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# Economic and Social Council

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**Economic Commission for Africa**
**Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development**
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Item 4 of the provisional agenda*
**High-level round-table discussions**

## Round table 2: Empowering Africa's Future: Advancing Digital Public Infrastructure, Data Centers, and Sovereignty

## Concept note

# I. Background

1. Africa is undergoing an accelerated digital transformation, with many countries prioritizing the development of inclusive Digital Public Infrastructure such as digital IDs, payment systems, and data exchanges to drive good governance, economic integration, and sustainable growth. These systems expand access to essential services, promote financial inclusion, improve access to markets and finance, and encourage local business innovation, laying the foundation for the continent's digital transformation and the operationalization of continental economic integrations, such as Africa's Digital Single Market and the African Continental Free Trade Area.[1]

2. A key element supporting this digital revolution is the development of data centers, which are crucial for securely storing, processing, and managing the sensitive data that power these Digital Public Infrastructure systems. Data centers not only ensure data protection and reliability but also enable nations to manage and control their data, which is vital for safeguarding national security and sovereignty.

3. Reflecting this growing importance, Africa's data center landscape is rapidly expanding with nearly 46 per cent concentrated in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Egypt[2], indicating that data center deployments on the continent are unevenly distributed. Around 80 commercial Tier-III or above data center facilities have come online, creating around 300 megawatt of fresh capacity to the market and indicating increasing demand for local digital infrastructure.[3] The African data center market is projected to grow from about $3.49 billion in 2024 to nearly $6.81 billion by 2030, at a compound annual growth rate of roughly 11.8 per cent, driven by increased internet usage and cloud adoption.[4]

4. However, despite these positive developments, significant challenges remain. Africa faces a structural "sovereignty gap" that threatens long-term autonomy. With less than 1 per cent of global data centre capacity, most sensitive public

1 Digital Public Infrastructure: A Practical Approach for Africa https://carnegieendowment.org/

2 Digital independence: Reclaiming Africa's tech sovereignty in a data-colonised world https://www.thecable.ng

3 Africa-Digital-Infrastructure-Report. https://cms.d4dhub.eu/assets/

4 Africa Data Center Market Landscape Report 2025-2030 https://www.globenewswire.com/

data and critical services are stored in foreign servers, raising concerns about data security, privacy, and dependence on external entities[5]. This challenge is compounded by a persistent digital divide—nearly half a billion African citizens lack foundational digital identities[6], and internet access remains prohibitively expensive. Additional challenge such unreliable energy grids and fragmented regulatory frameworks risk positioning African nations as consumers rather than creators of technology. A report from the International Telecommunication Union emphasizes that Africa must invest in local data infrastructure to ensure that data generated within the continent remains under local governance, strengthening regional autonomy and digital sovereignty.

5. Bridging this "sovereignty gap" requires more than just infrastructure—it calls for a holistic approach that integrates both technology and governance. True digital sovereignty lies at the intersection of infrastructure and governance. Therefore, expanding the distribution of data centers and strengthening local data center and cloud services are vital to avoid dependence on foreign hosting and to retain control over data flows and digital services.[7] This helps ensure digital sovereignty through local management of data centers, which is increasingly vital, enabling African nations to control their data and technology standards while reducing dependence on foreign cloud and data center providers.

6. The techno-legal approach where sovereignty is enforced through both policy and physical control of hardware, complemented by open-source protocols to avoid vendor lock-in. As nations transition from passive consumers to active architects of their digital future, building sovereign clouds and resilient data ecosystems becomes imperative. This ensures that citizens' identities and financial records remain protected from foreign legal claims and geopolitical risks, fostering public trust and national security. Managing data growth in the digital era requires effective national and regional governance frameworks.

7. Building on the recognition that digital sovereignty requires both robust infrastructure and sound governance. To address these needs, the strategic expansion of localized data centres and cloud computing capacity is critical and supports the African Union Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030), which aims to ensure continental digital transformation through harmonized policies, legislation, and regulations, and to establish and improve digital infrastructure, networks and services. Hosting data within national borders not only safeguards sensitive information but also reduces latency for emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and 5G. This creates the "digital floor space" necessary for nations to manage critical workloads independently, reducing reliance on global hyperscale providers. Additionally, investments in Digital Public Infrastructure are also crucial, urging African nations to allocate at least 1 per cent of gross domestic product to national systems such as ID platforms and open data portals to ensure data reflects and serves African populations.[8]

8. Nevertheless, efforts towards digital transformation require the engagement of various stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, and international institutions. To move beyond rhetoric and address these issues, this roundtable brings together various stakeholders to discuss how Digital Public Infrastructures and data centers can help build a sovereign, inclusive digital future and promote growth throughout Africa.

5 Digital independence: Reclaiming Africa's tech sovereignty in a data-colonised world https://www.thecable.ng

6 Digital ID systems in Africa: Challenges, risks and opportunities

7 How shared digital infrastructure can bridge the gap in Africa https://www.weforum.org/

8 Data Sovereignty: Africa's Strategic Imperative in the Age of Algorithmic Power https://interface.media/blog/2025

## II. Objectives

8. The objective of the roundtable is to gather decision-makers and key players in the continent's digital transformation to discuss strategies and regulations for building strong, independent, and inclusive digital public infrastructure in Africa. It will focus on strategies, regulations, and the essential role of data centers in safeguarding data security and supporting digital sovereignty.

## III. Target audience

9. 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 (African Union Commission, African Development Bank, secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area, African Union Development Agency, regional economic communities);

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

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

## 8. Speakers

10. **H. E. Ndaba Gaolathe, Vice-President and Minister of Finance, Botswana**

11. **H. E. Américo Muchanga, Minister of Communications and Digital Transformation, Mozambique**

12. **Dr. Hon Pius Stephen Chaya, Deputy Minister, President's Office-Planning and Investment of United Republic of Tanzania**

13. **Ambassador Philip Thigo, Special Envoy for Technology, Kenya**

14. **Ms. Angela Wamola, Head of Sub-Saharan Africa, GSM Association**

15. **Mr. Adil El Youssefi, Chief Executive Officer Africa Data Centres, Cassava Technologies**

## 9. Focal points

16. The lead focal point for the round table discussion is the Chief of Emerging & Frontier Technologies, Innovation & Digital Transformation Section at 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)