

2021 Africa ThinkTank Summit



“Digital Transformation in post-COVID-19 Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Options for Building Back better”

Concept Note



THE AFRICAN CAPACITY BUILDING FOUNDATION | FONDATION POUR LE RENFORCEMENT DES CAPACITES EN AFRIQUE

Securing Africa's future through capacity development



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1. Context

The COVID-19 outbreak has forced most countries, institutions, and businesses to move to online platforms, accelerating a digital transformation that has been underway for decades, especially in Africa, and demonstrating the value of digitalization. The disruptions to overall economic activities by the pandemic have demonstrated beyond doubt that digitalization has become more critical for Africa, in particular, than before.

Digital transformation, known as the use of digital technologies, data, and interconnection to change existing activities or create new ones¹, could be a game-changer for African countries given its potential to foster economic growth and industrialization and improve the lives of people.

Despite it being at the center of economic transformation, data from GSMA Intelligence show that Africa is lagging when compared to the other regions (developed and developing) in the areas of digital transformation. For instance, the percentage of the population covered by the 3G and 4G networks in 2020 is respectively 76% and 58% in Africa, 94% and 84% in Asia, and 93% and 83% in Latin America and the Caribbean.² While the global digital divide is still large, the gap between Africa and the rest of the world is narrowing fast, demonstrating the efforts being made by the continent to catch up with the rest of the world. For instance, internet penetration in Africa has increased tenfold since the early 2000s, compared with a threefold increase in the rest of the world. The proliferation of mobile technologies has been particularly pronounced in Africa, having the world's highest number of accounts (300 million). Evidence shows that there are more than 500 African fintech companies and over 640 active tech hubs across the continent.³

Although Africa has made much progress, some long-standing challenges explain the continent's relatively low performance in digital transformation compared to other regions. Key among the challenges are:

- The limited and high cost of connectivity and devices and operational costs which compromise innovation and scaling-up of digital services;
- The lack of relevant digital skills/expertise which limit the capacity of local stakeholders to drive the adoption and scaling up of digital services;
- The limited resources to continue building the capacity of all stakeholders in the ICT sector; and,
- The failure to adopt appropriate and coordinated policies and strategies at national, regional, and continental levels which hinder the digital transformation agenda of Africa.⁴

While weak human and institutional capacity has been cross-cutting, consultations done by the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) reveal that (i) capacity to implement the policies for digital transformation; and (ii) capacity to mobilize adequate resources to finance the digital transformation are the most important and priority issues to be addressed by African countries.

Evidence from ACBF's Africa Capacity Reports has always shown that amidst strong policy environments for capacity building, capacity to implement policies remains a major challenge for African countries. The problem with Africa's slow or lack of progress in implementing policies is not that Africa does not know "what" to do; rather, it lies in not knowing "how" to do it as well as not having the capacities to do it. Evidence suggests that the barriers to policy implementation include the lack of adequate monitoring and evaluation frameworks, limited skills required for implementation, lack of funding and resources to support delivery, lack of clear policy content, organizational culture and structure, and changes in policy priorities.⁵

Given the challenges faced by African countries to foster digital transformation and all the questions raised around the successful implementation of policies and strategies, the several hundreds of think tanks in Africa can and should play a critical role as organizations designed for and capable of long-term thinking and reflection to address the issues. Think tanks in view of their role in conducting research, providing advice, building capacities, and advocating for change can contribute to fostering digital transformation in Africa.

It is against this background that ACBF, through the Africa Think Tank Network (ATTN), is organizing the 2021 Africa Think Tank Summit (the 8th edition). Convened virtually under the theme ***"Digital Transformation in post-COVID-19 Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Options for Building Back Better"***, the 8th Africa Think Tank Summit will be held on 9-10 December 2021.

1. AUC/OECD. 2021. Africa's Development Dynamics 2021: Digital Transformation for Quality Jobs, AUC, Addis Ababa/OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/0a5c9314-en>

2. <https://www.gsmainelligence.com/> (accessed on 20 November 2021)

3. AUC/OECD. 2021.

4. International Telecommunication Union. 2021. Digital trends in Africa 2021: Information and communication technology trends and developments in the Africa region, 2017-2020. International Telecommunication Union Africa.

5. ACBF, KIPPRA, AfDB, Afreximbank, Hewlett Foundation and Islamic Development Bank (2019). "Tackling Implementation Challenges for Africa's Sustainable Development". Report of the 2019 Africa Think Tank Summit. Harare: The African Capacity Building Foundation.

2. Objectives

The main objective of the 8th Africa Think Tank Summit is to explore policy and implementation modalities that are essential to leveraging digitalization to build African economies back better in COVID and post-COVID 19 eras. Think Tanks and other stakeholders, including Policymakers and Development Practitioners, will share ideas and experiences and devise implementable recommendations on what works and what needs to change in Africa's approach to digitalization. Delegates will particularly discuss what capacities are required to accelerate the implementation of Africa's Digital Transformation Strategy (2020-2030) developed by the African Union and how it translates into the implementation of sound digital transformation policies and actions at regional and country levels. More specifically, the 8th Africa Think Tank Summit will provide an opportunity for all participants to:

- Examine the state of digital transformation and its potentialities and implications for Africa in light of the COVID-19;
- Present various initiatives and appropriate policy mix for digital transformation in Africa;
- Share Africa's experiences around the continental, regional and national experiences and interventions aimed at fostering digital transformation;
- Identify and examine key capacity challenges and critical technical skills facing countries, key institutions and actors and determine the most effective ways of addressing these institutional and human capacity challenges hindering the adoption and use of digital solutions;
- Discuss the role of think tanks in fostering digital transformation in Africa and enhancing their sustainability; and
- Propose capacity building interventions, partnerships, and coordination mechanisms that will enhance the efforts in advancing the digital transformation agenda in Africa.

3. Sub-themes for discussion

In keeping with the overall theme of *“Digital Transformation in post-COVID-19 Africa: Opportunities, Challenges and Options for building back better”* and the Summit objectives, the following topics/issues and guiding questions are suggested for further exploration:

(1) Understanding digital transformation: state, implications, and potentialities for building back Africa better. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has proven beyond doubt that digitalization has become most important now than any other time before to facilitate the transformation of the African economy. The following are among the key questions/issues that will be examined under this sub-theme. (a) What is the state of digital transformation in Africa? (b) What are the opportunities/potentialities for accelerating digitalization in Africa, in light of the effects of Covid-19 on the economy? (c) How has COVID-19 affected the implementation of Africa's Digital Transformation, including national strategies? (d) What are the efforts being made and the various initiatives in place to ensure the use of digital solutions to build back African economies?

(2) Initiatives for fostering digital transformation in Africa: sharing experiences at continental, regional and national levels. Most African countries have digitalization agenda and are implementing several interventions aimed at contributing to the digital transformation of the continent. While at the continental level, a comprehensive Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030) has been introduced, countries are using digital technologies and innovation to transform their economies. Under this sub-theme, the following questions will be addressed to deepen understanding and share experiences. (a) How is the continental agenda being implemented at the regional and national levels? (b) What are the related interventions being carried out at the Regional Economic Communities level? (c) What are the countries' experiences in utilizing digital technologies for economic development? (d) What works and what needs to change in Africa's approach to digitalization? (e) What can we do differently to accelerate the implementation of digital transformation policies at the continental, regional, and national levels?

(3) Identifying the appropriate policies and building the capacities and critical skills needed for digital transformation in Africa. Despite recognizing digitalization as the catalyst for Africa's **transformation**, the continent still lags behind compared to other regions in the pace at which digital technologies are being adopted. The slow pace points to the fact that capacity in its various forms is hobbling digital transformation in Africa. It is essential to unpack the nature and form of these capacity challenges to understand how key stakeholders in this sector relate to these key issues. To this end, the following are among the key questions that will be addressed under this sub-theme. (a) What are the capacity challenges faced by governments, the private sector (including SMEs), and CSOs in supporting digital transformation? (b) What challenges are these key sectors (government, private sector, and CSOs) facing in building capacities for digital transformation? (c) What are the options available to address these challenges? What is the appropriate policy-mix needed to foster capacity development for digital transformation? (d) What are the priority capacity needs of key stakeholders (government, private sector, and CSO), and how can these capacities be developed, retained and sustained for adaptive transformation?

(4) Roles of think tanks in fostering digital transformation and enhancing their sustainability. Think tanks, given their mandate and roles, could make a significant contribution in providing solutions to some of the issues identified and to support the implementation of Africa's digital transformation agenda. Specific issues to be addressed under this sub-theme include: (a) What has been the experience of think tanks in informing public debate on digital transformation through knowledge production, sharing and advocacy as well as capacity building, with reference to communication and dissemination as well as utilization of knowledge being generated by the targeted beneficiaries or consumers of knowledge? (b) What are the key lessons that can be derived from countries beyond Africa that can be adapted to the African context, to improve uptake and utilization of research output in digital transformation? (c) What roles can think tanks play in supporting key stakeholders (government, private sector, SMEs, and CSO) in using digital solutions for the socio-economic transformation of African countries? (d) How can think tanks be better supported to play their roles in Africa's digital transformation agenda?

(5) Establishing partnerships and coordination mechanisms to support digital transformation in Africa. The success of Africa in the digital era depends on how the key stakeholders and actors source and communicate good-quality and accessible information on digital transformation. Such undertaking requires building relationships with partners who hold this information and knowledge, have the technical expertise, or mobilize necessary financial resources to support the digital transformation. Therefore, the following issues will be examined under this sub-theme: (a) What coordination mechanisms are required to support Africa's digital transformation? (b) What kind of partnerships can be harnessed from the Summit to support the development of a comprehensive capacity development program for digital transformation, and what role can each stakeholder/partner play in the process? (c) What immediate actions should be taken by each stakeholder group in supporting implementation of Africa's digitalization agenda?

4. Format

The 8th Africa Think Tank Summit is intended to maximize interaction among participants to allow for deeper exploration of issues, sharing of knowledge and experiences by key stakeholders through:

- **Keynote addresses.** Keynote presentations by leading experts and decision-makers will be delivered to address critical dimensions of the Summit's objectives.
- **Panel discussions.** Plenary panel sessions will explore specific topics in key thematic areas designed to address various Summit's objectives.

5. Expected outputs and outcomes

The outputs expected from the Summit comprise the following:

- (1) Summit Communique
- (2) Report of the Summit

The 8th Africa Think Tank Summit is expected to generate the following outcomes:

- State and implications, as well as potentialities of the digital transformation agenda for Africa, examined;
- Continental, regional and national initiatives and interventions aimed at closing the digital gap presented;
- Key capacity challenges facing countries, key institutions, and actors identified and the most effective ways of addressing these institutional and human capacity challenges hindering the adoption and use of digital solutions proposed;
- Sustainability of think tanks and their role in addressing digital-related challenges and in supporting digital transformation at country, regional and continental levels discussed; and
- Capacity building interventions, partnerships, and coordination mechanisms that will enhance the efforts in advancing the digital transformation agenda in Africa recommended.

The key messages and conclusions of the Summit will also be used to develop a capacity building program to support digitalization policy formulation and implementation in African countries.

ACBF will work with its partners to deliver on the Summit and post-Summit outputs and outcomes.

6. Venue and date

The 8th Africa Think Tank Summit will be held virtually on 9-10 December 2021. The Summit will be held in English and French, with interpretation services.

7. Organization and Sponsorship

The Summit is convened by ACBF. The partners being engaged for financial and technical support include, among others (non-exhaustive list):

- African Union Commission (AUC)
- African Development Bank (AfDB)
- African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)
- African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM)
- African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank)
- Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa (BADEA)
- Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)
- International Cooperation Center of the National Development and Reform Commission (China)
- Mo Ibrahim Foundation
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Development Centre
- On Think Tanks
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
- World Bank

8. Target Audience

The Summit will provide space for representatives of more than 500 African think tanks and key stakeholders and offer them an opportunity to exchange practices and lessons. Moreover, the Summit provides a platform for the think tank community and stakeholders (development partners, government officials, private sector, and non-state actors) to brainstorm on new innovative ideas and strategies for impacting public policy and supporting the implementation of Africa's digital transformation agenda.

9. Contacts

Questions related to the organization of the 8th Africa Think Tank Summit should be directed to the following contacts:

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