qualification

On 13 January 2026, the two countries signed the CEPA, which, according to official Nigerian materials, is intended to broaden trade and investment access (FMITI, 2026; State House, 2026). Fish and seafood are named in Nigeria's official announcement. At the same time, UNCTAD classifies the agreement as signed but not in force. The finding is therefore the existence of a negotiated and publicly announced opportunity, not that tariff preferences have been used or that fish exports have risen.

4.2 The supplied evidence supports a readiness diagnosis, not an export-impact estimate

The four sectoral studies reveal distinct features of domestic capacity: potential coordination through aquaculture cooperatives, financial constraints among Lagos processors, heterogeneity in inland fisheries efficiency, and the importance of skills in aquaculture learning. They do not establish whether any respondent operates an export business, meets UAE standards, or holds the necessary approvals. Combining them into a single numerical "export readiness score" would be unjustified. Their legitimate role is to inform the questions that an export-readiness audit should ask.

Table 1. Source–claim alignment and permissible inference

Evidence source	Directly documented	Not established
Okhogbe (2023) thesis	Nigeria–UAE diplomatic tensions, aviation and visa issues; survey and interviews	Fish-specific trade losses or export volumes
FMITI / State House (2026)	Signed CEPA and announced fish/seafood market-access commitments	Preference use or seafood export growth
UNCTAD (2026)	Treaty listing: signed, not in force	Date of future implementation
Awolumate & Muyiwa (2025)	Financing-related associations among 150 Lagos roadside processors	Effects on export businesses
Awolumate & Ashiedu (2026)	Study of cooperative institutional support in Lagos aquaculture	Direct UAE-related market entry
Awolumate & Fregene (2025)	Technical efficiency and constraints among 235 Kogi inland fishers	Export-ready fish supply
Awolumate et al. (2025)	Digital-learning and finance evidence for 400 aquaculture learners	Export certification competence

4.3 Sequence of conditions for realised seafood access

The evidence suggests treating export readiness as a chain of conditions rather than a single attribute. A firm first needs operative and correctly classified market-access rules. It then needs proof of origin and compliance with applicable UAE food-safety and customs requirements. Only after that do dependable quality and volume, packing and temperature management, shipping economics, payment arrangements and customer acquisition determine whether a transaction is commercially viable. The conditions are analytical categories, not verified weaknesses of every Nigerian exporter.

Table 2. Proposed seafood market-readiness assessment

Stage	Question requiring verification	Potential evidence
Legal implementation	Is the CEPA in force, and which fish product tariff lines qualify?	Official entry-into-force notice; treaty annexes; tariff schedules
Eligibility and origin	Can the shipment document Nigerian origin and product classification?	Rules of origin; certificates; customs records
Safety and quality	Which health, handling and traceability requirements apply to this product?	UAE importer guidance; competent-authority certificates; facility inspections
Consistent supply	Can firms meet ordered sizes, quantity and quality across periods?	Harvest and purchase records; rejection rates; batch records
Logistics	What is the delivered cost, including refrigeration and losses?	Freight quotes; route records; temperature logs; loss registers
Finance and sales	Can working capital cover the trade cycle, and is demand verified?	Credit terms; cash flow; purchase orders; buyer due diligence

5. Discussion

5.1 Why tariff preferences may not determine competitiveness

A tariff concession can improve the landed-price calculation only for a compliant, qualifying shipment and only once the relevant commitment is operational. It cannot compensate automatically for poor quality, unpredictable supply, high rejection rates, or an uncompetitive freight quotation. The fisheries evidence suggests that access to operating finance and organizational support deserves scrutiny, but the relative importance of these conditions can be established only with enterprise-level transaction data. Consequently, a recommendation to subsidize shipping or expand credit would be premature without testing the costs and commercial returns.

The international literature also counsels against equating market entry with welfare gains. Domestic consumption and nutrition (Belton et al., 2018; Golden et al., 2021), production impacts (Naylor et al., 2021; Gephart et al., 2021), and the governance of certification (Bush et al., 2013) each provide a different criterion against which export development can be evaluated. Their findings are comparative frameworks, not measurements of the new Nigeria–UAE agreement.

5.2 Diplomatic repair and sectoral transmission

Okhogbe's thesis makes aviation restrictions and travel policies visible as instruments of bilateral friction. The 2026 CEPA marks a different phase, in which governments articulate shared commercial commitments. It is tempting to narrate this as an automatic conversion of diplomatic repair into fisheries growth. A stronger explanation requires a transmission test: did mobility improve for relevant exporters; did shipping options and freight economics change; did investors enter fish processing or aquaculture; and did shipments at identifiable product codes increase? The sources currently reviewed cannot answer those questions. The appropriate scholarly claim is that diplomatic relations shape the possible operating environment, not that they explain an observed fisheries export outcome.

5.3 Domestic heterogeneity and the risk of treating fisheries as one sector

The local studies span roadside processing in Lagos, managed aquaculture production in Lagos, capture fisheries along the Niger and Benue, and learners in southwest Nigeria. Each activity has different capital needs, risk profiles and output characteristics. A wild-capture fisher may face stock variability and ecological pressures; an aquaculture producer faces feed, seed and water-management constraints; a processor faces handling, storage and market finance requirements. Only some enterprises may have the scale or product form suitable for a given UAE market segment. Any national export programme that assumes identical needs across these groups risks poor targeting.

In the Nigerian evidence, fish marketing arrangements (Awolumate et al., 2022), youth enterprise constraints (Awolumate & Okoronkwo, 2026), and urban aquaponics operating costs (Awolumate et al., 2026) provide concrete reasons to examine the viability of compliance investment at firm level. ICT suitability among Lagos fish farmers (Awolumate, 2018) and livelihood diversification among Kogi fishing households (Awolumate & Fregene, 2023) broaden the assessment to information access and who might be able to capture benefits. None directly observes a response to CEPA, and the article does not assign them that evidentiary role.

5.4 Institutional readiness as an empirical question

Cooperative organisation is potentially valuable for aggregation, knowledge exchange and coordinated service provision, but membership alone cannot demonstrate that an institution can enforce quality specifications, manage invoices or negotiate contracts. Evidence-based readiness assessment should measure governance, member deliveries, quality consistency, dispute resolution, record keeping and financing. The publication on cooperative support identifies a relevant institutional research stream; its findings should not be converted into an untested assertion of export capability.

5.5 Research agenda and identification strategy

Three linked empirical projects would move the argument beyond policy analysis. First, a legal and tariff mapping exercise should establish CEPA entry into force, origin rules and UAE concession lines for fish and seafood at the most detailed available HS level. Second, a descriptive bilateral trade study should assemble Nigerian exports and UAE mirrored imports by product and year, document discrepancies between reporter series, and separate fish from seafood preparations. Third, a firm-level survey should record previous export experience, sales destination, certification, production or sourcing volume, rejection rates, transport mode, freight cost, cash cycle and access to commercial services. Where credible comparison destinations and pre-implementation periods exist, subsequent evaluation may examine differential changes, while addressing confounding changes in exchange rates, global seafood prices and demand. Such work must not assume a causal design is feasible before the data are assessed.

6. Policy implications

The immediate policy priority is an accessible, accurate implementation guide for Nigerian seafood enterprises. Such a guide should identify eligible product codes, application dates, rules of origin, required certifications, importer obligations and competent offices. Its contents should be updated as the treaty moves through domestic legal procedures. Promoting "duty-free fish exports" without those conditions could mislead firms into making costly commitments.

An accompanying readiness programme could begin with voluntary audits of processing and aquaculture businesses, not assumed export-readiness scores. Audits should identify marketable species and formats, food-safety compliance, production continuity, cold-chain gaps, unit costs, working capital and verified buyer demand. Extension agencies, competent regulators, trade-support bodies and cooperative organisations would have distinct functions; the paper does not presume that one agency can deliver the entire package.

Financial support should follow demonstrable commercial needs. The Lagos processing evidence makes inadequate capital and credit access relevant concerns, but the design of export credit, guarantee or insurance products requires data on payment terms, working-capital cycles and default risk. Programmes should also consider the opportunity cost of diverting product from domestic markets and the environmental implications of expanding wild-capture supply. Incentives that raise harvest effort without attention to stock sustainability could create costs not captured in trade statistics.

7. Limitations

The article is a document-based synthesis. It neither verifies fish and seafood trade flows between Nigeria and the UAE nor measures changes after the CEPA signature. The treaty status is a dated database observation and may change; an official implementation notice would supersede it for operational purposes. The supplied aquaculture-cooperative PDF includes journal and issue evidence but not a full verified dataset for secondary quantitative analysis. Results reported by the other three articles concern different locations and study populations, which limits transferability. Some original thesis findings are respondent-based assessments of diplomacy, not independently observed state-level outcomes. All proposed transmission mechanisms and intervention options should be treated as hypotheses requiring validation.

8. Conclusion

The Nigeria–UAE CEPA offers a credible subject for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of economic diplomacy and fisheries development. Official materials identify fish and seafood among the areas of prospective market access, while the treaty-status record consulted for this article does not yet establish entry into force. Okhogbe's work supplies the prior diplomatic setting; the four fisheries publications establish why financial capacity, resource conditions, institutional coordination and skills deserve examination. None of those sources demonstrates that fisheries exports to the UAE have increased. The defensible conclusion is that an agreement can create an opportunity only when its provisions become operative and enterprises can meet the commercial and regulatory conditions of trade. Product-level trade records, legal implementation documents, and enterprise-level readiness evidence are the necessary next steps.

Declarations and transparency

Ethics: This documentary study involves no new human-participant data collection; any use of identifiable interview material from the 2023 thesis would require appropriate permissions and ethical review. Data availability: The study draws on published documents and the 2023 thesis; no new primary dataset was created. The underlying 2023 survey data and individual firm records were not accessed for reanalysis.

Consent for publication: Not applicable; no identifying participant information is presented.

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