

Webinar Series

on

Digital Transformation and Trade in North Africa

23 June 2026
10:00-12:00 and 14:00-16:00 Rabat time (UTC+1)

Registration link: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_0IfAZKq4TrmPzpsEjWf67w

Concept Note

Objectives

The overarching objective of Webinar Series is to foster informed policy dialogue and analytical exchange on the role of digital transformation in advancing trade integration and the importance of digital infrastructure for inclusive trade in North Africa.

Background and Rationale

Across North Africa, countries are navigating a period of profound transformation marked by acceleration of digitalisation. The benefits of this digital transformation, however, have not been equal across all countries. As a broad measure of digitalisation, internet access rates convey general digital accessibility, and for North Africa there is a relatively high average internet access rate of 67%, in comparison with the internet access rate of only 36% for sub-Saharan Africa. However, in comparison with the average rate of internet access for high income countries of 94%, there remains significant room for increased digital access in North Africa, especially in light of the inequalities in internet access across the subregion with, at the lower end, only 19% of Sudanese accessing the internet.¹

Moving beyond internet access as a measure of digitalization, the ICT Development Index (IDI) measures universal and meaningful connectivity, additionally incorporating indicators of mobile internet access as well as coverage and pricing. At the continent level, North Africa has a relatively high average IDI of 79.6 out of 100, versus the sub-Saharan IDI of 55.6. However, again, North Africa as a subregion has important improvements to make in increasing digitalisation, as within North Africa digitalization is not equal with Mauritania having the lowest IDI of 58 for the subregion, in stark contrast with the average IDI of 92,5 amongst high-income countries.²

The digital transformation, via improved digital connectivity and access to digital technologies, offers significant economic opportunities for firms to integrate into local, regional, and global value chains. Signed in February 2024, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Digital Protocol aims to facilitate regional integration through digitalisation and presents a bold vision for a pan-African digital market. The Digital Protocol seeks to enable digital trade continent-wide

¹ ECA calculations for North Africa from data for Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Sudan, and Mauritania from World Bank (2026). World Development Indicators. Individuals using the Internet (% of population).

² ECA calculations for North Africa from data for Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Mauritania from The International Telecommunication Union (2025). ICT Development Index 2025.

through improved market access, digitalisation of trade facilitation processes, data governance, cybersecurity, and digital trade inclusion.³

In North Africa, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) represent 80–90% of formal firms and roughly half of formal employment, and as such, SME engagement is crucial in order to maximise the benefits of regional integration under the AfCFTA Digital Protocol.⁴ Countries must commit to investing in the development of the necessary enabling environment for SME digital inclusion. This involves ensuring that key physical infrastructure is in place for widespread internet access (electricity, optic fibre cables, cell towers). Further, inclusive training and education on digital skills is key so that entrepreneurs and employees alike can obtain the necessary level of digital literacy to actively participate in digital trade. Finally, within the digital ecosphere, platforms must be accessible to SMEs to ensure access to markets and payment systems as well as opportunities to develop new trade partnerships.⁵

In this context, the Webinar Series seeks to foster policy dialogue on digital trade, in the context of the AfCFTA Digital Protocol. The Webinar Series will move beyond diagnosis toward actionable insights by examining how digital transformation and digital trade can be leveraged to advance trade integration and digital trade inclusion in North Africa, in alignment with continental frameworks and regional priorities.

Webinar Series Structure

The Webinar Series will be held fully online in two consecutive sessions, with two hours of programming each session. Each session consists of presentations to provide practical insights, followed by a Q&A session.

Over the course of the two sessions, the Webinar Series will examine issues pertaining to the governance, regulatory, and institutional requirements for the effective implementation of digital trade policies under the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol as well as the foundational role of the digital transformation in reshaping trade processes and accelerating regional integration. In particular, the Webinar Series will examine the enabling environment needed for digital trade, including the necessary infrastructure, digital literacy, digital platforms, and digital trade facilitation.

Expected Outcomes

The Webinar Series is expected to deliver:

- Enhanced understanding among policymakers and stakeholders of the pathway through which digital transformation can advance trade integration under the AfCFTA in North Africa.
- Clear identification of opportunities and challenges related to digital trade in the subregion.

³ The International Institute for Sustainable Development (2024). “The AfCFTA Digital Protocol: A bird's eye view.”

⁴ UNECA (2026). “Why the next four years are crucial for north Africa’s Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises.”

⁵ World Bank (2020). “The African Continental Free Trade Area: Economic and Distributional Effects.”

Participants

The webinar is open to all participants interested in topics related to trade, AFCFTA, and digitalization including representatives from governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations.

Organisation and Delivery

The Webinar Series will be organised by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Sub-Regional Office for North Africa (SRO-NA). The fully online format will ensure wide participation and accessibility across the subregion and beyond.

Follow-Up

In follow-up to the Webinar Series, participants will have access to a webinar report.

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Languages: Arabic, English, and French. Interpretation available in all 3 languages.

Contact:

Caitlyn Carrico, Economic Affairs Officer, UNECA Sub-Regional Office for North Africa
caitlyn.carrico@un.org

Webinar Series Agenda

23 June 2026

10:00-12:00 Rabat time (UTC+1)	
Session 1 <i>Digital Transformation as a Catalyst for Trade</i>	
Moderator: Caitlyn Carrico, Economic Affairs Officer, SRO North Africa, UNECA	
10h00 – 10h10	Introductory Remarks
10h10 – 10h25	<i>Aligning Morocco's Regulatory Framework for Digital Trade with International Standards</i> Azzedine Ghoufrane Professor and WTO Chair, Université Mohammed V de Rabat
10h25 – 10h40	<i>Building an enabling policy environment for digital trade integration in Africa: Lessons from UNCTAD's eTrade readiness support</i> Martine Julsaint Kidane OiC, Digital Economy Capacity Building Section, UNCTAD
10h40 – 10h55	<i>Upskilling for Increased Participation in Digital Trade</i> Adel Ben Youssef Associate Professor of Economics, Université Côte d'Azur
10h55 – 11h10	<i>Policy recommendations for the implementation of the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol in North Africa</i> Amged B. Shwehdy Digital Transformation & Governance Specialist, UNECA
11h10-11h55	Q&A
11h55-12h00	Closing Remarks

14:00-16:00 Rabat time (UTC+1)	
Session 2 <i>Developing an Enabling Environment for Inclusive Trade</i>	
Moderator: Caitlyn Carrico, Economic Affairs Officer, SRO North Africa, UNECA	
14h00 – 14h10	Introductory Remarks
14h10 – 14h25	<i>Readiness to Engage in Digital Trade</i> Shamika N. Sirimanne Senior Advisor to the Secretary General, UNCTAD
14h25 – 14h40	<i>Digital Platforms Connecting SMEs across Africa</i> Lilia Hachem Naas Senior Expert in International Trade and Sustainable Development
14h40 – 14h55	<i>Digital Trade and E-Commerce in the WTO and support for Developing Countries</i> Mena Hassan,



	Head, Capacity Building and Strategic Partnerships, WTO
14h55 – 15h10	<i>Digital Trade Facilitation under the AfCFTA</i> Josephine Nyakatawa Economic Affairs Officer, African Trade Policy Centre, UNECA
15h10-15h55	Q&A
15h55-16h00	Closing Remarks