



Building Africa's Digital Single Market

Why common digital rules, trusted infrastructure and practical inclusion could change everyday trade across the continent.



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Imagine a coffee roaster in Kampala selling its products to a hotel in Kigali. The product may be ready, but the sale can still fail over payment, identity checks, customs documents, or rules that change at the border. Africa's digital single market project is about making that ordinary transaction less extraordinary.

1.3bn

people in the AfCFTA
market

US\$3.4tn

combined market
value

7,500

SMEs targeted for
digital skills

US\$712bn

projected internet
economy by 2050

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) brings together about 1.3 billion people in a market worth around US\$3.4 trillion. While these numbers are impressive, the real question is much simpler. Can a business in one African country easily sell goods or services to customers in another African country? Can it prove its identity, receive payment quickly, and deliver products without unnecessary delays?

● Why Digital Systems Matter

Trade today is no longer just about moving physical goods across borders. Most business transactions begin online. Orders are placed through websites and apps, payments are made electronically, and customs authorities often use digital systems to process information. Because of this, a successful African free trade area also needs strong and connected digital systems.

To support this goal, the African Union adopted the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol in February 2024. The Protocol seeks to create common digital trade rules across Africa. It covers areas such as online transactions, digital payments, data management, online safety, digital identities and emerging technologies.

In February 2025, eight supporting annexes were adopted to provide more detailed guidance on issues such as digital identity, data sharing across borders, financial technology, online security and digital payments.

However, adoption of rules is only the first step. Real benefits will come when countries implement these rules and ensure their systems work together. Businesses will only feel the impact once national laws, regulators and digital platforms begin operating in a coordinated way.

Four Things That Must Work Well

1. Faster and Cheaper Payments

For many years, payments between African countries often had to pass through foreign currencies and overseas banks before reaching their final destination. This increased costs and caused delays.

The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) was created to address this challenge. It is designed to allow businesses and individuals to send and receive cross-border payments in local currencies through participating financial institutions.

For ordinary traders and businesses, this means faster payments, lower costs and fewer currency conversions. However, banks, mobile money providers and fintech companies will still need to work together and maintain public trust for the system to succeed.

2. Reliable Digital Identity Systems

Trading becomes much easier when businesses can prove who they are through trusted digital systems. Instead of repeatedly submitting the same information, traders should be able to use recognised digital identities and documents across borders.

One initiative working towards this goal is the Africa Digital Access and Public Infrastructure for Trade (ADAPT). It seeks to connect digital identities, payments, data sharing and trade documentation through common infrastructure. Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria were selected as the first countries for implementation in May 2026.

The objective is simple: systems in different countries should be able to communicate with each other. A document issued in one country should be easily recognised and verified in another.

3. Rules That Build Trust

Technology alone cannot create a functioning digital market. Countries also need legal systems that businesses can trust. Issues such as electronic signatures, consumer protection, cybersecurity, data transfers and dispute resolution should be handled in a way that is broadly compatible across borders.

A small business should not need to hire different experts just to understand the rules in each country where it wants to operate. Shared standards and mutual recognition of regulations can reduce both cost and complexity.

4. Digital Skills and Inclusion

Technology is only useful if people can access and use it. Many Africans still face challenges such as expensive internet connections, limited access to devices and inadequate digital skills.

To address this, initiatives such as the AfCFTA Digital Inclusion and Entrepreneurship Programme have been introduced. The programme aims to help 7,500 small and medium-sized businesses develop skills in digital trade, artificial intelligence and cloud technology.

Training and capacity building are important because infrastructure alone does not create opportunities. People must also have the knowledge and confidence to use digital tools effectively.

● The Economic Opportunity

A widely cited study published in 2020 projected that Africa's internet economy could contribute about US\$180 billion by 2025 and as much as US\$712 billion by 2050. While the 2025 figure was a prediction rather than a confirmed result, the broader message remains clear: digital technology is becoming increasingly important to Africa's economic future.

Smaller businesses may benefit the most. A software company in Nairobi, a cooperative in northern Ghana or a craft business in Gulu should be able to reach customers across Africa without opening offices in every country. Digital tools, trusted payment systems and clear regulations can make this possible.

Digital integration can also strengthen regional value chains by making it easier for businesses in different countries to collaborate, share data and trade more efficiently.

● Challenges Remain

Despite the opportunities, significant obstacles still exist. Many areas of Africa continue to face limited internet access, unreliable electricity and expensive data. Businesses also encounter different tax systems, licensing requirements and consumer protection laws across countries. Cybercrime remains another concern.

There is also a risk that the greatest benefits will go mainly to large cities and well-connected businesses, leaving smaller traders behind. True success will depend on whether ordinary people can actually access and use these systems.

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Ultimately, Africa's digital single market is not about technology for its own sake. It is about removing unnecessary barriers between African businesses and African customers, making trade easier, faster and more inclusive for everyone.

● Turning Plans into Results

For the digital single market to become a reality, governments will need to ratify and implement the Digital Trade Protocol, improve cooperation between regulators and invest in digital infrastructure. Broadband networks, digital identity systems, secure payment platforms and cybersecurity measures will all play an important role.

Pilot projects can also help test solutions before they are expanded across the continent. Examples include ADAPT and the AfCFTA Digital Trade Corridor, a project launched through a partnership between the AfCFTA Secretariat and Quest Ghana Limited in August 2026. The initiative aims to provide digital marketplaces, payment solutions and logistics services for African trade.

● What Success Will Look Like

The success of Africa's digital single market will not be measured only by statistics or policy documents. It will be measured by real experiences.

Success will mean a trader in a small town being able to sell products anywhere in Africa and receive payment quickly. It will mean entrepreneurs expanding into new markets without dealing with unnecessary regulatory barriers. It will mean women-led businesses, young innovators and rural enterprises having equal opportunities to participate in the digital economy.

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Join the Conversation

The 9th KTA Africa Technology and Intellectual Property Symposium will be held in Kampala on 22-23 October 2026 under the theme *"Building Africa's Digital Single Market: The Role of Government and the Private Sector in Achieving Regional Integration."* The event brings together policymakers, regulators, lawyers, innovators, and business leaders to discuss practical ways of advancing Africa's digital future.

22-23 October 2026

Kampala Marriott Hotel

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