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Botswana may lift the remaining vegetable import restrictions on SA in April

- While other countries have taken a more confrontational tone in trade policy, South Africa must continue strengthening relations and widening export opportunities for all the export-reliant sectors of the economy. Agriculture is one such sector that largely depends on exports and has benefitted immensely from the trade opportunities that South African authorities have successfully negotiated over the recent decades. South Africa must deploy an accelerated effort to maintain relationships and strengthen friendships. One region that requires some attention is the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), a free-trade customs union that includes Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Eswatini.
- From 2021, Botswana banned imports of vegetables from South Africa, which continued until partial removal by President Duma Boko in December 2024. This month (April 2025) the government of Botswana plans to remove the remaining import restrictions on beetroot, butternut, cabbage, carrot, garlic, ginger, green melons, herbs, lettuce, onions, potatoes, sweet pepper, tomato, and watermelons from South Africa altogether. This is a welcome development for South African fresh produce and retailers. Notably, the easing of vegetable imports will mainly benefit consumers in Botswana.
- As Botswana removes all the restrictions on vegetable imports from South Africa this month, focus will shift to Namibia. In the case of Namibia, the restrictions on vegetable imports from South Africa started around the same time as those in Botswana. Each country's rationale for banning vegetable imports was that they were building their domestic industries, and that this required cushioning from imports. These bans on imports of agricultural products added uncertainty and have weighed on South African businesses. Moreover, they have fueled a sentiment in some quarters that SACU needs a review, especially in the context of South Africa sharing some financial resources with this region. However, we caution against an unfriendly approach in the SACU region.
- While South Africa's agriculture has experienced some challenges recently, the country continues to benefit from the free trade area. For example, Trade Map data show that the SACU region accounted for about 19% of South Africa's agricultural exports of US\$13,7 billion in 2024. This equals the same value as South Africa's agricultural exports to the EU. The only difference between the EU and SACU is the products in the export basket. The EU imports more fruits and wines, while the SACU basket mainly imports staple grains, vegetables, and beverages.

- South Africa imports under a billion dollars of products from SACU, averaging US\$816 million over the past five years. This is about an 11% share of South Africa's agricultural imports, on average, in the past five years. The imports are mainly live animals (cattle) and sugar. The major exports to South Africa in SACU are Eswatini and Namibia. The disparity in trade is partly because of the lack of production volume from some of the SACU countries that are not as naturally endowed as South Africa. That said, we believe that restrictive policies are not the best way for SACU countries to lift production. Instead, a more collaborative approach that seeks to leverage South Africa's technology and scientific know-how could be more helpful.
- Thus, considering this enormous export market for South Africa's agriculture and an essential one for SACU nations, the logical steps should be to preserve trade and reduce the frequent occurrence of export bans targeted at South Africa. The policy ambitions of the SACU members to increase their domestic production could focus on leveraging scientific advancements and investments from South Africa, which has mature agriculture and food, fibre, and beverage value chains. Ideally, collaboration should be the path forward rather than confrontations.
- As Botswana completely lifts its remaining restrictions on vegetable imports from South Africa, the focus and tone of engagement on both countries should move to collaboration. Botswana must outline the areas of agriculture in which they intend to grow and, thereafter, leverage South African technology and skill as they embark on that journey. This could be communicated through the Ministries of Agriculture, requesting private sector involvement. After all, South Africa is better off when its neighbours are also increasing their food production, and the long-term approach would then be to promote SACU exports to other regions of the world. Namibia must also move towards this collaborative approach and remove the restrictions on vegetable imports from South Africa. Its focus, too, must be on leveraging the technology and skills in South Africa to strengthen regional agriculture.