

A young boy with dark skin and short hair is looking directly at the camera. He is wearing a red, ribbed, long-sleeved shirt. On his head, he carries a large, heavy bundle of dry sticks and branches, secured with a piece of light-colored cloth. His hands are visible, holding onto the bundle. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

**Unchecked
Exploitation:
The Legacy Africa
Can't Seem to
Escape**

Continental Africa continues to pay the price for centuries of exploitation and global neglect.



Over decades, and even centuries, wealthy nations have accumulated vast fortunes through the exploitation of Africa's people, labour, and resources.

Only recently have corporations, institutions, and wealthy families begun to acknowledge their roles in the transatlantic slave trade.

How many decades will it take for today's corporations and wealthy families to acknowledge their exploitation of the continent's non-human species?

The industrial-scale extraction of wild species to serve wealthy consumers and luxury industries is not a thing of the past.

It continues today, hidden behind opaque supply chains that obscure the true ecological costs of production.



Walter Rodney argued in his 1972 book, **How Europe Underdeveloped Africa**, global inequality is not primarily the result of poor countries failing to develop, but rather of historical and ongoing structures that systematically transfer wealth and power from the Global South to the Global North.

That this is still the case was again shown and expanded on by Jason Hickel in his 2017 book *The Divide*.

One of the strategies utilised to achieve this is suppressing all efforts by countries in Africa to move up the value chain and hence keeping them trapped in simply supplying the raw materials, including in the trade of wild species.

Another strategy is maintaining supply chain opacity, as opaque supply chains help preserve economic arrangements that benefit wealthier countries and multinational firms.

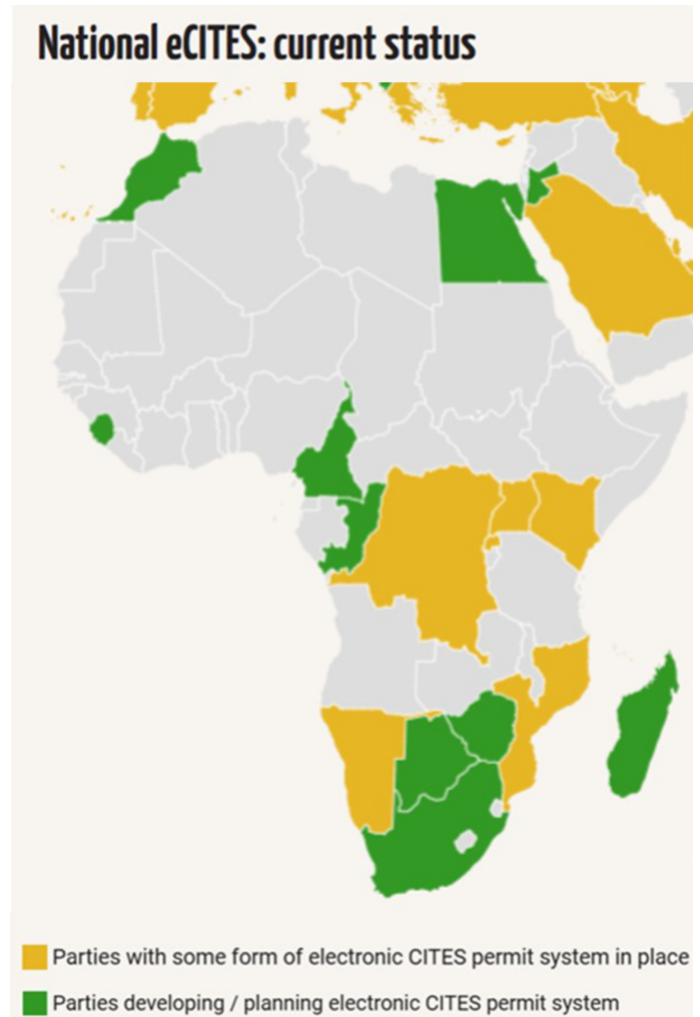
The scale of global indifference to supply-chain transparency is starkly illustrated by the **failure to modernise Africa's CITES trade systems**.

African countries continue to be neglected and left behind.

Of Africa's 54 countries:

- Only six have implemented digital CITES permitting systems.
- **Nine are in development or planning stages**, although some, such as South Africa, have remained there for more than six years.
- **Thirty-nine countries have yet to begin the transition** and remain reliant on a permit system designed over half a century ago.

This is an unacceptable failure for a global system facilitating the international trade in endangered and exotic wild species.



Africa contains many of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems and is a major exporter of CITES-listed wildlife and plant species, yet the continent has received little support to modernise the systems needed to monitor and manage that trade.

The result is predictable: while wealthy countries and industries benefit from wildlife-derived products and raw materials, many of the countries supplying them are left operating with antiquated systems that make transparency, accountability, and traceability impossible to achieve.



In September 2023, CITES Secretary-General Ivonne Higuero acknowledged the weaknesses of the paper-based permit system, **warning that it is vulnerable to fraud, forgery, theft, false declarations, and the reuse of permits.**

This is not a new concern. A 2015 study of 90,204 CITES trade records covering 2,750 species exported from 50 African countries found that **only 7.3% of records were free from discrepancies.**

At any point since this research was published the CITES trade permit system could have been modernised but it hasn't been.

In 2022, with CITES Decision 19.150f, *"Parties are invited to call upon donor countries and agencies to provide financial support towards the implementation of electronic CITES permit management systems in developing countries"* donor countries agreed to be called upon to fund eCITES.

The continued reliance on a permit system designed in the 1970s is not merely a technical failure. It is a failure of accountability. **Decades after the risks were identified and years after the solution was agreed,** many of the world's poorest countries are still being asked to regulate globally significant wildlife trade using paper documents in a digital age.

Like many low- and middle-income countries, **39 countries in continental Africa use the ASYCUDA Customs system.**



AFRICA

- | | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------|
| Angola | Eritrea | Mozambique |
| Benin | Eswatini | Namibia |
| Burkina Faso | Gabon | Niger (the) |
| Burundi | Gambia (the) | Rwanda |
| Cabo Verde | Guinea | Saint Helena |
| Central African Republic (the) | Guinea-Bissau | Sao Tome and Principe |
| Chad | Lesotho | Seychelles |
| Comoros (the) | Liberia | Sierra Leone |
| Congo (the) | Libya | Sudan (the) |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Madagascar | Togo |
| Democratic Republic of the Congo (the) | Malawi | Uganda |
| Djibouti | Mali | Zambia |
| Equatorial Guinea | Mauritania | Zimbabwe |

As a result of this the CITES and UNCTAD joined forces to create the ASYCUDA eCITES system (eCITES.org) that was launched in 2019.



ASYCUDA eCITES

Of the 39 African countries already using the ASYCUDA customs platform, only five have implemented ASYCUDA eCITES.

The cost of closing this gap is surprisingly small. Implementing ASYCUDA eCITES, including three years of support, costs approximately US\$310,000 per country.

For the remaining 34 countries, the total cost would be just US\$10.54 million.

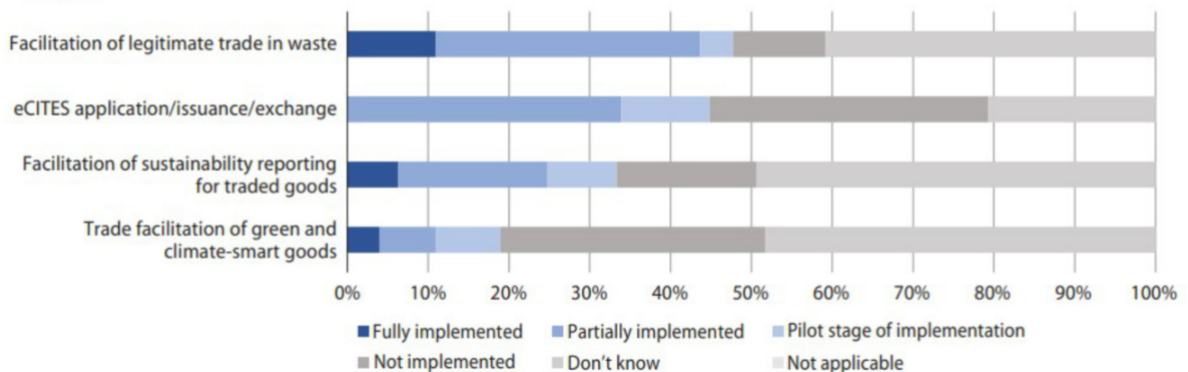
According to a World Bank analysis, international donors, both government and private, provided US\$2.16 billion to combat illegal wildlife trade in Africa between 2010 and 2023.

If donors can find US\$2.16 billion to address illegal wildlife trade, why can they not find US\$10.54 million—**less than 0.5% of that amount**—to modernise the legal trade system that is supposed to provide transparency, accountability, and traceability?

The legal and illegal wildlife trades are so intertwined that separating them is difficult. Yet billions are spent addressing one side of the problem while the comparatively modest investment needed to modernise oversight of the other remains neglected.



State of implementation of 'green trade facilitation' measures globally



Source: The UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation, 2025. Available at untfsurvey.org.

2025 UN Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation Global Report

The urgency of modernising wildlife trade monitoring was reinforced once again in a 2025 UN report.

Drawing on the sixth United Nations global survey of digital trade facilitation, including trade regulated under CITES, the report makes a striking point: **despite more than two decades of discussion, NO country has yet fully implemented eCITES.**

The reason is simple. A truly effective eCITES system requires global implementation, enabling the seamless exchange of electronic permit information. Until that happens, gaps in transparency, traceability, and verification will persist.

This should serve as a wake-up call. The world is still relying on a fragmented system that falls short of its own ambitions. Completing the global rollout of eCITES is no longer a technical aspiration—it is a necessity.

Achieving it will require meaningful financial support from high-income donor countries. If businesses, industries and governments are serious about combating wildlife crime, ensuring legal trade, and improving supply-chain transparency, they must invest in the digital infrastructure needed to make those goals possible.



When US\$10.54 Million could help slow biodiversity loss over a combined 34 countries of continental Africa, why is the region being neglected again?

At the time of writing, **over 450 homes for sale in Manhattan alone have a price tag of over US\$10 million**. Add Hong Kong, London, Paris, Singapore, Monaco, Geneva, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sydney, and that number rises dramatically. In **2025, a single 1954 vintage racing car sold for US\$52.5 million**—enough to fund the completion of the global roll out of eCITES.

So, why does the funding for eCITES remain stubbornly out of reach?

More than a century ago, Oscar Wilde observed that some people ***"know the price of everything and the value of nothing"***. The persistence of a 1970s paper-based wildlife trade system in some of the world's poorest countries suggests that his words remain uncomfortably relevant.

The US\$10.54 million required is insignificant by global financial standards. Yet its impact could be transformative. All it would take is one donor - business, government, foundation or philanthropist - willing to recognise that the value of transparency, and good governance extends far beyond this price tag.

The question is not whether the world can afford US\$10.54 million. The question is whether it values biodiversity enough to spend it.



Donations to tackle the illegal wildlife trade are essentially palliative work. While it is needed, it treats the symptoms leaving many of the underlying structural weaknesses untouched.

Meanwhile, the global economy remains deeply dependent on Africa. The continent has been described as an *"indispensable engine"* of the world economy and holds around 30% of the world's known mineral reserves, alongside vast biological resources that continue to supply global markets.

Against this backdrop, the failure to invest just US\$10.54 million to modernise wildlife trade permitting across much of the continent is difficult to justify. This is a sum smaller than the cost of a single luxury apartment in many global cities, yet it could significantly improve transparency, traceability, and accountability across 34 countries.

If the wealthiest nations cannot find US\$10.54 million to strengthen oversight of the natural resources and wildlife that help sustain their economies, **what does this say about the plan to continue exploiting the African continent, its people, its wild species and its ecosystems?**

For a continent whose resources continue to fuel global prosperity, the refusal to make such a modest investment risks sending a clear message - **Africa's resources are considered indispensable, but investing in the systems that protect them is optional.**