

WEBINAR REPORT

State of Africa's Digital Agenda, 20 Oct 2021

Webinar Recording link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8ITqPUWZMg>

INTRODUCTION

The growth, scope, speed, and complexity of the Fourth Industrial Revolution – the digital revolution - calls for a distinct and coordinated approach by all stakeholders. The digital revolution has indeed disrupted and is defining how governments must operate their affairs. Globally, countries have put in place digital policies, strategies, and regulations to maximize the benefits of this digital transformation. This includes countries in Africa that are making strides towards harnessing the digital economy for social and economic growth and innovation. Almost all countries in Africa have a digital policy and/or strategy. Most of these complement the African Union Commission's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa launched in 2020 geared towards transforming countries, generating inclusive growth, and creating jobs for social and economic growth.

APRI - Africa Policy Research Institute, launched in 2021, is contributing to discussions around the impact of this digital economy to Africa through its [Africa's Digital Agenda Program](#), one of its three programme areas of focus. The programme is taking stock of Africa's digital landscape and generating evidence-based research that can be used to strategically position African governments to accelerate their digital transformation.

With this background, APRI in partnership with the University of Johannesburg (UJ), South Africa, hosted the inaugural webinar dubbed 'State of Africa's Digital Agenda' on Wednesday, 20th October 2021. 48 participants drawn from policy think tanks, the private sector, funding partners, regional economic bodies and the academic sector attended the webinar that builds on a report published by APRI, *What is Africa's Digital Agenda?*

The objective of the webinar was to map the gains and the gaps in implementing digital agendas and strategies by African countries to date – and to collectively deliberate on how the continent should develop and implement digital policies moving forward.

THE WEBINAR



In his opening remarks APRI Executive Director Olumide Abimbola gave context about how APRI is bringing a critical and distinctly African lens to global public policy issues, especially those that have implications for Africa's development potentials, and especially the ability of African

countries and governments to create jobs for the youngest populations in the world.

He articulated how APRI is prioritizing the work and voices of those who know the most about the realities in Africa countries, and how it operates a non-prescriptive approach in offering policy options to policymakers in Africa, Europe and around the world.

Session 1: Paper presentation

Dr Bhaso Ndzendze, Head of the Department of Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, presented major findings of the paper *What is Africa's Digital Agenda?* which he co-authored with Olumide Abimbola and Faten Aggad. Bhaso began by explaining how a mixed research approach of triangulation and use of multiple sources (National Development Plans, standalone strategy documents and various policy documents) and content analysis was important in articulating what is emerging as Africa's Digital Agenda.

Key highlights from the presentation:

1. African governments have prioritized three areas in their digital agendas - Economic development, digital economy/e-government, and cybersecurity/digital financial services.
2. Harmonization of digital strategies across the continent is critical in ensuring a homegrown African digital agenda and better positioning the continent for partnerships with international players. This is important for resource optimization and for attracting investment.
3. There is a strong case for continental leadership set a context-specific digital landscape for greater success.
4. The ideal African digital landscape will be based on three pillars: multisectoral participation, harmonized standards and regulations, and a sustainable innovation ecosystem.



The complete presentation is available here.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Faten Aggad, Advisor, International Negotiations and CEO, Afriprism, moderated the discussion of three panel experts: Executive Director of Research ICT Africa **Dr. Alison Gillwald**, Executive Secretary, West Africa Telecommunications Regulators Assembly **Mr. Aliyu Aboki**, and former Director, Trade and Industry, African Union Commission and current Director, AeTrade Group **Ms Treasure Maphanga**.

- Aliyu Aboki highlighted some of the work that has been done at the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). He highlighted the persisting challenges of realities such as limited state capacity, competing priorities, and the limitation of low levels of literacy in many countries, and why these challenges cannot be overlooked and must be realistically contextualized in pursuing digital transformation. "Despite this, Africa has a fairly robust digital agenda that can push forward even capacity-challenged countries and guide investment. I see the biggest opportunities in the education, healthcare, and agriculture sectors," he said. Aliyu emphasized the urgent need to close critical gaps such as the digital divide and technology adoption while learning from other regions already ahead in the game.

- Treasure Maphanga brought to the discussion the African Union Digital Transformation Agenda and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). “While the benefits of a single African market under the AfCFTA are huge, it is not a panacea for all problems on the continent. It is important for us to use this opportunity to reflect more deliberately and systematically and create a whole new narrative. The protocols within the AfCFTA have identified some critical sectors that can be prioritized to complement Africa’s digital agenda. The e-commerce protocol (in ensuring we have regional digital infrastructures that reduce the cost of the kind of investments that are made while considering alternative models to optimize these investments to attract the private sector); intellectual property (to provide structure and an enabling environment for the explosion in fintech space); and the investment protocol (to guide on how to build the correct infrastructure and to strengthen it).

“Let us think of the digital transformation like a grassroots agenda and support SMEs to overcome some of the traditional barriers to investing in digital technologies despite the cost advantages that these may offer.” “It is essential for us to build an ecosystem that drives this digital agenda,” she concluded.

- Dr. Alison Gillwald spoke of the digital equality paradox and emphasized the importance of first getting the basics right. “We cannot simply overlay tech (broadband, artificial intelligence, etc.) over infrastructure that already has gaps while ignoring issues such as data injustice and data exclusion of the continent from a globalized digital ecosystem,” she said. She underscored the importance of assessing progress using context-relevant and Africa-centric metrics and getting data from both supply and demand side. Alison emphasized that the digital transformation is a global process and that global public goods that should managed as such, which includes having Africa as part of that agenda.

Summary of deliberations from the Panel Discussion:

1. **People-centred digital policy design:** As digital solutions will be integrated in various aspects of human life, the centrality of human development in the digital agendas cannot be overlooked. The digital strategies should enable all people to adapt to and excel in the digital economy regardless of income, education, gender and geographical location. Gaps in digital literacy, digital access and digital usage persist in Africa. For instance, considerations of issues such as broadband availability where there are affordability challenges and low usage of smartphones, and digital licensing models that drive up costs and therefore locking out most of the population must inform policies around Africa’s digital agenda. Policies should address these gaps among marginalized populations to completely maximize the effects of the digital economy in the continent.
2. **The role of data in the digital transformation:** Countries in Africa have for a long time been merely consuming digital products and providing raw data to owners of digital platforms and then having to pay for the digital intelligence produced from that data. African countries should identify strategies to promote local capacities to collect and analyze the data, and to monetize it. Using data to drive insight into policy design will be key to the success of Africa’s digital agendas. Countries must get the right data, using the right metrics, from the right sources for the correct evidence-based policy design and implementation.

3. **Prioritize a continental-wide coordinated approach:** The digital landscape in Africa is rapidly changing and the focus on a digital transformation is gaining momentum. The success of a coherent digital transformation in Africa is dependent on effective and meaningful cross-border partnerships with all stakeholders, including with the private sector and civil society. This can be through co-initiatives such as talent attraction and retention, cross-border projects, and data-generation initiatives. African countries can fast-track the continent's digital transformation by developing and implementing specific collaborative actions such as harmonizing similar thematic areas in their countries. Such collaborations have the potential to provide solutions that span across borders.

Emerging Opportunities and Next Steps for APRI and UJ?

Both APRI and UJ aim to continue working on ways to support Africa's digital agenda. Potential areas include:

1. Exploring how Africa can invest more in research and data generation in the implementation of digital agendas across the continent. This could involve building up on the *Africa's Digital Agenda* report to understand the patterns of prioritization of various themes for the different regional economic communities (RECs) in Africa.
2. Exploring working with RECs to create opportunities for knowledge exchange such as peer-to-peer events and thematic seminars between Member States on the progress and challenges around their digital agendas.
3. Exploring options for African countries and RECs regarding concrete steps on how to harmonise aspects of Africa's digital agenda.