Traps importers fall into

CUSTOMS

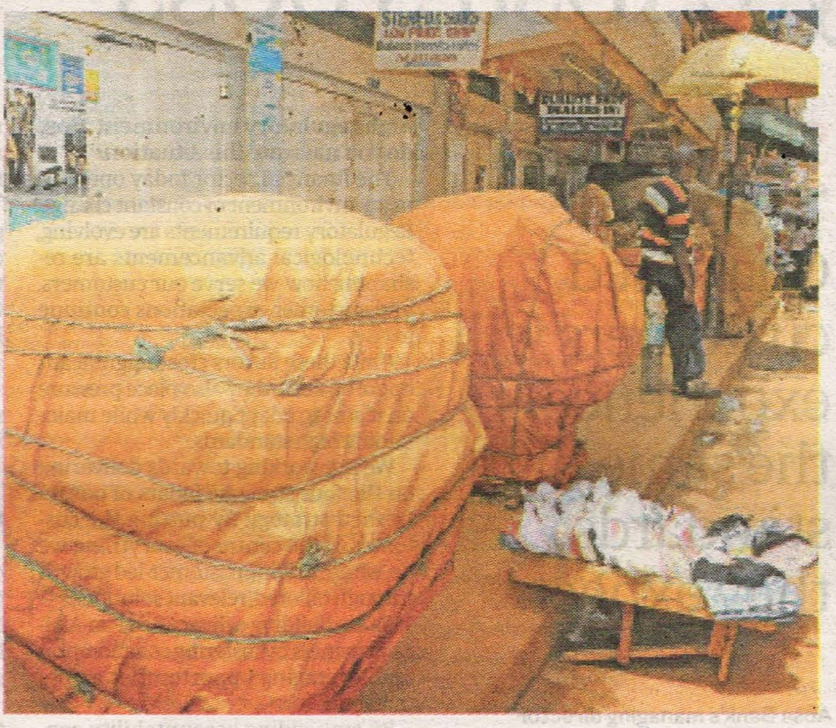
DEDAN MUTATINENSI

# Customs myths no one warns importers about

One of the biggest barriers standing between importers and smooth trade operations is the myths that persist. These myths don't just confuse people; they cost money, delay shipments, trigger penalties, and disrupt cash flow for thousands of business owners trying to move goods across borders.

Many of these misconceptions come from informal networks, industry gossip, WhatsApp advice, or assumptions based on a previous shipment that somehow, by miracle, slipped through the system. But customs is guided by structured laws, valuation principles, tariff codes, and risk-management systems.

Yet importers unknowingly walk into costly mistakes because they trust myths more than the actual rules. Here are the myths that mislead importers, and the truths that could save your business from unnecessary expenses and endless frustration.



Goods in down town. Customs valuation is guided by the World Trade Organisation Valuation Agreement. PHOTO/MICHAEL KAKUMIRIZI

**Myth 1: If my clearing agent says it's okay, then it's okay."**

Many think hiring a broker means checking out completely. And yes, brokers are essential. They understand the language, the systems, and the processes. But giving them 100 percent control without personal understanding is where problems start.

When you don't understand customs basics, you can't question wrong declarations. You can't verify if they chose the right HS code. You can't detect undervaluation that could get you penalised later. You can't tell whether delays are genuinely from customs or just poor follow-up.

**Truth: A broker helps you navigate customs, but understanding the basics protects you from errors, exploitation, and penalties. Understand your own goods.**

Customs sees the importer, not the agent, as the responsible party. Every declaration, every HS code, every value, every tax calculation legally falls on you. Even if the agent makes a mistake, you are the one penalised, investigated, or flagged.

Always request a copy of the lodged declaration. Know the HS code, the applied tax rate, and the declared value. The cost of ignorance is far greater than the cost of involvement.

**Takeaways**

- The frustrations many importers feel are often caused by misinformation, poor preparation, or avoidable mistakes, not by customs enforcement. Their operations are guided by rules not personal interest or emotions.
- Each shipment is evaluated independently based on: new regulations, updated tariff codes, random inspections, risk profiling, alerts triggered by other importers, system changes or upgrades.

**Myth 2: Customs officers can reduce taxes if you know who to talk to.**

Some importers still believe customs taxes are negotiable, adjustable, or influenced by relationships. This misconception exposes businesses to corruption, fraud, and legal trouble.

**The truth:** Taxes are determined by tariff laws, valuation rules, and HS codes. No officer has the legal authority to reduce, waive, or alter taxes outside the system.

What happens when importers chase 'shortcuts':

You may end up paying more through unofficial channels. You risk linking your business to illegal practices. You open yourself up to blackmail or exploitation. Your shipments can attract increased scrutiny in the future.

**The wiser approach: Learn the tax structure. Use the correct HS code. Pre-calculate taxes before importing. Compliance is safer, cheaper, and more sustainable than shortcuts.**

**Myth 3: Customs officers just decide to charge extra.**

Every importer has, at some point, felt like customs officers randomly increase fees. It feels personal when your package, which you expected to clear smoothly, suddenly comes with a bigger tax bill. But customs doesn't operate on guesswork. Every charge is tied to something: your product category, declared value, duty rate, HS code, weight, import regulations, or even mistakes in the paperwork. What feels random is usually the result of an information mismatch.

If you declare $300 and the supporting documents show $600, expect a problem. If your product is classified under the wrong HS code, taxes automatically change. If you rely purely on hearsay instead of knowing your product's correct tax rate, you will always feel blindsided.

**Truth: Customs follows a structured valuation and classification system, not personal feelings. When your documents are accurate, predictable charges become your norm.**

**Myth 4: A lower invoice means lower taxes, just under-declared.**

This is one of the most widely believed myths, especially among new importers. People assume customs simply accept whatever value is declared, but that is not how modern customs systems work.

**The truth:** Customs valuation is guided by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Valuation Agreement. Officers compare your declared value against global market values and intelligence databases. If your invoice looks unrealistic, customs will revalue the goods using alternative valuation methods.

Consequences of undervaluation:

Delays as customs queries your documents, penalties for misdeclaration, suspicion that affects future shipments, Mandatory inspections for subsequent imports. There could be possible seizure if fraud is detected. Instead, declare true commercial values. If your supplier offered discounts, provide evidence. Transparency saves time and protects your compliance record.

**Myth 5: Customs is always responsible for clearance delays.**

When a shipment is delayed, most importers automatically blame customs. Sometimes it feels like your goods are stuck because someone somewhere is refusing to release them. But most delays occur long before customs officers even see your declaration.

Common causes: Agents submitting incomplete or incorrect data, missing permits or licences, wrong HS codes that trigger queries, delayed payment of taxes, errors in the bill of lading or commercial invoice, waiting for corrections from suppliers or transporters.

Losses

'The biggest losses importers face do not come from taxes, they come from assumptions.'

**The writer is a tax expert and accounting professional.**