

Leveraging trade to foster a more inclusive digital economy in Africa

By Landry Signé

Senior Fellow – Global Economy and Development Program, Africa Growth Initiative, Brookings Institution;
Executive Director and Professor, Thunderbird School of Global Management;
Co-Chair, World Economic Forum Regional Action Group on Africa

The spread of emerging and digital technologies, also called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is drastically affecting trade, economic competitiveness and development, including in Africa (Signé and Ndung'u, 2020; Signé, 2023a). Global exports of information and communications technology (ICT) services increased at an average annual rate of 8 per cent between 2005 and 2016, and revenues for e-commerce, another prominent feature of the digital economy, reached US\$ 25.6 trillion in 2018. A striking feature of e-commerce trade is its uneven distribution across countries: China alone makes up 23 per cent of total e-commerce trade, while the top 10 advanced economies made up 75 per cent of the total. In contrast, more than 75 per cent of the world's adult population has access to internet connections (ITU, 2019). The costs of this digital gap were apparent during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which provided a narrow window of time to bridge the digital divide and strengthen their competitiveness to capitalize on the opportunities offered by the growing digital economy (Signé, 2020). Among other things, this will require fixing the continent's digital skill gap and mismatch, and building its digital competitiveness to international standards (Signé, 2023b).

To unlock Africa's digital economy, it is necessary to foster the enabling environment and to leverage physical, digital, human, agility, perception and technology capitals. African countries therefore have the unique opportunity to leverage trade and trade policies to foster a more inclusive digital economy.

Trade facilitates access in Africa to emerging and digital technologies and to the infrastructure needed for an

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