

**Capacity Building Workshop & B2B Event:
Unlocking opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Southern Africa
under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**

**Jointly Organized by the
Economic Development Board of Mauritius
(Host of ITC She Trades Hub in Mauritius)
&
United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
Subregional Office for Southern Africa
3-4 September, 2025
Venue: Intercontinental Hotel, Balaclava, Mauritius**

Concept note

1. BACKGROUND

1.1. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)¹ and its contribution to women empowerment.

The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a flagship initiative of the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063. The Agreement Establishing the AfCFTA is a Free Trade Area (FTA) Agreement which is aimed at creating a single market for goods and services in Africa, through tariff liberalization, removal of non-tariff barriers and other barriers impeding the free flow of goods and services across the 55 member states of the AU, including bottlenecks to transport and cumbersome regulations.

The AfCFTA Agreement is more than a trade agreement, it encompasses measures to stimulate intra-African investment, stimulate industrial and regional value chain development as well as to improve business and trade competitiveness on the continent. It is built around a set of protocols, namely the Protocol on Trade in Goods, Protocol on Trade in Services, Protocol on Dispute Settlement, Protocol on Competition Policy, Protocol on Investment, Protocol on Intellectual Property Rights, Protocol on Digital Trade and Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade. A set of institutions, mechanisms and tools have been created to facilitate the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement².

Once the AfCFTA Agreement is fully implemented, it will create the largest free trade area in the world, in terms of number of member states. The AfCFTA, once functional, will create a single market of 1.3 billion people across 55 countries, including Mauritius, with a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$3.3 trillion, a figure projected to more than double by 2050. However, while the AfCFTA is intended to create social and economic benefits for African countries, such benefits are not automatic and will be contingent on a set of conditions. Namely an effective implementation of the Agreement by all member states and importantly the emergence of a dynamic, competitive and innovative African private sector, capable of identifying and seizing market access opportunities under the AfCFTA. In many places, be it Africa, Mauritius and elsewhere, the private sector is dominated by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), with women-led enterprises constituting an important segment of the African private sector landscape.

Empowering women entrepreneurs in Africa and Mauritius to take advantage of trade agreements such as the AfCFTA Agreement can unlock significant growth opportunities for

¹ For more information on the AfCFTA, please see <https://www.uneca.org/afcfta-what-you-need-to-know>. The AfCFTA stands for the African Continental Free Trade Area, which was established in 2018 through the AfCFTA Agreement, negotiated by Member States of the African Union (AU). To understand what the AfCFTA is, one needs to first understand the concept of a Free Trade Area (FTA). An FTA is an arrangement between two or more countries which seeks to create conditions for the free flow of trade among them. In practice, this means countries establishing FTAs agree not to charge import tariffs, i.e., taxes on imported goods, or impose other barriers on goods from other members of the same FTA.

² More information can be found in the *Economic Report on Africa 2025* of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) titled "Advancing the Implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area: Proposing Transformative Strategic Actions". Available at: <https://www.uneca.org/economic-report-on-africa-2025>.

them and enhance their contributions to the socioeconomic development of their countries while fostering progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as SDG 5 on Gender Equality.

The United Nations (UN) Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in its *2025 Economic Report on Africa* notes that the AfCFTA offers opportunities for women's economic empowerment, particularly in manufacturing and trade-intensive sectors but highlighted however that women face major barriers, including limited access to finance, education, and digital skills, impeding them to fully participate in cross-border trade in Africa. Furthermore, according to a 2021 African Union survey, 58 per cent of women-owned MSMEs identified capacity building and training on trade facilitation and standards as critical to leveraging intra-African trade opportunities. The survey also revealed that 51 per cent of women cross-border traders emphasized the need to strengthen networks among women traders, while 57 per cent highlighted the importance of building capacity in ICTs and e-business development.

The AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade is intended to precisely address the barriers to trade that Southern African and Mauritian women may face to participate in intra-regional trade under the AfCFTA. As the AfCFTA translates gradually into a reality, sensitizing women entrepreneurs in Southern Africa and in Mauritius of the challenges and opportunities of trading under the AfCFTA and training them on how take advantage of such opportunities is critically important.

In this context, the SheTrades Mauritius Hub, hosted by the Economic Development Board (EDB) of Mauritius, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), through its Subregional office for Southern Africa (SRO-SA), are joining forces to organise a 2 day capacity building workshop for women entrepreneurs in Southern Africa and Mauritius on how to take advantage of the opportunities of the AfCFTA.

The workshop intends to bring together at least 20 women-led businesses from across Southern Africa, at least 50 female entrepreneurs from Mauritius, other female entrepreneurs from regions with business ties to Mauritius, key local stakeholders, and international partners. The workshop will serve, among others, as a platform to explore Africa's potential as a source of raw and intermediate materials and as a large market for goods and services exports, including in Business and ICT Services.

For Mauritius, trade in services has become a critical driver of external trade in recent years. As a net exporter of services, the country achieved a positive trade balance of USD 3.2 billion in 2023 (source: UNCTADStats). The anticipated boost in intra-regional trade under AfCFTA is expected to increase both trade volumes within the region and market share among member countries.

1.2. SheTrades Mauritius Hub at the Economic Development Board and the AfCFTA at ECA.

SheTrades Hub of EDB

The Economic Development Board (EDB) of Mauritius hosts the United Nations International Trade Centre (ITC) SheTrades Mauritius Hub, a laudable initiative dedicated to fostering gender inclusivity in international trade. Officially launched on 9th March 2023 in the presence of Ms. Pamela Coke-Hamilton, Executive Director of ITC³, the hub is a testament to Mauritius's commitment to empowering women entrepreneurs.

The SheTrades Mauritius Hub recognizes the pivotal role of women's empowerment in driving economic and social development. By equipping women entrepreneurs with essential skills and knowledge, the hub aims to enable their successful participation in cross-border trade. At its core, the hub is committed to promoting women's economic empowerment, unlocking their untapped potential, and highlighting the significant contributions they can make to the global business landscape. To this end, the SheTrades Mauritius Hub has undertaken a series of capacity-building programs and market access initiatives designed specifically for women-led businesses.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSCDF) for Mauritius (2024-2028) recognizes under Outcome 1 and Output 1.2 the need for *“more people, especially youth, women and persons living with disabilities, to have access to education and vocational training that enables them to access socioeconomic opportunities”*. Empowering women entrepreneurs to have market access opportunities, through a better leveraging of trade, contributes directly to the achievement of the UNSCDF Outcome 1.

Support of UNECA to Mauritius and on the AfCFTA.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), headquartered in Addis Ababa, through its Africa Trade Policy Centre (ATPC) and its Subregional office for Southern Africa (SRO-SA), based in Lusaka, Zambia have supported Mauritius to develop a National African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Strategy. The strategy was launched by the Honourable

³ ITC has developed an umbrella programme, the ONE TRADE AFRICA (OTA) to empower MSMEs, women and youth to access the opportunities unfolding under the new single market to be created by the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement once implemented. OTA is an integrated package of technical assistance solutions that ITC is offering to the African business community operating in both the formal and informal sectors to enable them to understand the opportunities of the AfCFTA and to build the capacity of enterprises and entrepreneurs to export across Africa and beyond. More information on [One Trade Africa strategy](#).

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade (MoFA) on 9 November 2022, at a National AfCFTA Awareness Workshop, organized by the ECA SRO-SA and ECA ATPC under the aegis of MoFA. At the National AfCFTA Awareness workshop, a segment on Women, Youth and MSMEs, was organized targeted among others to women-led entrepreneurs. At the same workshop, a joint study by ECA SRO-SA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Mauritius *“The AfCFTA and market implications for the Mauritius economy post-Covid-19: A case study on Mauritius”* was launched by the Honourable Minister of Industrial Development, SMEs and Cooperatives. The ECA-SROSA, in collaboration with ECA ATPC had organized a National Policy Dialogue on the Manufacturing sector in Mauritius on 23 and 24 March 2022, in the aftermath of the National AfCFTA Strategy Validation Workshop of Mauritius.

ECA has supported almost 40 countries in Africa to elaborate and validate their National AfCFTA strategies. Economic diversification, through manufacturing, services and regional value-chains development, highlighted in these strategies, will be critical for countries to be able to reap the expected benefits of the AfCFTA. It is important for women entrepreneurs to be able to participate in and support the diversification strategies of their respective countries. The SheTrades Hub of the EDB in Mauritius can play a critical role in supporting the participation of Mauritian female entrepreneurs in the further economic diversification of Mauritius in the context of the AfCFTA.

Cognizant that the private sector and MSMEs, including women-led MSMEs are critical drivers of economic diversification, industrialization and trade, EA SRO-SA, in partnership with ECA ATPC is planning to deliver a series of Capacity building workshops on the AfCFTA targeted at the private sector and MSMEs in Southern Africa. Under this capacity-building programme, Mauritius through this workshop, Zambia and Zimbabwe will be among the beneficiaries in 2025.

2. OBJECTIVES

This capacity building workshop, organized jointly by the EDB and ECA SRO-SA, will span two (2) days and features an agenda designed to empower women entrepreneurs, from Mauritius, Eastern and Southern Africa to take advantage of trading under the AfCFTA. Highlights include dedicated technical capacity-building sessions, engaging panel discussions, and sessions to raise awareness about the opportunities available under the AfCFTA. Additionally, participants will benefit from a B2B networking event and an exhibition corner showcasing the products and services of the women entrepreneurs attending the event, namely from Mauritius, Eastern and Southern Africa.

The workshop focuses on empowering women entrepreneurs mainly across the Southern African continent to fully leverage the trade opportunities created by the AfCFTA and

contribute to a more inclusive trade landscape. Key goals include upskilling women entrepreneurs in digitalization, rules of origin and non-tariff measures, three critical areas for maximizing benefits under the AfCFTA.

Sub-Objectives

Component 1: Training

- Increase awareness of opportunities available under AfCFTA.
- Facilitate networking opportunities to showcase product and service portfolios.
- Enhance knowledge of rules of origin and non-tariff measures and their benefits under AfCFTA.
- Strengthen women's skills in digital trade and e-commerce to improve their participation in intra-African trade.

Component 2: B2B Meeting and Business Matchmaking

- Share experiences and best practices to encourage cross-border trade across Africa.
- Foster new collaborations and innovative synergies through market expansion and information exchange.

3. EXPECTED RESULTS /OUTCOMES

Component 1: Training

- Empowering 75 women-led businesses (WLBs) from across Africa with the knowledge and skills to utilize digital tools. These tools can help overcome trade challenges, improve market access, and better prepare them to trade under AfCFTA.
- Enhancing the understanding of 75 WLBs on rules of origin and non-tariff measures and their role in facilitating intra-regional trade. This is a crucial step toward aligning with implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement and ensuring compliance with trade protocols.
- Providing a training guide covering topics discussed during the program to support participants in applying their newfound knowledge effectively.

Component 2: B2B Meetings and Business Matchmaking

- Facilitate the initiation of new and innovative projects through targeted B2B meetings and business matchmaking sessions.
- Foster the creation of new business relationships, paving the way for enhanced business opportunities and potential deals.

- Strengthen intra-regional trade in goods and services among AfCFTA member countries, contributing to the broader objectives of the agreement.

4. EXPECTED OUTPUTS

The expected outputs from the workshop are:

- PPT materials covering a range of topics in relation to empowering women entrepreneurs in Southern Africa to take advantage of the AfCFTA;
- A meeting report detailing main messages of the presentations and recommendations for governments and the private sector;
- Press releases by the EDB and ECA SRO-SA.

5. FORMAT

The first component of the workshop will focus on capacity-building sessions focused on the AfCFTA, conducted over one and a half- days. The morning session will begin with the **opening ceremony**, followed by technical presentations thereafter and sharing of experiences among female entrepreneurs. There will be a high-level session discussing the role of institutions in supporting trade under the AfCFTA and the AfCFTA Guided Trade Initiative.

The key topics will include:

- The AfCFTA, protocols, provisions and institutional arrangements
- The interface between SADC and AfCFTA
- Opportunities for trade in goods and services under the AfCFTA.
- Using **Trade Map** to identify potential markets.
- Requirements to be able to trade under the AfCFTA.
- Rules of Origin and Non-tariff measures.
- Implementation tools and mechanisms under the AfCFTA
- Leveraging virtual platforms to market products and services.
- E-commerce strategies to tap into emerging opportunities
- Awareness of the "**One Trade Africa**" (OTA) program by ITC, which is designed to empower MSMEs, women, and youth in accessing opportunities within the single African market.

The training will highlight the importance of digital transformation for women-led businesses across Africa. Building digital capability will not only create equal access to opportunities but also enable optimum utilization of AfCFTA benefits. Moreover, these efforts align with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 4.4.2: *"Percentage of youth/adults who have achieved at least a minimum level of proficiency in digital literacy skills."*

The second component of the workshop (lasting half of a day) will consist of a B2B event and will focus on two key activities:

1. Sharing best practices to help businesses maximize the benefits of the AfCFTA.
2. Facilitating B2B meetings and business matchmaking sessions for women entrepreneurs.

Resource persons will include, among others, representatives from UNECA (SROSA and ATPC), ITC, TRALAC, AfCFTA Secretariat, SADC Secretariat and DHL.

6. PARTICIPANTS

The audience/participants will consist of at least 20 women business owners, mainly from Eastern and Southern Africa (at least 10 different countries), who will be sponsored to attend the workshop and exhibit their products and services. These exhibitors will represent countries such as Botswana, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe (member states of ECA SRO-SA) and Comoros, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Seychelles, Tanzania. Other female entrepreneurs from countries that are major trading partners with Mauritius (e.g. India) may also attend at their own costs. Additionally, private sector stakeholders (including the Mauritius Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Association of Mauritian Manufacturers), senior government representatives from Mauritius and international partners will also participate in the event.

7. DATE AND VENUE

3-4 September, 2025

Venue: Intercontinental Hotel, Balaclava, Mauritius.

8. LANGUAGE

English.

9. CONTACTS

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