

A Legal Appraisal of the Challenges Faced by Forwarding Agents in Cameroon

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Abstract

Forwarding agents play a crucial role in facilitating international trade by managing the logistics and documentation necessary for the smooth transit of goods. In Cameroon, a rapidly growing economy with increasing trade activities, forwarding agents are pivotal in ensuring efficiency and compliance in supply chains. Despite their importance, forwarding agents in Cameroon face numerous challenges that hinder their operational efficiency and affect the overall trade environment. These challenges include bureaucratic delays, inadequate infrastructure, regulatory complexities, and security issues, which collectively impact on their performance and the country's trade competitiveness. This article aims to appraise the key challenges faced by forwarding agents in Cameroon. The research adopts the qualitative research methodology, and data were obtained from books, article Journals. The study reveals that forwarding agents predominantly struggle with cumbersome customs procedures, poor transport infrastructure, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, and security threats such as cargo theft. These challenges result in increased operational costs, delays in shipment processing, and reduced competitiveness in the logistics sector. It is recommended that there is the need to streamline and simplify customs clearance procedures to reduce delays and bureaucratic hurdles at ports, particularly Douala, which faces congestion and long cargo dwell times.

Keywords: challenges, forwarding agents

1. Introduction

In Cameroon¹, the historical evolution of middlemen can be traced to ancient times when various indigenous tribes conducted regional and local commerce. As external influences and trade networks expanded over the years, the significance of middlemen also intensified and evolved.²

Thus, at the end of the 1800s,³ middlemen dealt with businesses that were defined in terms of user industries, such as steel, mining, textiles and ship-building", while others specialized by product categories, for example, welding supplies, cutting tools and industrial chemicals⁴. In the new arrangements powerful manufacturers with

¹ Cameroon is a country located in Central and West Africa, bordered by Nigeria to the west, Chad to the northeast, the Central African Republic to the east, and Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo to the south. The country has a diverse geography that includes coastal regions along the Atlantic Ocean, mountains, rainforests, and savannas.

² Copeland, M., (1928). The present status of wholesale trade. *Harvard Business Review*, 3(6), pp. 257-263:262.

³ Anthony W., (2017). Liverpool and the Asian trade, 1800–50: Some insights into a provincial British commercial network. *The empire in one city? I*, pp. 35-54:44.

⁴ Corey, R., Cespedes, F. and Rangan, K., (1989). *Going to Market. Distribution Systems for Industrial Products*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 253.

trade-marked goods, more or less, dictated business conditions and the roles of middlemen “have become less of a trading nature and more of a distributing nature”¹ In particular the position of wholesalers was weakened, because they were threatened from both sides by firms that wanted to bypass them². The functions of wholesalers were taken over “more and more by manufacturers, retailers, and to some extent by consumers — either directly or by agencies they own or control.”³

There comes the 20th century which marked a shift towards more complex and diverse international trade networks⁴. Beyond physical intermediation, incorporating financial services, market research, customs clearance and legal assistance, expanded the role of middlemen⁵. Middlemen later evolved into sophisticated intermediaries with the rise of globalization, leveraging technology and embracing new forms of communication and logistics⁶. The advent of the internet and digital technologies further transformed the role of middlemen in International commercial transactions. E-commerce platforms, online marketplaces, and digital payment systems have enabled direct communication and transactions between buyers and sellers globally,⁷ reducing the need for traditional intermediaries.⁸ Middlemen however, still play a vital role in facilitating trust, ensuring compliance, and providing specialized knowledge and services in complex international trade environments.⁹ As such, air transportation began to emerge as a viable option for the shipment of goods. Initially, air freight was limited to small, high-value items, but as aircraft technology improved, larger and heavier goods could be transported by air.¹⁰

The use of air freight dramatically reduced transit times, allowing goods to be transported across the globe in a matter of hours.¹¹ This development was a game-changer for the international freight forwarding industry, and air freight quickly became a popular choice for time-sensitive and high-value goods.

During the colonial era, Cameroon was divided between French and British, resulting in distinct trade routes and systems. Middlemen were commonly known as “Facteurs”¹² in French-speaking regions and “Brokers”¹³ in English-speaking regions who acted as intermediaries between the European traders and local producers.¹⁴ These middlemen played a crucial role in connecting the domestic market with the global economy. They served as agents, arranging contracts, negotiating prices, and organizing the transportation of goods, facilitating the dissemination of European goods within Cameroon thereby helping exporters to access international markets.¹⁵

¹ *Ibid.*

² Arne M., (2013). International trade, trade costs and middlemen: A new look at mirror data. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 15(1), pp. 50-68:61.

³ Stewart, P. and Dewhurst, J., (1939). *Does distribution cost too much?* New York: Twentieth Century Fund, p. 45.

⁴ Theodore K., (2002). Trade and Traders in Mid-Victorian Liverpool: Mercantile Business and the marketing of a World Port. *Victorian Studies*, 45(1), pp. 176-178:176.

⁵ Bernardo B., Sebastian C., Ignatius J., (2018). Trade costs and the role of international trade intermediaries. *Handbook of international trade and transportation*, 1, pp. 337-367:343.

⁶ Graeme M., (2000). *Trade and traders in mid-Victorian Liverpool: Mercantile business and the making of a world port*. Liverpool University Press, p. 10.

⁷ John F., (1997). Competition among middlemen when buyers and sellers can trade directly. *The journal of industrial economics*, 45(4), pp. 405-427:411.

⁸ Graeme M., (2002). Knowledge, Communications and the Information Order in Nineteenth-Century Liverpool. *International Journal of Maritime History*, 14(1), pp. 209-224:210.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Deepa S., Sandeep G., et al., (2023). An assessment of challenges and factor influencing the freight forwarding business in the logistics industry. *Economics, finance and management review*, 2, pp. 4-23:20.

¹¹ Markides V. and Holweg M., (2006). On the diversification of international freight forwarders — A UK perspective. *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics Management*, 36(5), pp. 336-359:339.

¹² The term “facteurs” is French for “factors.” In various contexts, factors refer to elements or components that contribute to a particular outcome or situation. In business or economics, factors can denote elements that influence market conditions or financial performance.

¹³ Under English law, a broker is an individual or entity that acts as an intermediary between buyers and sellers, facilitating transactions in various markets, such as financial instruments or real estate. Brokers typically earn a commission for their services.

¹⁴ NgonjiNjungwe E., (2008). Picam position statement: The political economy of sustainable development in Cameroon.

¹⁵ Raphael A A., Jonathan D., (1999). *Middlemen of Cameroons Rivers: The Duala's and their hinterlands, c-1600-1960*. Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

Middlemen continued to play an important role in Cameroon trade during the post-independence period as they could adapt to the changing circumstances and the emerging market economy like agriculture, mining and manufacturing. They specialized in specific commodities such as cocoa, coffee, oil and timber.¹

Similarly, to the countries on the west coast of Africa, Cameroon is also rich in natural resources, namely: petroleum, timber, coffee, and cocoa. The economy relies on agriculture, and has been steadily experiencing growth since 2005, with projections of 4 percent real economic growth for 2008.² Cameroon has focused on economic reforms, in an effort to catalyze more business. To this end, the government has liberalized some aspects of trade, passing new legislation in 2002. Efforts to reform port and customs administration: “A one-stop shop for customs procedures became operational in December 2000. All documents must be submitted within 48 hours of a shipment’s arrival. This innovation has reduced import formalities from 26 days to 15 days and export formalities from 14 days to 7 days.”³

Lack of transparency constitutes one of the most significant challenges of the system; Corruption continues to be an obstacle to doing business in Cameroon, and its manifested within the system even at border-point; “although the Cameroon government has tried to speed customs clearance, customs fraud is still a major problem and protracted negotiations with customs officers over the value of imported goods are common”⁴. An average of three days is needed to clear goods through customs.

Cameroon has several ports, Douala being the major one, followed by the smaller ports of Limbe, Kribi, and Garoua. Doula port has served Central Africa since the 19th century, and although it handles 95 percent of Cameroon’s port cargo volume, is also known for its inefficiency.⁵ In an effort to improve the efficiency indicators, ports were granted administration autonomy in 2000. Transport efficiency, however, relies on the state of the infrastructure.⁶

As Cameroon experienced economic growth and increased participation in global trade, the role of middlemen continued to evolve. They became more diversified in their activities, adapting to changing market demands and adopting new technologies. Within the agricultural sector, middlemen played a critical role in the trade of cash crops like cocoa, coffee and palm oil.⁷ The middlemen acted as intermediaries between small-scale farmers and exporters, facilitating the purchase, storage and transportation of these commodities. Farmers were often provided with inputs such as fertilizers and loans, assisting them in improving their productivity by these middlemen. As times went on, middlemen were involved in the trade of resources like gold, diamond and timber within the mining sector⁸. Their role was to connect local miners to buyers, facilitate transportation of extracted materials, and handle the complex logistics involved in cross-border trade.⁹ The manufacturing industries in Cameroon also relied on middlemen as they sourced for raw materials, negotiated contracts with suppliers, and distributed finished products to retailers or export markets. Therefore, middlemen participated in helping to bridge the gap between manufacturers and the market thus ensuring a smooth flow of goods and maximizing efficiency.¹⁰

It is no doubt that middlemen have contributed to the development of trade in Cameroon and therefore have a great impact on the economic landscape of the country. However, some scholars¹¹ have argued that middlemen

¹ *Ibid.*

² Fung P., Chen I., and Yip S., (2006). Relationships and performance of trade intermediaries: an explanatory study. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41(½), pp. 159-180:163.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Furukawa, H., (2005). *Douala Port Container Terminal Modernization Project*. Cameroon: Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting Co., p. 24.

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¹⁰ Raphael A A., Jonathan D. *op.cit* p.4.

¹¹ Some scholars who argued that middlemen extract excessive profits include Karl Marx, Adam Smith, and John Maynard Keynes. These scholars emphasized that middlemen were able to exploit their position in the supply chain to charge higher prices and extract more

extract excessive profits leaving producers with minimal returns and the presence of multiple intermediaries can lead to a lack of transparency and traceability, making it challenging to ensure fair trade.¹ In recent years, there has been a growing trend towards direct trade, with producers seeking to by-pass middlemen and engage directly with consumers. This shift has been facilitated by the rise of e-commerce platforms and social media, allowing producers to market their products and reach a wider audience directly.²

The idea of middlemen in the light of this research is discussed from double stands as middlemen can act on their own personal contract as independent parties outside the influence of any party to the contract, or middlemen acting as agents on behalf of the principal linking him to the buyer or third parties. The law of agency occupies an important place in society especially in the sphere of commerce. It enables business to be conducted effectively and smoothly. With globalisation of business activities, business would have been almost impossible if there were no law of agency which makes it possible for one man to act on behalf of another.³

The middleman may perform many different types of tasks within the commercial relationship. Tasks such as carrying inventory, selling, physical distribution, after-sale service and extending credit to customers.⁴ These tasks, and the intermediary's involvement, can differ depending upon the situation. It is important to note that the specific character of an intermediary lies in the fact that its role is not necessary for the business relationship as a whole. The seller and the buyer can always choose to have direct dealings with each other, taking over some or all of the tasks of the intermediary.⁵

It is thus possible that the middlemen do not perform any specific tasks while still existing within the business relationship⁶. This means that the role of the middleman can be more or less central for the business relationship. Especially in cases where the seller and the buyer do not have direct contacts with each other the intermediary is in a position to be able to influence the character of the business relationship. The other two parties are dependent upon the middleman's performance. But also, in cases where the seller and the buyer have direct contacts with each other, the middleman can impact the business relationship as a whole. Thus, the middleman plays an important role in the business relationship.⁷ Not only because of specific tasks performed, but also because of the positive or negative impact on the business relationship as a whole. The role of the intermediary can, then, be crucial for the existence of the business relationship.⁸

Over the past thirty years, middlemen like forwarding agents have built intricate financial and retail empires capable of moving goods across the country and around the world transforming the economy and our lives⁹. Because of middlemen, many people today, enjoy an unprecedented degree of choice and convenience. But the rise of the middleman economy comes at a steep price.¹⁰

2. Challenges Faced by Forwarding Agents in Cameroon

Forwarding agents in Cameroon face significant challenges primarily related to complex customs clearance procedures, widespread corruption, poor infrastructure, inconsistent regulatory environments, and a lack of

profits for themselves, often at the expense of producers and consumers. They believed that middlemen played a significant role in exacerbating inequalities and inefficiencies in the economy.

¹ Rabiya H., Edward K., (2016). Analysis of transport logistics challenges affecting freight forwarding operations in Malawi. *African Journal of Business Management*, 10(24), pp. 607-614:612.

² *Ibid* at p.5.

³ Akkermans H., (1995). Developing a logistics strategy through participative business Modelling. *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, 15(11), pp. 110-112:110.

⁴ Stern, L. W. & El-Ansary, A. I., (1992). *Marketing Channels*, 4th ed., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Lorenzo P., (2020). *Optimization problems for freight forwarding companies*. Università degli studi di Bergamo, p. 15.

⁷ Cunningham, M. T. & Turnbull, P. W., (1982). Inter-organizational Personal Contact Patterns, in Håkansson, H. (ed.), *International Marketing and Purchasing of Industrial Goods: An Interaction Approach*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, p. 310.

⁸ Desouza K., Chattaraj A. and Kraft G., (2003). Supply Chain perspectives to knowledge management: research propositions. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 7(3), pp. 129-138:135.

⁹ Mohamed M., Sudha P., Pradeep V., (2023). An Investigation of the Challenges That Freight Forwarders Face When Working with Import and Export. *Central Asian Journal of Theoretical and Applied Sciences*, 4(10), pp. 2660-5317. Also available at <https://cajotas.centralasianstudies.org> (Accessed on 20/2/2025)

¹⁰ Judge K., (2022). Direct: The Rise of the Middleman Economy and the Revolution Underway. Faculty Books, 340. <https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/books/340> (Accessed on 18/11/2024)

transparency, often leading to delays, high costs, and difficulties in navigating the import/export process effectively.¹

1) **Bureaucratic Hurdles**

Lengthy and complicated customs clearance processes with multiple documentation requirements, causing delays and frustration for both agents and clients. Bureaucracy significantly slows logistics processes in Cameroon, particularly through complicated customs procedures that delay goods clearance. This results in increased costs and time lags, with customs clearance often described as time-consuming and confusing due to multiple documentation requirements and excessive red tape. The bureaucratic environment is also linked to corruption, which further exacerbates delays and costs.

2) **Corruption and Lack of Transparency**

Prevalence of bribery at various stages of customs clearance, adding additional costs and uncertainty to shipments. Lack of transparency constitutes one of the most significant challenges of the system; Corruption continues to be an obstacle to doing business in Cameroon, and its manifested within the system even at border-point; “although the Cameroon government has tried to speed customs clearance, customs fraud is still a major problem and protracted negotiations with customs officers over the value of imported goods are common”(FTB: Cameroon, 33). An average of three days is needed to clear goods through customs.²

3) **Poor Infrastructure**

Inadequate transportation networks, including roads and ports, leading to logistical difficulties and potential damage to goods. Cameroon has several ports, Douala being the major one, followed by the smaller ports of Limbe, Kribi, and Garoua. Doula port has served Central Africa since the 19th century, and although it handles 95 percent of Cameroon’s port cargo volume, is also known for its inefficiency. In an effort to improve the efficiency indicators, ports were granted administration autonomy in 2000. Transport efficiency however, relies on the state of the infrastructure.³

Similarly to Nigeria, infrastructure constitutes Cameroon’s constraint, at a score of 2. Based on the data obtained by both LPI and GETR 2008, this score reflects particularly the poor stage of transport infrastructure, and the lack of availability of quality transport services. As for the use of telecommunications and information technology, Cameroon appears to be making good use of it, which is also reflected in the ability they have to track and trace.⁴

4) **Regulatory Inconsistency**

Frequent changes in customs regulations and interpretations, making compliance challenging for forwarding agents. Freight forwarders struggle with inconsistent and complex regulations that vary and change unpredictably, creating barriers to efficient trade facilitation. This inconsistency complicates compliance and planning, increasing operational risks and costs for freight forwarders. The lack of a stable regulatory framework undermines smooth customs and logistics operations.⁵

5) **Lack of Transparency**

Difficulty in accessing clear information regarding customs procedures and fees, leading to potential delays and disputes. Transparency issues are prevalent in customs and clearance processes, with procedures neither well documented nor openly communicated. This opacity fosters corruption and bribery, increasing the cost and duration of freight forwarding activities. Importers and agents often face unclear rules and informal practices that hinder efficient cargo handling.⁶

6) **Limited Digitalization**

Lack of robust online systems for customs clearance, requiring manual processes and increasing the risk of errors. Digital transformation in Cameroon’s freight forwarding sector is limited. Despite global trends, freight

¹ Interviews conducted on the 18/4/2025 with Mr Paul Anaías owner of REGAL Shipping SARL.

² *Ibid.*

³ Interviews conducted on the 18/4/2025 with Mr Jean Etienne, Managing Partner of Aqua Cargo and Freight Ltd, Bonaberi Douala.

⁴ Cameroon and Chad Strengthen trade route security on Douala-N’Djamena Corridor <https://www.ajot.com/news/cameroon-and-chad-strengthen-trade-route-security-on-douala-ndjamena-corridor> (Accessed on 20/4/2025)

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Freight Forwarding Services in Cameroon <https://giantlogisticsolutions.com/2024/02/14/freight-forwarding-services-in-cameroon/> (Accessed on 18/4/2025)

forwarding remains heavily reliant on physical processes¹, and the adoption of digital platforms is slow and fragmented.² Legacy IT systems, lack of digital skills, and insufficient integration with partners impede efficiency gains and innovation. This limits the ability to streamline operations and improve transparency.³

7) Fluctuating Exchange Rates

Currency fluctuations can significantly impact costs and profitability for forwarding agents. Exchange rate volatility in Cameroon, influenced by regional and global economic conditions, increases costs and financial risks for freight forwarders. Since many transactions, including payments for international shipping and customs duties, are denominated in foreign currencies, fluctuating rates can unpredictably raise operational expenses and reduce profit margins, complicating pricing and budgeting.⁴

8) Political Instability

Occasional political unrest in certain regions can disrupt supply chains and create security concerns. Political instability in Cameroon, including regional conflicts and governance issues, disrupts supply chains and logistics operations. Instability can lead to insecurity on transport routes, delays at borders, and interruptions in port activities, thereby increasing risks and costs for freight forwarders. It also deters investment in infrastructure and technology needed to modernize the sector.⁵

9) Skilled Labor Shortage

Difficulty in finding qualified personnel with expertise in international trade and logistics. The freight forwarding sector in Cameroon suffers from a shortage of skilled professionals familiar with modern logistics, customs regulations, and digital tools. This limits operational efficiency and the ability to adopt new technologies, which are essential to compete effectively and meet growing demand in a complex trade environment.

10) Competition from Informal Sector

Unregulated brokers and intermediaries can undercut prices and create unfair competition. The informal logistics and freight forwarding sector in Cameroon presents stiff competition by offering lower-cost but often less reliable services. This undermines formal freight forwarders who must comply with regulations and bear higher operational costs, creating unfair competition and market distortions.

11) Lack of Funds for Business Development

Limited access to capital restricts freight forwarding companies from investing in infrastructure, technology, and workforce development.⁶ Without adequate funding, firms struggle to modernize operations, improve service quality, and expand, constraining growth potential in a rapidly evolving market.⁷

Generally, financial institutions in Cameroon involved in the disbursement of funds to business development and growth strictly rely on the enforcement of due diligence in order to minimize the risk of exposure to bad loans and credit. In this context, they conduct due diligence on their customers prior to the granting of credit for development.⁸ The state of most of the firms does not enhance their suitability and qualification for the granting

¹ Cameroon Digital Freight Forwarding Market (2025-2031) <https://www.6wresearch.com/industry-report/cameroon-digital-freight-forwarding-market> (Accessed on 18/4/2025)

² State of Digitization in Freight Forwarding 2025 — Magaya Corporation. <https://info.magaya.com/freight-digitization-report> (Accessed on 18/4/2025)

³ Freight Forwarding Challenges in 2025 and Beyond <https://ifa-forwarding.net/blog/international-freight-forwarding/freight-forwarding-challenges-in-2024-and-beyond/> (Accessed on 18/4/2025)

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Cameroon Cargo Shipping Market (2025-2031) | Trends, Outlook & Forecast <https://www.6wresearch.com/industry-report/cameroon-cargo-shipping-market> (Accessed on 18/4/2025)

⁶ What to expect in 2025: 5 evolving dynamic trends for freight ... <https://www.maersk.com/es-mx/insights/integrated-logistics/2024/12/20/what-to-expect-in-2025-evolving-dynamic-trends-for-freight-forwarding> (Accessed on 19/4/2025)

⁷ Quels secteurs vont booster la logistique en 2025 au Cameroun <https://logistiquemagazine.com/%F0%9F%93%88-quels-secteurs-vont-booster-la-logistique-en-2025-au-cameroun/> (Accessed on 19/4/2025).

⁸ Arnold, J., Mathenge, J., Dihel, N., Strychacz, N., (2011). The Role of Clearing and Forwarding Agents in Reforming the EAC Logistics Sector. *African Trade Policy Notes*, (17). World Bank, Washington D.C. available at www.worldbank.org (Accessed on 18/2/2024).

of funds for development by banks. This situation becomes even dire given the scarcity of funds in the financial sector. The implication is that forwarding firms would continue to grow organically albeit slowly given the competitiveness in the industry and other constraints in the Cameroon economy.¹

3. Conclusion

Freight forwarding is an essential component of international trade, but it comes with its own set of challenges. From navigating complex regulations and managing costs to handling delays and disruptions, freight forwarders must be prepared for a range of issues that can affect shipments. By embracing technology, improving communication with partners, investing in compliance and security, and planning for contingencies, businesses can overcome these challenges and ensure smoother, more efficient shipments². With the right strategies in place, freight forwarders can enhance their operations, reduce risks, and maintain a competitive edge in the fast-paced world of global logistics.

4. Recommendations

Recommendations would be made to different categories of stakeholders like the government, freight forwarding agents, international community and parties to international trade or transactions

To the Government of Cameroon, there is the need for the Government to signed, ratified and adopts the FIATA model Rules 2019. Currently, Cameroon's freight forwarding sector operates under a patchwork of national laws and regulations that may lack clarity or uniformity. The FIATA Model Rules offer comprehensive, clear provisions on key issues such as liability, documentation, and dispute resolution. This clarity would reduce disputes, litigation costs, and delays in cargo handling, thus improving the business environment.

To Freight Forwarding Agents, they must rigorously adhere to Cameroon's legal requirements, including submission of accurate shipping documents and compliance with hazardous goods regulations.

To International Community, adopts the UNIDROIT Draft Convention on Contract of Agency for Forwarding Agents. This is because these categories of persons operate under uncertainty.

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