



**INDUSTRY STUDY**  
**INTERNATIONAL TRENDS:**  
**FOOD PROCESSING**  
**DECEMBER 2024**

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This study This study aims to analyse global trends in the food processing market and evaluate South Africa's position in this competitive landscape.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The food processing industry is a vital component of South Africa's agro-processing sector, contributing significantly to both the economy and employment. By transforming raw agricultural products into market-ready goods, it adds value and improves the marketability of these goods. Global trade in processed food has undergone notable changes, driven by technological advancements, shifting consumer demands, and evolving international trade dynamics. In 2023, the five largest exporters of processed food – Germany, the Netherlands, the United States (US), France, and China – accounted for nearly 29% of global exports, with Germany leading at 6.8%. Cereals were the top export, making up 14% of the market, followed by meat, beverages, and fruit and nuts.

South Africa, however, remains a minor player in this global market. In 2023, the country's processed food exports were valued at just over US\$5 million, representing only 0.5% of the global share. Despite this, South Africa recorded a trade surplus of R91 billion, while the manufacturing sector saw a deficit of R677 billion. Africa remains the largest market for South African food exports, accounting for 34% of total food exports, with much of this directed towards the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Southern African Customs Union (SACU) member states. Conversely, imports from Africa fell by 7%, reversing the 11% growth seen in 2022, while imports from the European Union (EU) made up 33% of South Africa's food imports.

This study aims to analyse global trends in the food processing market and evaluate South Africa's position in this competitive landscape. The focus will be on global import and export dynamics, the dominant players in the market, and South Africa's overall trade in processed food products. In addition, it explores Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) trends within the South African agro-processing sector.

## 2. TRENDS IN GLOBAL EXPORTS

Since 2012, global exports of processed food and agro-based products<sup>1</sup>, have steadily risen, reaching US\$1.12 billion in 2023, up from US\$787 million in 2012 (in current US dollars). In 2023, the top five exporting countries—Germany, the Netherlands, the US, France, and China – accounted for 29% of global food and agro-based product exports.

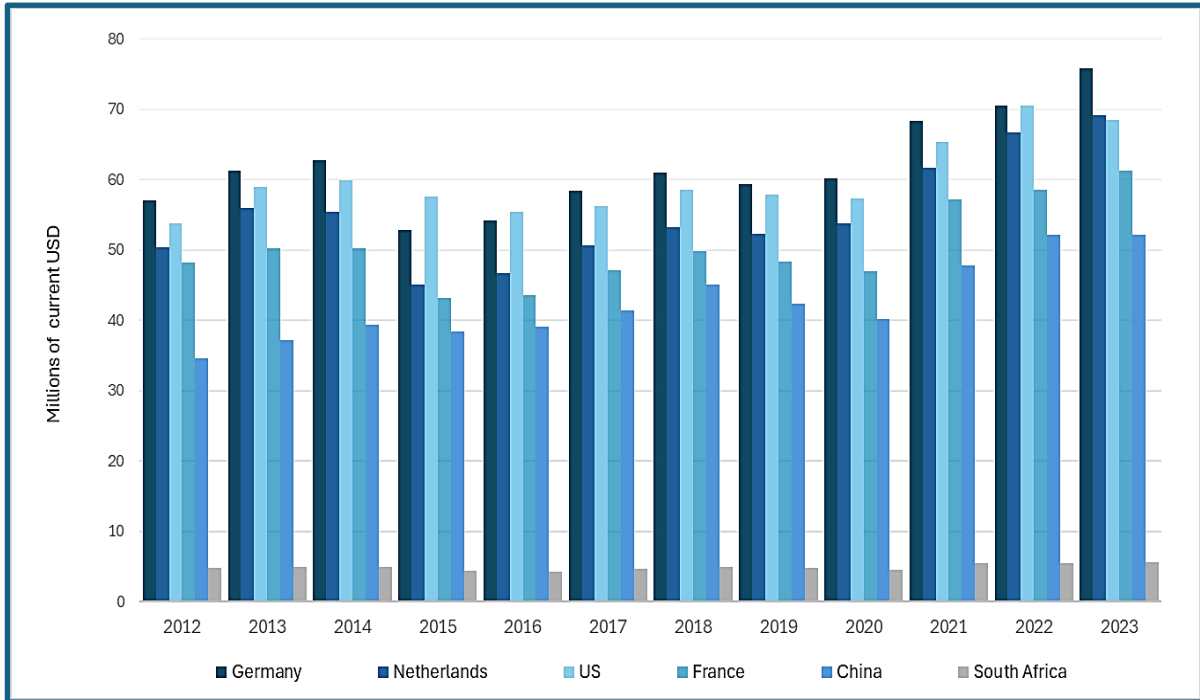
Germany and the US have led the global food and agro-based product export market since 2012, followed closely by the Netherlands. Germany's exports in 2023 totalled US\$75 million, representing 7% of the global food and agro-based product export share. The Netherlands and the US followed with US\$69 million and US\$68 million in exports, respectively, each holding a 6% share (Graph 1).

As per Graph 1, South Africa's exports of food and agro-based products have, however, historically been low, accounting for only 0.5% or US\$ 5.5million of global exports in 2023.

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<sup>1</sup> Agro-based products are derived from agricultural resources, encompassing minimally processed items like grains and fruits, as well as value-added products like flour, sugar, and textiles.

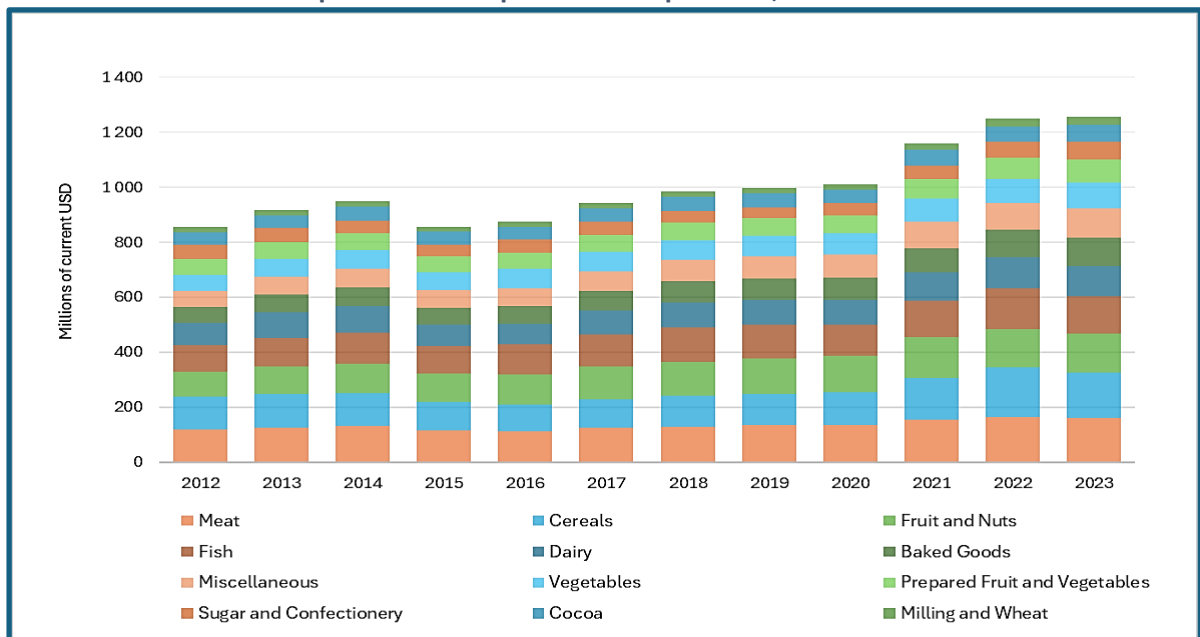
**Graph 1. Global processed food and agro-based product exports by country, 2012 – 2023**



Source: Calculated from ITC calculations based on UN Comtrade and ITC statistics.  
 Accessed at [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org) in November 2024.

Graph 2 highlights global exports by product, specifically food products. The top five categories are meat, cereals, fruit and nuts, fish, and dairy. Since 2012, exports of fruit and nuts and dairy have notably increased. In 2012, fruit and nut exports totalled US\$95 million (current US\$), reaching US\$141 million by 2022. Similarly, dairy exports rose from US\$82 million in 2012 to US\$114 million in 2022 (Graph 2). By 2023, cereals, meat, and fruit and nuts ranked as the top three exported food products globally. Meat exports were valued at US\$160 million, representing 13% of total food exports, cereals at US\$164 million (13%), and fruit and nuts at US\$ 141 million (11%) (Graph 2).

**Graph 2. Global exports of food products, 2012 – 2023**

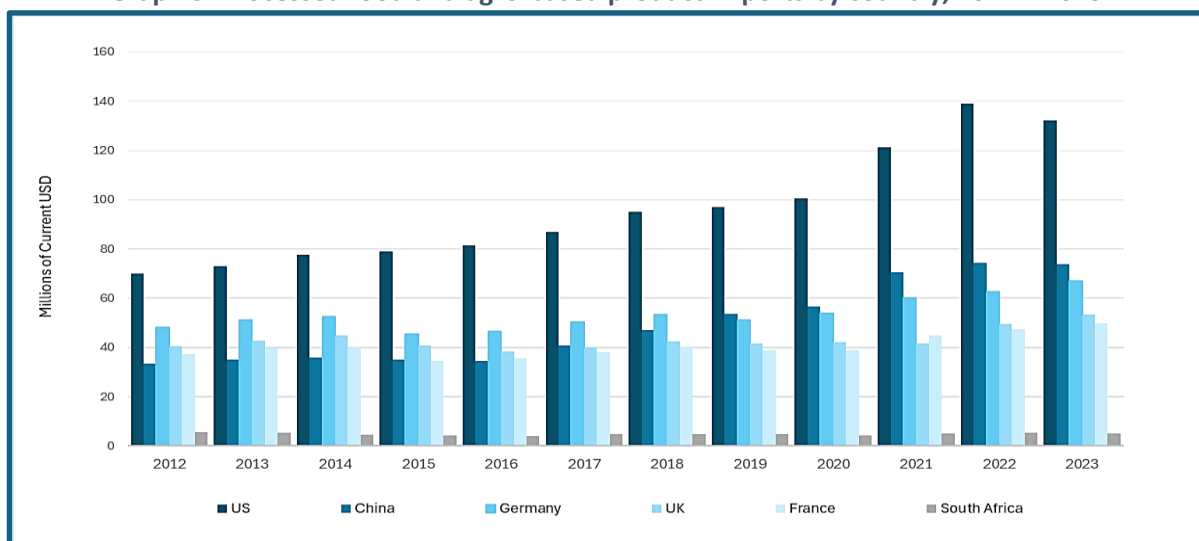


Source: Calculated from ITC calculations based on UN Comtrade and ITC statistics.  
 Accessed at [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org) in November 2024.

### 3. TRENDS IN GLOBAL IMPORTS

In 2023, global imports of processed food and agro-based products, reached US\$ 1.14 billion (current US dollars). The top importing countries – the US, China, Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), and France – accounted for over 33% of global imports. The US led with imports valued at US\$132 million, holding an 11.5% share of the global market, followed by China with a 6.5% share (US\$73 million). Germany’s imports amounted to US\$66 million, or 5.9%, while the UK and France accounted for 4.7% (US\$53 million) and 4.4% (US\$49 million), respectively (Graph 3). In contrast, South Africa has historically maintained a modest level of food and agro-based product imports compared to the top five importers, with its global share ranging between US\$4 million and US\$5 million since 2012, representing less than 1% of global food imports (Graph 3).

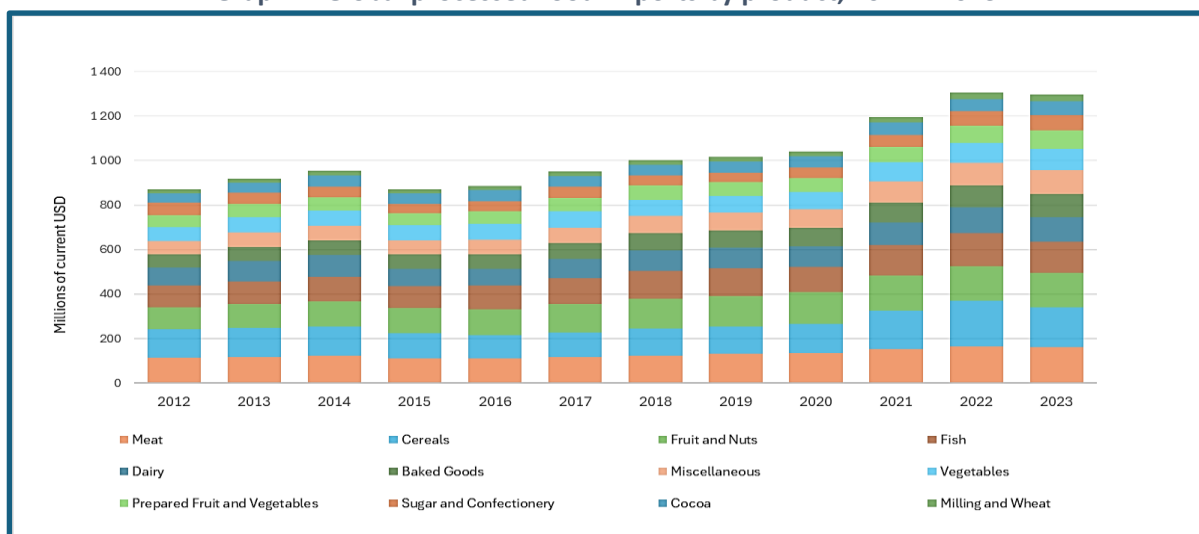
**Graph 3. Processed food and agro-based product imports by country, 2012 – 2023**



Source: Calculated from ITC calculations based on UN Comtrade and ITC statistics. Accessed at [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org) in November 2024.

Graph 4 illustrates global food product imports. In current US dollars, cereals, meat, fruit and nuts, fish, and dairy have consistently been the top imported food items since 2012. In 2023, cereals led with a 14% share of global food imports, valued at US\$177 million, followed by meat at US\$161 million (12%), fruit and nuts at US\$155 million (12%), and fish at US\$140 million (11%) (Graph 4).

**Graph 4. Global processed food imports by product, 2012 – 2023**

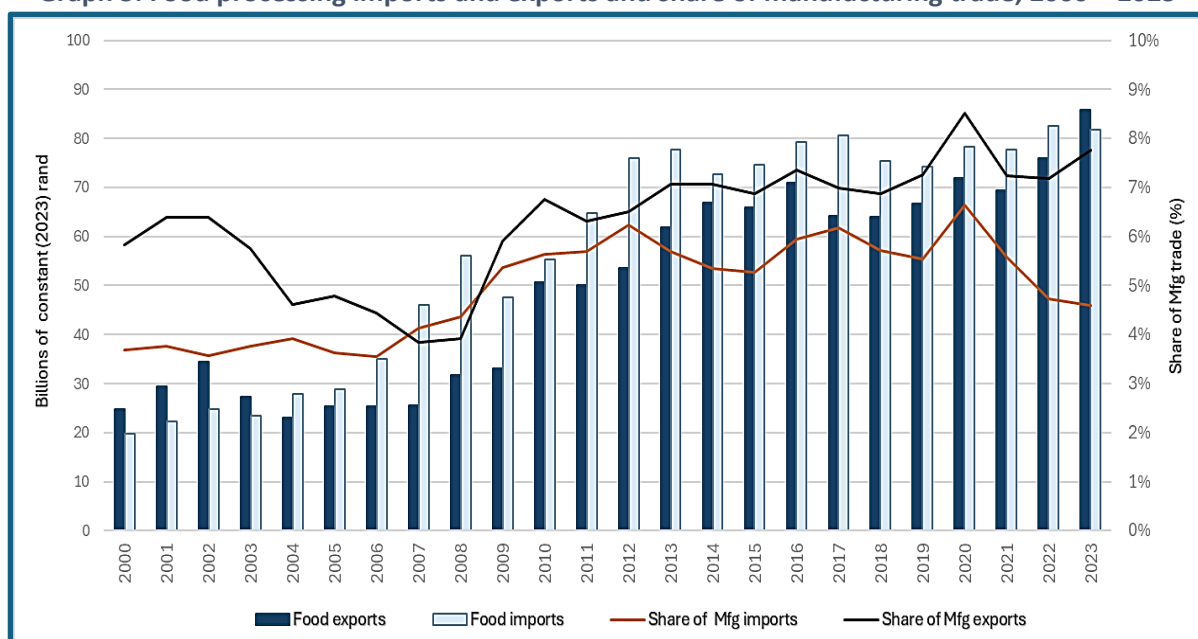


Source: Calculated from ITC calculations based on UN Comtrade and ITC statistics. Accessed at [www.trademap.org](http://www.trademap.org) in November 2024.

## 4. PROCESSED FOOD SHARE IN SOUTH AFRICAN TRADE

Graph 5 illustrates South Africa's food processing imports and exports and its share of total manufacturing imports and exports. Overall, the manufacturing sector had a trade deficit of R677 billion in constant (2023) Rand terms in 2023. South Africa's food exports as a share of total manufacturing exports have averaged 6% between 2000 and 2023, with a notable peak period during 2020 and 2023. In 2023, food exports accounted for 8% of South Africa's manufacturing exports, or in constant terms amounting to R85 billion (Graph 5). Since 2000, South Africa's imports of food products have, however, been somewhat lower than the exports, averaging 5% between 2000 and 2023. In 2023, food product imports accounted for 5% of manufacturing imports, valued at R81 billion (in constant Rand) (Graph 5).

**Graph 5. Food processing imports and exports and share of manufacturing trade, 2000 – 2023**



Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in November 2024. Deflated using CPI.

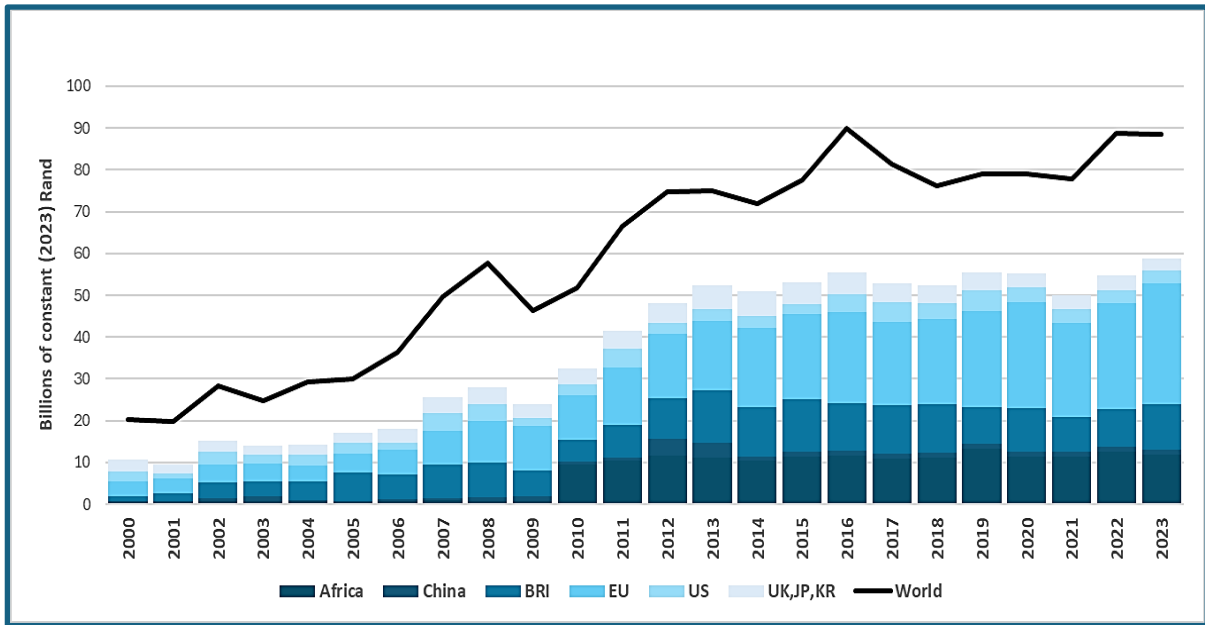
## 5. TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICAN IMPORTS

Graph 6 shows South African imports of food products (processed and unprocessed), with total imports valued at R88 billion in constant 2023 Rand. Key import trading partners for South Africa include the EU and China, both of which have seen significant growth in trade over the past two decades.

Imports from the EU surged from R3 billion in 2000 to approximately R29 billion in 2023, while imports from China increased from R327 million in 2000 to R1.27 billion in 2023. South Africa's overall import trends for 2023 reflect mixed patterns across its trading partners. Notably, imports from Africa declined by 7%, reversing the 11% year-on-year growth recorded in 2022. In contrast, imports from the EU and BRI countries<sup>2</sup> grew by 14% and 22%, respectively. The EU accounted for 33% of South Africa's food imports in 2023, reflecting its pivotal role in the country's trade dynamics.

<sup>2</sup> BRI (Brazil, Russia, India) refers to BRICS member states, excluding China and South Africa.

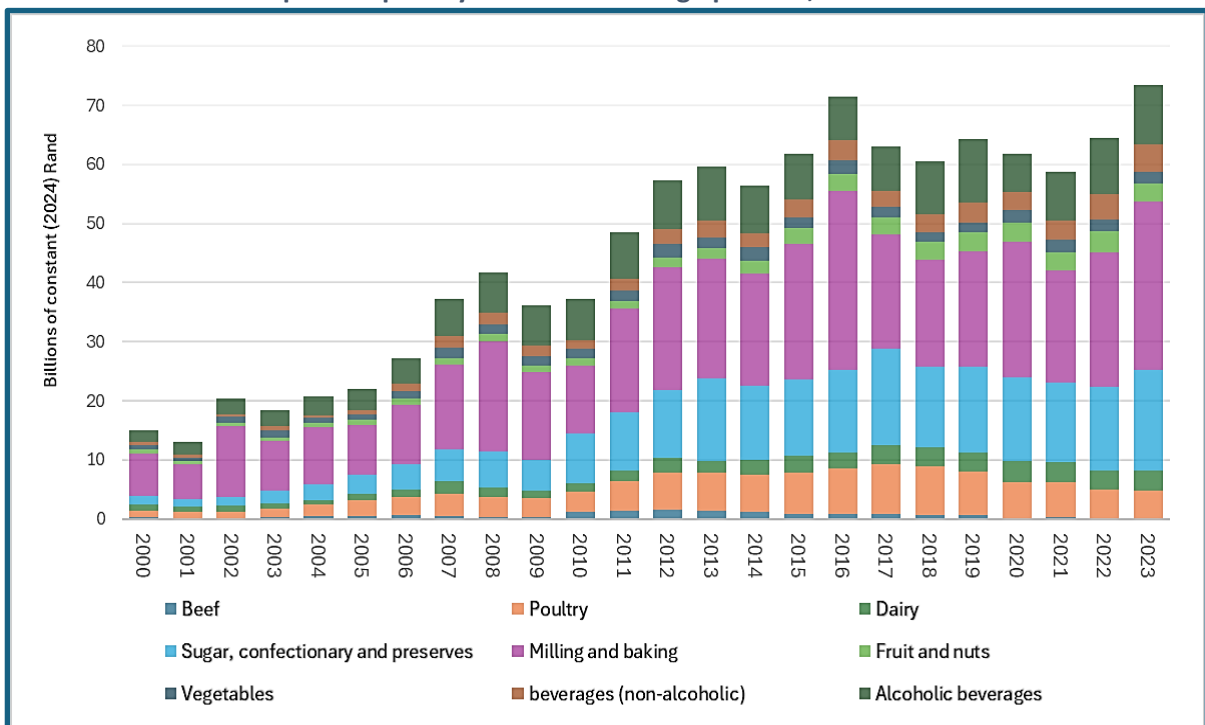
**Graph 6. Imports by major partner, 2000 – 2023**



Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service – RSA Trade HST 6-digit. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in August 2024. Deflated using CPI.

Graph 7 highlights South Africa’s food imports (processed and unprocessed) by product category from 2000 to 2023. In 2023, milling and baking products emerged as the largest imported product, representing 39% of imported food product imports, valued at R28 billion in constant (2023) Rand. Sugar, confectionary and preserves were the second highest imported products, accounting for 23% of total food product imports in 2023, valued at R17 billion in constant (2023) Rand (graph 7).

**Graph 7. Import by food and beverage product, 2000 – 2023**

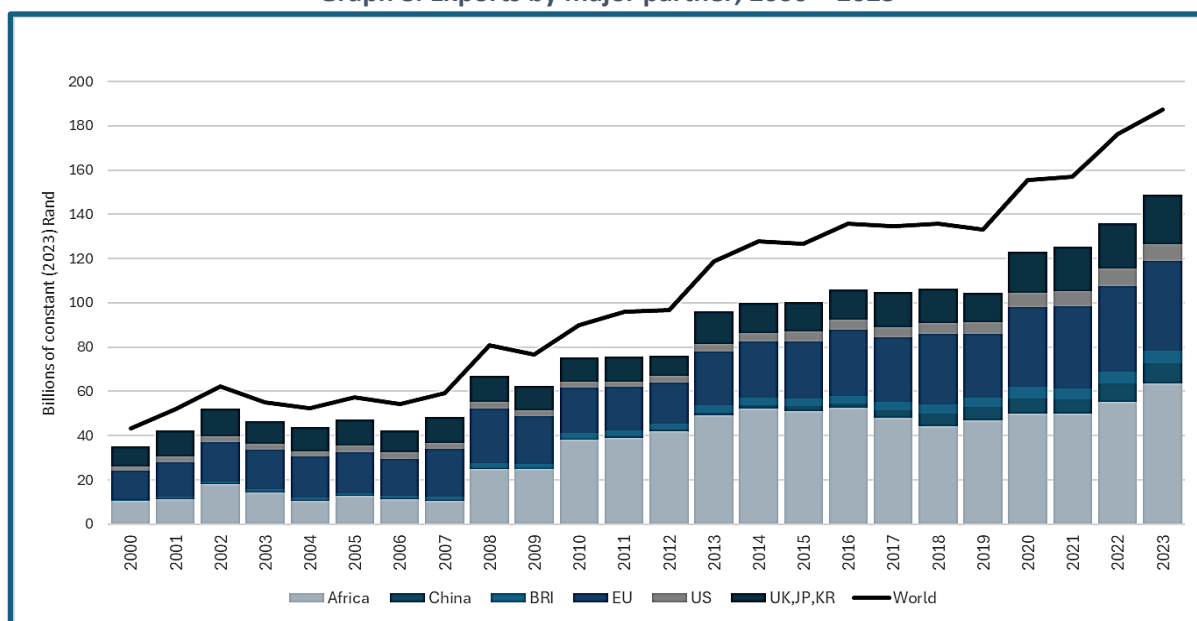


Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in October 2024. Deflated using CPI.

## 6. TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICAN EXPORTS

Graph 8 shows South African exports of food products (processed and unprocessed) by major trading partner, with total exports valued at R187 billion in constant 2023 Rand. South Africa's global exports rose significantly from R43 billion in 2000 to R187.3 billion in 2023, with Africa emerging as a key destination. Exports to African countries expanded from R10 billion in 2000 to R63 billion in 2023. In terms of food exports (both processed and unprocessed), China accounted for 5% in 2023, while the US represented 4%, and the BRI countries collectively comprised 3%. Exports to the UK, Japan, and South Korea made up 12%, and the EU accounted for 22%. Africa remains the largest market for South African food exports, representing 34% of total food exports in 2023. On a year-on-year basis, food exports to Africa grew from 11% in 2022 to 15% in 2023.

**Graph 8. Exports by major partner, 2000 – 2023**

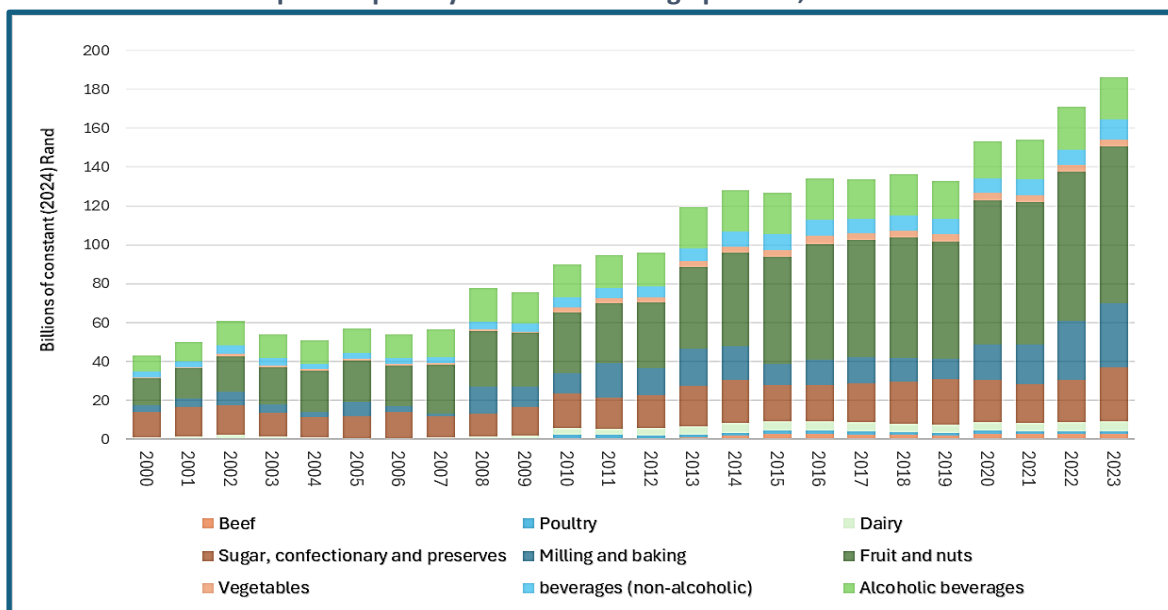


Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in October 2024. Deflated using CPI.

Graph 9 illustrates South Africa's food exports, both processed and unprocessed, by product category from 2000 to 2023. In 2023, the leading food exports were fruit and nuts, milling and baking products, and sugar and confectionery. Fruit and nuts dominated food exports, making up 43% of exports valued at R80 billion (in constant 2023 Rand). This was followed by milling and baking products at 18%, worth R33 billion, and sugar, confectionery, and preserves at 15%, valued at R27 billion (Graph 9). It should be noted that in recent years, citrus exports have experienced strong growth (Who Owns Whom, 2023). As noted by Chitonge (2021) fresh fruits, particularly citrus, rank among South Africa's top export products due to their high value-added nature, contributing significantly to the country's export in food products (including agro-based products).



**Graph 9. Export by food and beverage product, 2000 – 2023**

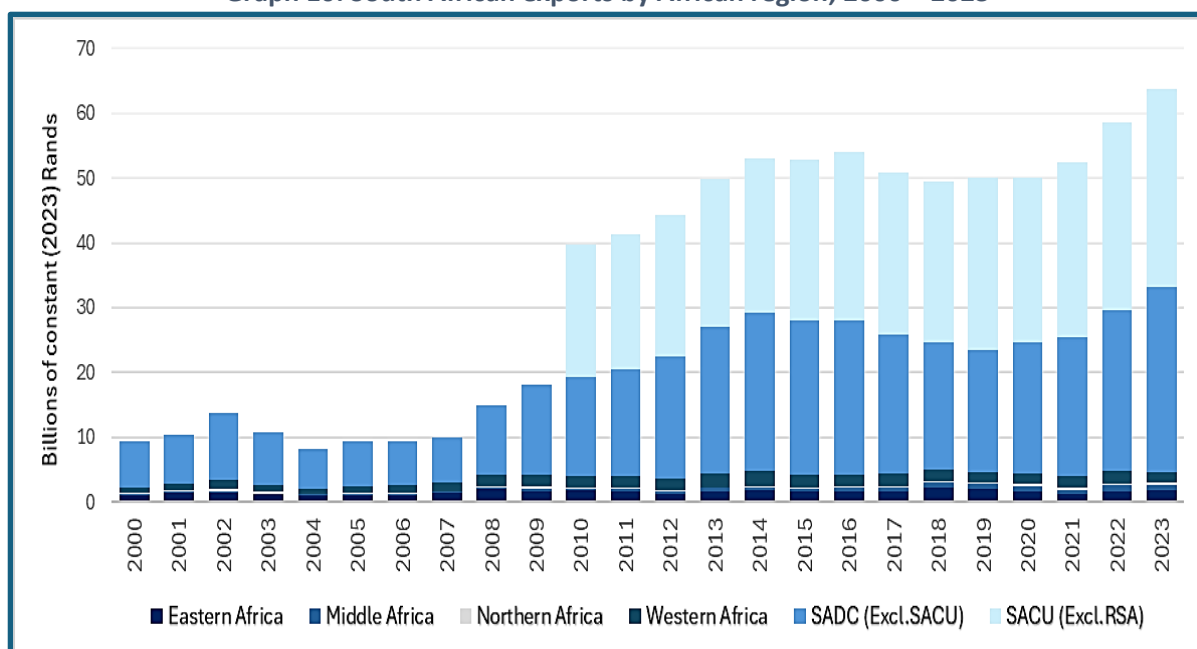


Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in October 2024. Deflated using CPI.

## 6.1. Trends in South African exports to Africa

In 2023, South African food product exports were predominantly directed towards Africa, capturing a substantial 34% of the total export share (Graph 8). At a regional level, exports to SADC and SACU countries constitute a significant portion. Specifically, in 2023, exports to SACU (excluding South Africa) represented 48% of Africa-bound exports, amounting to R30 billion. Exports to SADC (excluding SACU) followed at 45%, valued at R28 billion. The distribution to other African regions was as follows: Eastern Africa received 2.7%, Western Africa 2.6%, Middle Africa 1.4%, and Northern Africa 0.6% (Graph 10).

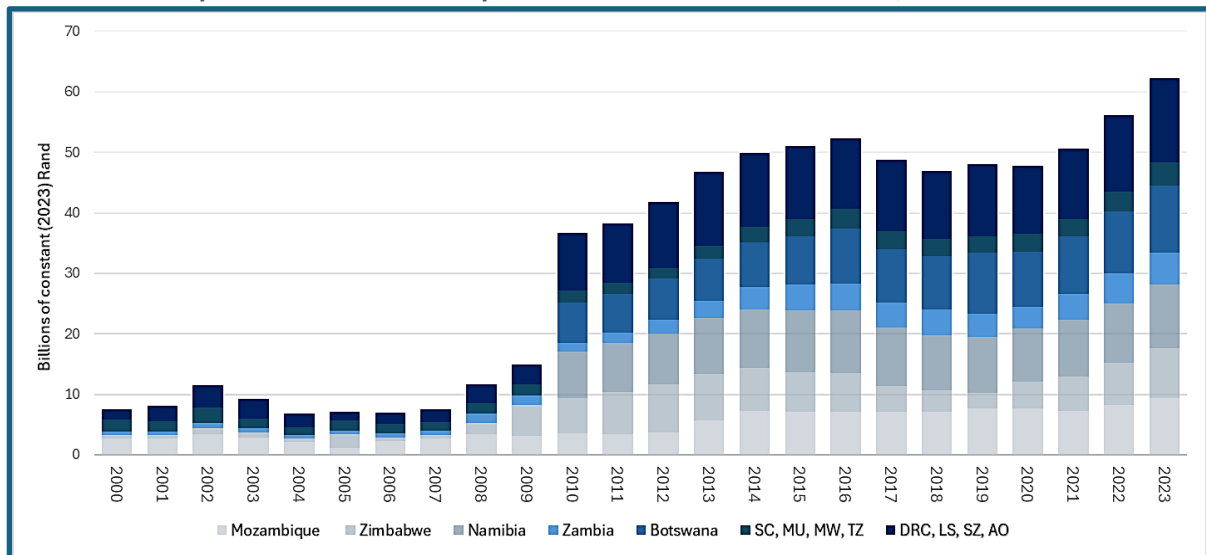
**Graph 10. South African exports by African region, 2000 – 2023**



Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in September 2024. Deflated using CPI

In terms of exports to SADC and SACU countries (Graph 11), Botswana accounted for approximately 18% of food product exports valued at R11 billion (in constant 2023 Rand), while Namibia accounted for 17% valued at R10 billion. Mozambique received 15% (R9 billion), while Zimbabwe and Zambia accounted for 13% (R8 billion) and 8% (R5 billion), respectively.

**Graph 11. South African exports to SADC and SACU countries, 2000 – 2023**



Source: Calculated from Quantec, EasyData. Series on RSA National Trade in International Trade Service. Accessed at [www.easydata.co.za](http://www.easydata.co.za) in September 2024. Deflated using CPI.

## 7. TRENDS IN FOREIGN INVESTMENT

This section examines FDI trends within South Africa’s food processing industry, focusing on investment patterns across the value chain and key foreign investors. Between 2003 and 2017, South Africa attracted 84% of FDI flows to Southern Africa. This can be attributed to the country’s advanced commercial agricultural sector, alongside favourable climatic and geological conditions that support a diverse range of agricultural crops (Husmann and Kubik, 2019; the dti, 2020).

The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) reported approving investments worth R1.4 billion in South Africa’s agriculture and agro-processing sector. Additionally, through the Agro-Industrial Fund, R236 million was allocated to support nine businesses, resulting in the creation of 433 jobs. A further R228 million was directed towards grape and raisin farmers in the Northern Cape affected by floods. In 2023/2024, the Agro-Processing Competitiveness Fund provided R45 million in concessionary funding, creating or preserving 71 jobs (IDC, 2024).

As climate change and loadshedding pose significant challenges to the agro-processing sector, investment in climate-resilient technologies and renewable energy solutions has increased. Tiger Brands has initiated a clean energy strategy, incorporating onsite solar power across 35 of its manufacturing facilities. RFG Foods has added seven new solar installations to its plants, while Clover invested R360 million in a solar energy system at its Queensburgh factory in KwaZulu-Natal, designed by Energy Partners. In addition, discussions between the national government and the South African Sugar Association are underway to introduce a biofuels subsidy, which could enable the sugar industry to convert over two-thirds of its annual production into renewable energy sources (Who Owns Whom, 2023). McCain Foods has invested in regenerative farming practices in South Africa through its Farm of the Future project. Officially launched in Lichtenburg, North West, in 2023, the initiative represents a R100 million investment aimed at advancing sustainable agricultural methods in the region (McCain Foods, 2023).

Table 1 presents FDI projects in the food processing/agro-processing industry in South Africa, based on the [TIPS FDI Tracker](#). According to the FDI Tracker, Lactalis invested R140 million in a new evaporator dryer powder plant at its Bonnievale cheese manufacturing facility in the Western Cape. This new plant is designed to efficiently produce powdered milk that is easy to transport and has a long shelf life. The evaporator is expected to increase production capacity by 35%, enabling the production of 1250 tons of milk annually.

Nestlé South Africa established a new manufacturing plant in Gauteng to localise the production of Nescafé Gold and Nescafé Ricoffy 3-in-1 coffee mixes, which were previously imported. About 46% of the ingredients are now sourced locally. This R79 million investment, allocated to machinery, equipment, employee training, and production trials, has created 27 permanent jobs.

South African Breweries (SAB) announced a R5.8 billion investment aimed at supporting growth and cost initiatives. This includes a R555 million expansion of the Ibhayi Brewery and a R825 million expansion of the Prospecton Brewery in Durban. These investments are part of SAB's R4.5 billion commitment made at the 2022 South African Investment Conference.

AB InBev launched a renewable energy initiative in 2020, with completion targeted for 2025. This initiative includes installing solar power facilities at major breweries across South Africa. AB InBev also signed a Power Purchase Agreement with the South African firm SOLA Group, which will build and fund the solar facilities. Over the next 20 years, AB InBev is expected to commit an additional R12.4 billion in energy costs. The company is also testing electric trucks for delivery purposes.

TERRAGRIN, a UK-based company specialising in climate-smart agriculture, invested R35.1 billion in developing a sustainable agroforest in Mpumalanga. The project, initiated in 2022, is set to be completed by 2030. Initially, 222 hectares will be planted, with plans to scale to 200,000 hectares, starting in 2024. The company also aims to engage in commercial operations and produce green energy through hydrogen and bamboo pellets.

Coca-Cola has been investing in regional operations across Southern and East Africa since 2019, with the project set to conclude in 2024. This investment focuses on increasing capacity, acquiring new trucks, and supporting innovation for the group's brands. However, the exact value of the investment allocated to South Africa remains undisclosed.

At the 2019 South African Investment Conference, Heineken pledged R1.48 billion for the expansion of its Sedibeng production facility, worth R952 million, and the purchase of land for a solar plant. The company has committed to sustainable practices, including groundwater extraction, to reduce municipal water usage. Heineken is also constructing a water reclamation plant to treat wastewater for non-brewing purposes.

Following its 2020 acquisition of Pioneer Foods, PepsiCo began implementing capital investment projects aligned with its R6.5 billion public interest commitment. In 2022, PepsiCo opened a R300 million production line at its Weet-Bix facility in the Western Cape and upgraded its Malmesbury Mill with an additional R60 million investment. FutureLife, a subsidiary of PepsiCo<sup>3</sup>, committed R75 million at the 2023 South African Investment Conference. Shortly afterwards, FutureLife opened a concept store in KwaZulu-Natal, creating 25 jobs. The store offers dietician services, a restaurant bar, and FutureLife products. FutureLife also planned to open a new factory near the Dube TradePort

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<sup>3</sup> PepsiCo acquired the remaining 50% stake in FutureLife Health Products, following an initial 50% acquisition in 2015.

by late 2023, creating over 300 jobs. The factory’s second phase will focus on sustainability initiatives, including solar power and rainwater harvesting infrastructure (Parker, 2023).

**Table 1. Food and beverage FDI projects in South Africa, 2018-2023Q4**

Investor Firms	Project Name	Investment Value in R billions	Province	Investor Country
FutureLife/PepsiCo	FutureLife KZN investment	0.1	KwaZulu-Natal	United States
PepsiCo	Weet-Bix facility production line	0.3	Western Cape	United States
SAB/AB InBev	SAB 2023 Investment Programme	5.8	KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape	Belgium
AB InBev	Renewable energy initiative	5.6	Western Cape, Limpopo, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng	Belgium
Lactalis	Evaporator Dryer Plant	0.14	Western Cape	France
Terragrñ	Agroforest	35.1	Mpumalanga	United Kingdom
Nestlé	Coffee mix production plant	0.079	Gauteng	Switzerland
Heineken	Sustainability investments	0.528	Gauteng	Netherlands
Coca-Cola	Regional operations investment	14.7	Gauteng	United States

Source: TIPS FDI Tracker, 2018–2023Q4. Accessed at [www.tips.org.za/manufacturing-data/fdi-tracker](http://www.tips.org.za/manufacturing-data/fdi-tracker) In September 2024.

## 8. DOMINANT FOREIGN EXPORTERS

Based on ITC’s global export statistics for processed food, including agro-based products, Germany, the Netherlands, the US, France, and China ranked as the leading exporters in 2023 (Graph 1). Among these, Germany, the Netherlands, and the US consistently emerged as dominant players in the sector from 2012 to 2023. Over this period, Germany averaged 7% of global food exports, while the US and the Netherlands both averaged 6% of global food exports.

Germany’s export dominance is closely tied to its strong integration within the EU. As Europe’s largest economy and one of the highest-income nations globally, Germany benefits from a highly developed transport infrastructure, making it a central hub for distributing goods throughout the EU. In the past decade, 10 of Germany’s top 11 food export markets were fellow EU countries, highlighting this intra-European trade dependence. Its leadership is further strengthened by a competitive agricultural base and an advanced food-processing sector, marked by cutting-edge technology and rigorous quality standards. Additionally, Germany’s stringent sustainability regulations, combined with the tariff-free advantages for products from other EU member states, create additional barriers for non-EU exporters looking to access the German market (Jumle, 2022; Food Export Association of the Midwest USA, 2024a).

The Netherlands’ prominence in global food exports is driven by its innovations across the agricultural value chain, positioning it as a leading exporter and re-exporter. The country’s substantial investment

in agricultural research and development has enabled breakthroughs in areas such as cell-cultured meat, vertical farming, seed technologies, and robotics in dairy production. These advancements have attracted major global food companies like Nestlé, Coca-Cola, Unilever, Cargill, and Kraft Heinz, all of which have established R&D centres in the Netherlands – with some companies, such as Unilever and Heineken, being among the most dominant international brands.

The Dutch agricultural sector is also highly mechanised and efficient, supporting large-scale production. Furthermore, as a member of the EU, the Netherlands (and exporters from other EU members) benefits from favourable trade conditions, including lower tariffs, reduced non-tariff barriers, and minimised transportation costs for exports and imports from other EU states. The country's food processing industry is well-established, mature, and organised, with access to a wide variety of ingredients. Dutch food companies typically source ingredients from specialised traders within the country or the EU rather than procuring directly from overseas markets, enhancing the efficiency of their operations. Moreover, there is also strong governmental support for the agricultural and agro-processing sectors, through subsidies, tax incentives and export promotion programmes which enable these sectors to remain globally competitive (Food Export Association of the Midwest USA, 2024b; Reiley, 2022).

The US maintains its position as a leading exporter of processed food. This is due to its highly efficient agricultural sector, driven by advanced technology, diverse climatic conditions, and large-scale farming, which enable the cost-effective production of essential raw materials like corn and soybeans. Furthermore, the US adds value to seasonal imports, particularly from countries such as Mexico, capitalising on their lower labour costs and specialised production. Competitively, the US leverages economies of scale, globally recognised brands like Tyson Foods and Kraft Heinz, and cutting-edge food processing technologies, enhancing the global appeal of its products. In addition, trade agreements such as the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) have been instrumental in securing key markets for US agricultural and processed food exports, bolstering its international trade footprint (AGAmerica Lending, 2021; USDA, 2021).

## 9. CONCLUSION

In 2023, the global processed food market remained dominated by a few key players such as Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. These leaders benefit from advanced agricultural infrastructures, state-of-the-art food-processing technologies, and supportive trade policies within the EU and North America respectively. Their competitive advantage is reinforced by substantial investments in innovation, including climate-smart agriculture and cutting-edge processing technologies.

Conversely, South Africa holds a relatively modest position in global processed food exports, accounting for only 0.5% of the global market share. Nonetheless, the country has experienced consistent growth in food exports, particularly within African markets. The expansion is supported by intra-regional trade agreements, like the African Continental free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement, and increased exports to regional partners in SADC and SACU. Despite facing significant challenges from climate change and energy shortages, South Africa's agricultural and agro-processing sectors are poised for future growth. Investments in renewable energy, sustainable agricultural practices, and advanced food-processing techniques are promising. Companies such as Tiger Brands and RFG Foods are leading efforts in integrating renewable energy sources and regenerative farming methods, positioning South Africa's agro-processing sector for long-term competitiveness.

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