Economic and Social Council

Economic Commission for Africa
Conference of African Ministers of Finance,
Planning and Economic Development
Fifty-eighth session
Tangier, Morocco (hybrid), 2 and 3 April 2026

Item 4 of the provisional agenda[*]
High-level round-table discussions

Round table 2: Unleashing the Africa of the future: advancing the development of digital public infrastructure, data centres and sovereignty

Concept note

I. Background

1. Africa is undergoing an accelerated digital transformation. Many countries are prioritizing the development of such inclusive digital public infrastructure as digital identification systems, payment systems and data exchanges to promote good governance, economic integration and sustainable growth. Such infrastructure expands access to essential services, promotes financial inclusion, improves access to markets and finance, and encourages local business innovation. This expansion serves as the foundation for the digital transformation of the continent and the operationalization of continental economic integration, such as through a digital single market for Africa and the African Continental Free Trade Area.[1]

2. A key element in supporting this digital revolution is the development of data centres, which are essential for the secure storage, processing and management of the sensitive data that is required for the operation of digital public infrastructure systems. Data centres ensure data protection and reliability and enable nations to manage and control their data, which is a critical aspect of safeguarding national security and sovereignty.

3. Reflecting this growing importance, the continent's data centre environment is expanding rapidly. However, with nearly 46 per cent of installed capacity concentrated in Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa,[2] the resulting distribution of data centres across the continent is uneven. Approximately 80 commercial tier III or higher data centre facilities have come online, adding around 300 megawatts of capacity to the market and reflecting the growing demand for local digital infrastructure.[3] The African data centre market is projected to grow from approximately $3.49 billion in 2024 to nearly $6.81 billion by 2030, at a compound annual growth rate of about 11.8 per cent. This growth will be driven by increased

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[*] E/ECA/CM/58/1.

[1] Diana Sang, Jane Munga, and Nanjira Sambuli, "Digital public infrastructure: a practical approach for Africa" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2025).

[2] Olufemi Ariyo, "Digital independence: reclaiming Africa's tech sovereignty in a data-colonised world", *The Cable*, 4 November 2025.

[3] Xalam Analytics, "The state of African digital infrastructure" (May 2025).

Internet usage and the adoption of cloud services.[4]

4. However, despite these developments, significant challenges remain. Africa faces a structural sovereignty gap, which is associated with the risk of undermining its long-term digital autonomy. With less than 1 per cent of global data centre capacity, a substantial share of sensitive public data and critical services are currently hosted on foreign servers, giving rise to concerns related to data security, privacy, and reliance on external providers.[5] These challenge are compounded by a persistent digital divide: nearly half a billion people in Africa lack foundational digital identities,[6] while the cost of Internet access remains prohibitive. Additional constraints, including unreliable energy infrastructure and fragmented regulatory frameworks, are likewise associated with patterns in which African nations may be positioned primarily as consumers rather than producers of digital technologies. In a recent report on global connectivity, [7] the International Telecommunication Union emphasized the need for investment in local data infrastructure to ensure that data generated on the continent remains subject to domestic governance arrangements, thereby strengthening regional autonomy and digital sovereignty.

5. Bridging this sovereignty gap requires measures extending beyond infrastructure and calls for an integrated approach combining infrastructure and governance. Accordingly, expanding the distribution of data centres and strengthening local data centre and cloud services are critical to reducing dependence on foreign hosting arrangements and to maintaining control over data flows and digital services.[8] Such measures are associated with enhanced digital sovereignty through local management of data centres, which has become increasingly important for enabling African nations exercise control over their own data and over domestic technology standards..

6. Another necessary measure is an integrated regulatory and technical approach, under which sovereignty is enforced through policy measures and physical control over digital hardware, complemented by the use of open-source protocols to avoid exclusive reliance on a single provider. As countries make the transition from passive consumers to active architects of their digital future, the establishment of sovereign cloud environments and resilient data environments becomes imperative. Through such measures, the identities and financial records of people on the continent are protected from extraterritorial legal claims and geopolitical risks, thereby strengthening public trust and national security. The effective management of data growth in the digital era requires coherent national and regional governance frameworks.

7. Digital sovereignty is contingent on both robust infrastructure and sound governance. To that end, the strategic expansion of local data centres and cloud computing capacity is critical and supports the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030) of the African Union. The Strategy is aimed at advancing continental digital transformation through harmonized policies, legislation and regulations, and at establishing and improving digital infrastructure, networks and services. The hosting of data within national jurisdictions is associated with improved protection of sensitive information and reduced latency for emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and 5G. This creates the domestic digital capacity required for the independent management of critical workloads and for reduced reliance on global hyperscale providers. In addition, continued investment in digital public infrastructure is essential. African countries are, therefore, encouraged to allocate at least 1 per cent of their gross domestic product to such national digital systems as identification platforms and open data portals, to ensure that data systems

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[4] Aritzon Advisory and Intelligence, *Africa Data Center Market Landscape Report 2025–2030* (April 2025).

[5] Ariyo, "Digital independence: reclaiming Africa's tech sovereignty in a data-colonised world".

[6] Melody Musoni, Ennatu Domingo and Elvis Ogah, "Digital ID systems in Africa: challenges, risks and opportunities", ECDPM discussion paper No. 360 (December 2023).

[7] International Telecommunication Union, *Global Connectivity Report 2025* (Geneva, 2025)

[8] Nii Simmonds and Obinna Isiadinso, "How shared digital infrastructure can bridge the gap in Africa", World Economic Forum, 9 April 2025.

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reflect and serve African populations.[9]

8. Successful digital transformation requires the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders, including Governments, the private sector, civil society organizations and international institutions. In this context, the round table is an opportunity for stakeholders to consider the role of digital public infrastructure and data centres in establishing a sovereign and inclusive digital future and in contributing to growth across Africa.

II. Objectives

9. The objective of the round table is to convene decision makers and principal stakeholders involved in the digital transformation of Africa to consider strategies and regulations for the development of strong, independent and inclusive digital public infrastructure. The discussions will also concern the essential role of data centres in safeguarding data security and supporting digital sovereignty.

III. Target audience

10. The target audience for the round-table discussion includes the following:

(a) Members of the Steering Committee of the Programme for Digital Transformation in Africa (including the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank, the secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area, the African Union Development Agency and regional economic communities);

(b) Senior officials representing ministries responsible for digital transformation, information and communications technology, transport, planning, or economic development and others;

(c) Representatives of the private sector, civil society organizations and financial institutions.

IV. Speakers and moderator

11. Details concerning the speakers and moderator of the round table will be published in due course.

V. Focal points

12. The lead focal point for the round-table discussion is the Chief of the Emerging and Frontier Technologies, Innovation and Digital Transformation Section, in the Technology, Innovation, Connectivity and Infrastructure Development Division of the Economic Commission for Africa, Mactar Seck (seck8@un.org). The technical focal point is Economic Affairs Officer of the Division, Afework Temtime (temtimea@un.org).

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[9] Jalal Charaf, "Data sovereignty: Africa's strategic imperative in the age of algorithmic power", Interface.Media, 20 November 2025.