United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

# Aide-memoire

## Sub-Regional Dialogue in preparation for ECA 2026 Conference of Ministers of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development, virtual

Theme**:** *"Growth through innovation: Harnessing data and frontier technologies for the economic transformation of West Africa.*"

Date: 12 March 2026

## I. Context

Africa stands at a critical moment in its development trajectory. Between 2000 and 2019, the continent experienced periods of sustained economic growth above 4% (WBG,2023)[1], and in roughly half of these years, Africa's GDP grew faster than that of East Asia. However, this growth has not led to a deep structural transformation. Many economies continue to rely heavily on primary commodities, with modest industrial diversification, low productivity growth, and high levels of informality.

In most countries, manufacturing value added remains under 12% of GDP (UNIDO, 2023)[2], while primary commodities still account for over 60% of merchandise exports (UNCTAD, 2023)[3]. At the same time, Africa is the world's youngest continent, with a labor force set to double by 2050. Capturing the potential of this demographic surge requires a shift toward innovation-led, productivity-driven growth models.

Innovation, data systems, and frontier technologies are increasingly central to this transformation agenda. Beyond digital connectivity, frontier technologies, including artificial intelligence, advanced data analytics, biotechnology, geospatial systems, climate-smart technologies, blockchain, robotics, and advanced manufacturing, are redefining production systems, trade logistics, financial services, agriculture, health delivery, and public administration. Data has become a strategic asset, enabling evidence-based policymaking, efficient service delivery, improved domestic resource mobilization, and enhanced competitiveness.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents an unprecedented opportunity, creating a single market of 1.4billion people with a combined GDP of three trillion (UNECA,2023). Realizing its full potential requires interoperable digital systems, harmonized standards, efficient trade facilitation, and technologically capable firms that can integrate into regional value chains. Digital platforms, including e-commerce marketplaces, online business registration, payment systems are key enablers for businesses, especially SMEs to access regional markets.

Although accounting for less than 1% of global research and development expenditure, far below the global average of 2.3% (UNESCO, 2023), Africa remains committed to digital transformation and innovation. The continent's ongoing digital shift demonstrates massive potential for structural change. Advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence, digital finance, geospatial systems, and cloud computing, can enhance domestic resource mobilization, boost productivity, and create new economic opportunities for all. The e-Conomy Africa 2020 report estimates that Africa's Internet economy will reach $180 billion by 2025 (5.2% of GDP) and could grow to $712 billion, representing 8.5% of the continent's GDP[4] by 2050. Mobile Connectivity has expanded rapidly, with access to third-generation networks in Africa rising from 54% to 86% between 2015 and 2024, and 85.9% in West Africa. This expansion of connectivity creates a foundation that supports the development of digital platforms enabling e-commerce, mobile payments, and international data

[1] https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/d08686b6-36bd-47da-bcfd-fd4ef2d0a728

[2] https://www.unido.org/sites/default/files/unido-publications/2024-04/Annual%20Report%202023-English%20Spread.pdf
[3] https://unctad.org/publication/economic-development-africa-report-2024

[4] https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2020/google-e-conomy

transfers. African countries need dependable digital infrastructure and robust data governance to leverage these technologies across key sectors such as agriculture, health, finance, and trade.

Despite progress, challenges remain, including infrastructure gaps, limited digital skills, and uneven platform adoption. Addressing these challenges requires targeted investments, capacity-building efforts, and supportive regulatory environments to unlock the full potential of frontier technologies for economic development and inclusive growth. These efforts are also crucial for advancing the global digital compact, Agenda 2063, and achieving the SDGs. In particular, Goal 9 of the 2030 Agenda which highlights the importance of strengthening technological capabilities, fostering innovation and building resilient infrastructure as essential drivers for inclusive growth.

It is against this backdrop that the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) dedicated its fifty-eight (58$^{th}$) Session of the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (CoM 2026), to explore how frontier technologies can enhance productivity, competitiveness, and digital sovereignty while fostering structural transformation across African economies.

The session will examine sectoral applications of innovation, opportunities, challenges, and policy options to support evidence-based innovation-led growth strategies. Participants will present empirical evidence of the impact of innovation, highlight trends in frontier technology adoption and demonstrate the centrality of innovation and data to effective policy -making. The CoM 2026 will be held from 28 March to 3 April 2026 in Tangier, Morocco, under the theme: "*Growth through innovation: harnessing data and frontier technologies for the economic transformation of Africa*".

To kick-start the reflection ahead of the CoM 2026, the Sub-regional Office for West Africa of the ECA is organizing a sub-regional dialogue with key stakeholders, providing a platform to identify regional priorities, share lessons learned, and formulate actionable recommendations for harnessing data and frontier technologies to drive West Africa's economic transformation.

## II. Objective

The overall objective of the sub-regional dialogue is to build on the progress of digital transformation in West Africa to stimulate reflections and policy actions on data and frontier technologies to advance growth, economic transformation, and sustainable development in the sub-region.

The specific objectives are as follows:

- Review recent progress and policy options of innovation ecosystems, digital transformation, and frontier technology adoption, in West Africa.
- Share best practices, promote regional collaboration, and showcase key digital initiatives and platforms that enhance the operationalization of international agreed agendas towards advancing sustainable development.
- Identify challenges, and opportunities to data-driven productivity growth and innovation in the region.
- Discuss and explore policy, regulatory, and financing options to accelerate innovation-led economic transformation.  and effective policy formulation and implementation.

## III. Expected results

- Enhanced understanding of the current innovation and technology landscape in WA.
- Insights related to the adoption of data-driven solutions, innovation, and technology across key sectors in the region.
- Identify key challenges and opportunities for innovation-driven growth.
- Development of actionable policy recommendations.
- Enhanced knowledge sharing and regional collaboration.

## IV. Participants

The sub-regional dialogue will be attended by government senior Officials, Regional Economic Commissions (RECs) and Intergovernmental organizations, Resident Coordinators of the UN System and UN Country Teams, representatives from the private sector, civil society, academia, and the Network of the Economic Journalists for West Africa.

## V. Format

The dialogue will be held virtually.

## VI. Date

The virtual Dialogue is scheduled to take place on March 12, 2026.

## VII. Working Language

The dialogue will be conducted in English and French.

**Contact**

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## VIII. Draft Agenda

| Time | Item | Responsible/Facilitator |
|---|---|---|
| 14:30-15:00 | Introduction – participants will be invited to introduce themselves in the chat box | ECA |
| 15:00-15:10 | • Welcoming remarks<br>• Opening remarks | Ms. Ngone Diop, Director ECA/ SRO-WA<br>Chair of the 28th Session of ICSOE |
| 15 :10-15 :20 | Initiatives on digital transformation and innovation, recent trends, and initiatives across WA | ECA |
| 15 :20-16: 20 | Opportunities and challenges in data and digital transformation: Showcasing key innovations and digital initiatives across West Africa towards supporting key agreed development agendas and advancing sustainable development:<br><br>- AfCFTA digital platform :<br>a) - Promotion of digital trade in the context of AfCFTA (Nigeria/Guinea/Burkina Faso)<br>b) Facilitating business network (WABL)<br><br>Digital Platform Demographic Dividend<br>Digital platform for monitoring the implementation of the AU roadmap on Demographic dividend. | AfCFTA: Introduction by Mamoudou Sebego (ECA)<br>Nigeria<br>Burkina Faso<br>Guinea<br><br>West Africa Business Linkages (WABL)<br>Tahirou<br><br>Introduction: Carolina/Fabien(<br>Pilot countries participated in the |

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| | | monitoring of DD roadmap. |
| 16:20-16 :50 | • Regional perspectives and policy options: Strategies, policy or regulations on digital transformation and data frontier technologies | Experience sharing by countries' |
| 16 :50-16 :55 | Take Away/key Messages | Ms. Ngone Diop |
| 16 :55-17 :00 | Closing remarks | Chair, 28th Session, Bureau ICSOE/ICE, for West Africa |