

Connectivity, Diplomacy and Development: How Digital Diplomacy is Shaping Africa's SDG Agenda

Discussion Paper

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Executive Summary

With less than six years remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Africa stands at a defining digital crossroads. This paper argues that digital diplomacy has emerged as one of the most consequential levers available to the continent for accelerating SDG delivery and that Africa's transition from passive participant to active architect of the global digital order is both urgent and achievable, but only if matched by concrete structural reforms.

Africa's digital transformation has connected millions and created new economic opportunities, yet profound challenges persist. At 38% internet penetration against a global average of 68%, the continent's digital divide remains stark. Only 35% of SDG targets show adequate progress, while nearly a fifth are actively regressing. Geopolitical rivalries, particularly the U.S.-China competition playing out across African digital infrastructure, add further complexity to an already uneven landscape. Meanwhile, Africa remains largely absent from the ISO and equivalent standard-setting bodies that write the technical rulebook of the global digital economy, a structural exclusion with compounding consequences for SDG delivery.

The paper examines how leading African states are responding. Kenya's Silicon Savannah model and its Office of the Special Envoy on Technology demonstrate digital diplomatic ambition, though rapid AI adoption is outpacing governance frameworks. South Africa has leveraged its historic G20 Presidency to centre African priorities on AI governance and digital inclusion, though the gap between continental representation and genuine continental consensus remains a live tension. Ghana's cybersecurity diplomacy and pandemic-era digital resilience illustrate that deliberate investment in digital infrastructure before a crisis creates diplomatic advantage during one. At the continental level, the African Union's integration of digital tools into peacebuilding, combined with the AfCFTA's potential to create a unified digital market of 1.4 billion people, signals a meaningful maturation of Africa's collective digital diplomacy.

Two landmark frameworks provide the normative foundation for this agenda. The African Digital Compact, adopted in 2024, and the UN Global Digital Compact together create a complementary architecture through which Africa can engage global digital governance as a co-author rather than a recipient. Read alongside Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030, these

instruments establish both the continental vision and the global accountability framework within which Africa's digital diplomacy must now operate.

The paper advances five concrete recommendations. First, the AU should establish a Digital Standards Corps to end Africa's fragmented and ineffective engagement with ISO and ITU processes. Second, African foreign ministries must institutionalise Digital Diplomacy Units, building the professional human capacity on which every other recommendation depends. Third, digital partnerships must be reframed so that preferential access to African markets and data is conditioned on partners actively supporting Africa's participation in global standard-setting bodies. Fourth, the AfCFTA Secretariat must deliver a Digital Standards Protocol by 2030, establishing unified African positions on data interoperability, cybersecurity, and AI technical standards. Fifth, a Continental Digital Trade Dispute Resolution Mechanism must be established to enforce agreed standards and ensure that smaller economies have accessible recourse, because rules without remedies are not governance, they are aspiration.

Taken together, these recommendations are not aspirational gestures. They are the specific, executable steps that separate a continent that shapes the digital order from one that merely inherits it. Co-authorship of the digital age requires more than presence at the table; it requires preparation, coordination, and leverage. Africa has the frameworks, the demographic dynamism, and the growing diplomatic will. What it needs now is the institutional architecture to convert that will into structural change, before the SDG deadline closes and the window narrows.

Introduction

With less than six years remaining to achieve the SDGs, the African continent finds itself at a defining digital crossroads. Decisions made in Geneva, New York, and Nairobi today will shape the livelihoods of billions of people tomorrow. Africa's digital transformation over the years has connected millions of people and unlocked new economic opportunities, positioning the continent as a growing force in global technology conversationsⁱ. This has also been due to Africa being a fast adopter of technology. Several developments have led to improvements in internet infrastructure across the continent. However, challenges remain due to the digital divide and affordability constraintsⁱⁱ. A diverse ecosystem of actors is actively shaping digital policymaking. These include governments and tech developers, as well as civil society and local communities. They engage across inclusive platforms such as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)ⁱⁱⁱ and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)^{iv}, as well as through UN specialised agencies. These agencies cover areas such as telecommunications, e-commerce, and digital health. Yet for all this momentum, Africa's progress on the SDGs remains deeply uneven, undermined by geopolitical tensions and gaps. For instance, the U.S.-China rivalry has made Africa a key battleground, with China's digital Silk Road funding infrastructure across the continent, while the United States counters through initiatives such as the Digital Connectivity and cybersecurity partnership. Another key issue is that we have the continent at 38% internet usage rate compared to the world that is at 68%^v infrastructure deficit. Data from Africa renewal^{vi} paints a sobering picture. Only 35% of the targets show adequate progress, while 48% show insufficient progress. A further 17% have stalled, and 18% regressing. These limitations inform the persistent lack of Africa's voice in the global digital governance structures that most affect the continent.

It is against this backdrop that this paper examines how digital diplomacy is emerging as a critical lever for SDG delivery in Africa and what structural shifts are needed to ensure the continent's move from passive participant to active architect of the digital order that will define the next decade. Digital diplomacy has been defined in differing ways. For the current paper, the definition of digital diplomacy SDGs diplomacy refers to the practice of promoting and implementing the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through diplomatic efforts, international cooperation, and negotiation, with digital diplomacy extending this practice into online and technology-mediated spaces^{vii}

The Pact for the Future^{viii}, adopted at the 2024 Summit of the Future, is explicitly designed to amplify implementation of the SDGs, committing to greater voice and representation for developing countries in international financial institutions and mobilising additional financing for development. Its annexed Global Digital Compact further commits member states to investing in resilient digital infrastructure, connecting schools and hospitals to the internet, and developing financing mechanisms to bridge the digital divide, all explicitly linked to SDGs 1, 3, 4, 9, and 11. While the Declaration on Future Generations and the UN Pact for the Future offer frameworks that can help African countries accelerate SDG achievement and secure the well-being of generations to come, what the continent urgently needs is a coherent SDG ecosystem approach that consolidates existing continental resources and aligns them with global development goals. The African Union's Agenda 2063^{ix} provides precisely this kind of platform, positioning Africa simultaneously as a producer and a consumer in the global digital economy, and articulating a vision of an integrated, inclusive digital society. Complementing this, the AU's Digital Transformation Strategy^x provides a concrete roadmap to align national digital policies with continental ambitions. Together, these frameworks create the architecture through which digital diplomacy can be deployed not merely as a tool of foreign policy, but as a lever for sustainable development.

Countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa have already demonstrated what active engagement with multilateralism looks like. Each has contributed in distinct but complementary ways to advancing digital governance and SDG-related issues at the global level. Ghana has been a leading voice in nurturing a multilateral ethos, with its former President serving as an SDG advocate and organising an SDG Investment Fair to promote SDG financing roadmaps in collaboration with the World Economic Forum and the United Nations. Ghana also co-founded the Coalition on Science, Technology, and Innovation for Africa's Development in 2023,^{xi} launched during the first UN STI Africa Day and designed to accelerate the application of science and technology in support of the SDGs across all five African regions.^{xii}

Kenya, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, used its position to raise critical issues around digital technologies and international peace and security. In May 2021, Kenya co-organised an informal Security Council meeting on the impact of emerging technologies on international peace and security, specifically addressing the dangers posed by the militarisation of emerging technologies in the context of terrorism.^{xiii} Kenya's Ambassador

Martin Kimani further distinguished the country as a strong advocate for multilateralism, urging the international community to renew its commitment to seeking peace and security.

South Africa reaffirmed its commitment to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs at the SDG Summit in September 2023, pledging transformation in critical areas including the just energy transition, climate finance, and digital inclusion.^{xiv} South Africa also chaired the Coalition on Science, Technology, and Innovation for Africa's Development, before handing over the chairpersonship in January 2025, underscoring its role in driving STI-led SDG implementation across the continent.^{xv}

Yet meaningful participation in global digital governance remains uneven across the continent. While a growing number of African countries engage actively in processes led by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)^{xvi} and contribute to cybersecurity norm-setting through UN bodies, participation in the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO)^{xvii} remains strikingly low, and this gap carries direct consequences for Africa's ability to achieve its SDG targets.

ISO standards govern the technical architecture of the digital economy: data interoperability, cybersecurity protocols, and the specifications underpinning cross-border digital trade. They are, in effect, the silent rulebook of the digital age, and the same digital infrastructure that SDG 9 envisions as a driver of inclusive industrialisation and innovation. Africa is largely absent from the room where that rulebook is written. The consequence is a form of structural dependency that trade agreements and connectivity investments alone cannot resolve: African businesses and governments are left operating within technical frameworks designed for economies with fundamentally different infrastructure realities, regulatory capacities, and developmental priorities, undermining the very digital foundations on which SDG progress depends.

This representation gap is therefore not a technical matter to be quietly delegated to standards bodies. It is a diplomatic priority that belongs at the centre of Africa's digital foreign policy agenda, demanding the same strategic intentionality and collective resolve that African nations have rightly brought to AI governance and digital trade. The continent cannot credibly claim co-authorship of the digital age, nor accelerate its SDG commitments, while remaining absent from the rooms where its foundational rules are written.

I. Emerging Technologies, AI, and the SDG Paradox

The impact of technological change on the SDGs^{xviii} is well documented. From SDG 3 on good health and well-being to SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, digital technologies have transformed how governments deliver services, engage citizens, manage information, and plan for the future, including through the rise of smart city frameworks that leverage data and connectivity to improve urban living across the continent. Kigali exemplifies smart city innovation by attracting institutions such as Carnegie Mellon University and the African Leadership University alongside innovation incubators, while deploying smart technologies to improve urban services, hence positioning the city as a regional model for technology-driven sustainable development.^{xix}

The field of diplomacy and international communication has evolved significantly, moving from general digital diplomacy practice toward a more specialised and consequential domain. AI diplomacy refers to how countries manage their international relationships regarding artificial intelligence, encompassing the full range of activities nations use to navigate the challenges and opportunities that AI presents. It is not merely about a new technology; it represents the next chapter in how humanity governs itself, communicates, and manages power.^{xx} It is the emergence of AI, and its convergence with diplomatic practice, that presents the most complex challenge for Africa's SDG agenda. Used responsibly, AI has the potential to increase progress in support of the SDGs, but a significant AI divide persists, with many underserved communities in the Global South facing acute challenges in developing, deploying, and adopting AI technologies^{xxi}. For Africa, AI is now regarded as a strategic asset pivotal to achieving both Agenda 2063 and the SDGs. Yet the continent risks being shaped by AI rather than shaping it. Africa holds less than 1% of global data capacity and would require an estimated \$2.6 trillion^{xxii} in investment by 2030 to bridge the infrastructure gap, a deficit that strikes at the very foundations of meaningful AI diplomacy and SDG delivery.

AI carries enormous potential: it can accelerate service delivery, improve agricultural yields, strengthen health diagnostics, and enhance financial inclusion for populations long excluded from formal systems. Rwanda offers a compelling African model in this regard. Through its National AI Policy, the country has adopted an ambitious plan to deploy AI across key sectors including agriculture, health, financial services, and public administration, with early warning systems providing farmers with more accurate weather predictions to support food security, and AI tools being deployed to improve healthcare delivery and streamline government

operations through data-driven decision-making Rwanda's National AI Policy, launched in 2023, sets a target of developing 50 AI applications across various sectors by 2029, positioning the country as Africa's centre of excellence for responsible AI practices^{xxiii} These ambitions align directly with the SDG agenda, from SDG 2 on zero hunger and SDG 3 on good health, to SDG 8 on decent work and SDG 9 on innovation and infrastructure, demonstrating that with the right policy architecture, AI and SDG delivery can be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive

But it also introduces a profound paradox. Poorly governed AI risks deepening the very inequalities that the SDGs seek to eliminate, concentrating technological gains among already-advantaged nations and communities while leaving others further behind. For Africa, where AI adoption is accelerating rapidly, but regulatory and governance frameworks are still evolving, this paradox is not theoretical; it is an urgent diplomatic and developmental reality^{xxiv}. How African nations collectively navigate AI governance in multilateral spaces will therefore be as consequential for SDG delivery as any infrastructure investment or financing arrangement.

II. The African Digital Compact and the Global Digital Compact: Africa Speaking with One Voice

One of the digital diplomacy tenets is the creation of coalitions of stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, and civil society, to tackle common problems. Issue-based UN and AU compacts have become one of the means through which SDGs are implemented. An example is the merging of actors in the digital domain, as the African Digital Compact and the UN Global Digital Compact show.

The African Digital Compact (ADC),^{xxv} adopted by the African Union in July 2024 at the 45th Ordinary Session of the AU Executive Council in Accra, Ghana, represents a landmark moment in the continent's digital diplomacy journey. Far from being a mere regional echo of global frameworks, the ADC functions as a context-specific application of the same core principles underpinning the UN Global Digital Compact (GDC)^{xxvi}, building an inclusive, open, safe, and secure digital future, while deliberately tailoring these principles to Africa's unique infrastructure realities, developmental priorities, and digital sovereignty aspirations. Together, the ADC and the GDC create a complementary architecture through which African nations can engage global digital governance processes not as recipients of externally designed frameworks, but as co-authors of the rules that will govern the digital age.

In doing so, the two compacts speak directly to the SDG framework at multiple levels. Most explicitly, they embody SDG 17, strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising the global partnership for sustainable development, by institutionalising multilateral cooperation on digital governance between African and global actors. But their reach extends further: the compacts' commitments to digital inclusion and connectivity advance SDG 9 on resilient infrastructure and innovation; their emphasis on data governance and cybersecurity supports SDG 16 on accountable institutions; and their focus on bridging the digital divide reinforces SDG 10 on reduced inequalities. Read together, the ADC and GDC are not merely digital policy instruments; they are SDG delivery mechanisms.

The alignment between the two compacts is most visible across four thematic areas. The first is bridging the digital divide. Both the GDC and the ADC prioritise universal, affordable connectivity as a foundational condition for inclusive digital development. This commitment maps directly onto SDG 9, which calls for resilient infrastructure and affordable access to information and communications technology, and SDG 10, which demands a reduction in inequalities within and among countries, recognising that in the digital age, connectivity is no longer a luxury but a prerequisite for participation in economic and social life. For Africa, where the ITU estimates that only 38% of the population was online in 2024 against a global average of 68%, closing the connectivity gap is not merely a digital policy objective it is a condition for SDG progress across the board.^{xxvii} However, the ADC situates this commitment within Africa's specific context, where internet penetration rates remain among the lowest in the world and where the cost of mobile data continues to place meaningful connectivity beyond the reach of millions. For Africa, universal connectivity is not merely a development target; it is a prerequisite for participation in the global digital economy and a precondition for SDG delivery across nearly every goal.

The second area of alignment is the digital economy and innovation^{xxviii}. Both frameworks recognise the transformative potential of digital technology as an SDG accelerator, emphasising the need to foster digital literacy, support entrepreneurship, and create enabling regulatory environments that allow innovation to flourish. For Africa, home to one of the world's youngest and fastest-growing populations, this represents both an enormous opportunity and a significant responsibility. With a median age of just 19 years and 70% of Africans under the age of 30, Africa is the world's youngest continent, and by 2050, more than one in four humans on earth will be African.^{xxix} By 2030, young Africans are expected to make

up 42% of the world's youth.^{xxx} This demographic reality transforms the digital agenda from a technical policy matter into a generational imperative. Harnessing this youth dividend through digital inclusion, skills development, and innovation directly advances SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, and SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, making the commitments enshrined in both the ADC and GDC not merely aspirational, but existentially urgent for Africa's development trajectory. Harnessing this demographic dividend through strategic digital diplomacy could reposition the continent from a consumer of global technology to a producer and exporter of digital solutions tailored to the Global South. Yet the same demographic force carries a warning. Where digital opportunity is denied, delayed, or captured by elites, Africa's youth bulge risks tipping from dividend into disruption. Recent history offers stark illustrations: Kenya's Generation Z protests of 2024, which were organised and amplified through social media platforms, forced a government reversal on a controversial finance bill and shook the foundations of political governance; South Africa's Fees Must Fall movement used digital activism to mobilise a generation locked out of higher education; and the broader wave of youth-led uprisings across the Sahel reflect the volatile consequences of a young population confronting unemployment, inequality, and exclusion. These movements are not anomalies; they are signals. They underscore that the failure to invest in digital inclusion, quality education, and decent work for Africa's youth does not merely stall SDG progress; it actively generates the instability that makes such progress impossible.

The third area is data governance and protection. Both the GDC and the ADC emphasise the importance of building robust, rights-respecting data ecosystems that protect citizens while enabling the flow of data necessary for economic growth and public service delivery. This commitment speaks directly to SDG 16, which calls for accountable, transparent, and inclusive institutions at all levels, recognising that in the digital age, data governance is inseparable from good governance itself. It also connects to SDG 17, which underscores the importance of data, monitoring, and accountability frameworks as foundational tools for tracking and accelerating SDG implementation across all 17 goals.

This is particularly significant for Africa, where data sovereignty, the right of nations and communities to govern their own data, has emerged as a central concern in diplomatic engagements. At stake is not only the protection of citizens' rights, but Africa's ability to derive economic value from its own data rather than ceding that value to external platforms and corporations, a dynamic that directly undermines SDG 10 on reduced inequalities and SDG 8

on inclusive economic growth. The AU Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection provides an important regional foundation, though harmonisation across member states remains an ongoing challenge that digital diplomacy must continue to address and one whose resolution is essential if Africa is to exercise meaningful data sovereignty and translate its digital resources into SDG progress.

The fourth and perhaps most structurally significant area of alignment is multi-stakeholder collaboration. Like the GDC, the ADC recognises that no single actor, whether government, private sector, or civil society, can address the complexity of digital governance alone. The ADC's proposal for an African Digital Cooperation Forum (ADCF)^{xxxii} is a concrete expression of this principle, creating a dedicated continental platform to harmonise digital initiatives, reduce fragmentation, and amplify Africa's collective voice in global negotiations. Crucially, the ADC also works in tandem with the AU Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy (CAIS)^{xxxiii}, ensuring that as AI becomes an increasingly central feature of digital diplomacy, Africa's engagement with this technology is grounded in ethical principles and oriented towards outcomes that benefit all of humanity, not just the most technologically advanced nations.

Taken together, the ADC and its alignment with the GDC signal a maturing of Africa's digital diplomacy. The continent is no longer simply responding to frameworks designed elsewhere; it is actively contributing to the architecture of global digital governance. The challenge now is implementation, translating these ambitious frameworks into tangible improvements in connectivity, data rights, and digital opportunity for Africa's over 1.4 billion people^{xxxiii}. That implementation gap is, at its core, an SDG gap. Closing it requires not only political will and financial investment, but the kind of sustained, strategic digital diplomacy that ensures Africa's developmental priorities, from universal health coverage under SDG 3, to quality education under SDG 4, to decent work under SDG 8, to reduced inequalities under SDG 10, are embedded in the very architecture of the global digital order being built today.

III. Digital Diplomacy in Action: Country and Continental Case Studies

It is increasingly evident that digital diplomacy is actively reshaping foreign policy across the African continent, moving well beyond the use of social media as a diplomatic tool towards strategic, policy-driven approaches that address local development needs and navigate complex geopolitical realities. The experiences of Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana, alongside the

continental leadership of the African Union, illustrate the diverse ways in which African actors are deploying digital diplomacy in service of their development agendas.

Kenya: The Silicon Savannah and AI for Development

Kenya has firmly established itself as one of Africa's foremost technology hubs, earning the designation of the "Silicon Savannah"^{xxxiv} through decades of deliberate investment in digital infrastructure, mobile innovation, and a thriving tech entrepreneurship ecosystem. This technological dynamism has translated directly into diplomatic influence. Kenya has played a leading role in regional dialogues aimed at developing African-centric AI governance frameworks that seek to ensure AI adoption benefits local communities and aligns with international standards, rather than simply importing governance models designed for very different economic and social contexts. Kenya's partnership with the European Union^{xxxv} (EU) has further deepened this agenda, with collaboration focused on digital infrastructure development, AI governance, and strengthening the broader digital ecosystem in ways that speak directly to SDG 9 on industry, innovation, and infrastructure, and SDG 17 on partnerships for the goals.

The establishment of the Office of the Special Envoy on Technology represents a new paradigm in diplomatic engagement with the digital economy and emerging technologies by addressing digital and tech diplomacy including generative AI, quantum computing, and microchips, with an explicit focus on international partnerships that deliver public value and address the SDGs, including contextual development priorities such as health, climate, and the use of AI to improve efficiency and service delivery^{xxxvi}

Yet Kenya's experience also surfaces an important tension that thought leadership on this subject cannot afford to ignore. The 2024 Stanford AI Index^{xxxvii} identified Kenyans as among the world's most frequent users of AI tools, a statistic that underscores both the country's digital maturity and the urgency of a question Kenya has not yet fully resolved: rapid AI adoption is outpacing the regulatory and governance frameworks needed to ensure it serves development priorities rather than undermining them. Kenya is simultaneously a model of digital ambition and a cautionary illustration of the governance lag that afflicts even the continent's most digitally advanced economies. The lesson for the continent is therefore not simply to replicate Kenya's enthusiasm, but to pair it with the institutional investment in AI governance that transforms adoption into accountability.

Kenya is therefore simultaneously a model of digital ambition and a cautionary illustration of the governance lag that afflicts even the continent's most digitally advanced economies. For the SDG agenda, this duality matters enormously. Where Kenya's digital diplomacy succeeds, in attracting investment, shaping AI governance norms, and institutionalising tech diplomacy through the Special Envoy's office, it advances SDG 9, SDG 17, and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth. Where it falters, through regulatory overreach, inadequate stakeholder inclusion, or governance frameworks that lag behind adoption, it risks entrenching the very inequalities and institutional weaknesses that the SDGs are designed to overcome. The lesson for the continent is therefore not simply to replicate Kenya's enthusiasm, but to pair it with the institutional investment in AI governance that transforms adoption into accountability

South Africa: G20 Multilateralism and Digital Economic Diplomacy

South Africa has leveraged its prominent position in multilateral forums, most notably the G20, to amplify Africa's collective voice on digital governance and emerging technology. South Africa has leveraged its prominent position in multilateral forums, most notably the G20, to amplify Africa's collective voice on digital governance and emerging technology. The G20 represents one of the most consequential diplomatic platforms for advancing Africa's development agenda, bringing together the world's largest economies and providing a forum where decisions on trade, investment, infrastructure, and increasingly digital governance are shaped, making Africa's presence and voice within it not a diplomatic courtesy, but a developmental necessity. As the first African country to hold the G20 Presidency, South Africa's 2025 chairship marked a historic inflection point, an opportunity to embed African priorities, including digital inclusion, AI governance, and SDG financing, at the very heart of the world's most economically powerful multilateral table. This positioning speaks directly to SDG 17, which calls for strengthening the means of implementation through global partnerships and ensuring that developing countries have a meaningful voice in the institutions and processes that govern the global economy, including its rapidly digitalising dimensions. During its G20 engagements, South Africa championed the "AI for Africa"^{xxxviii} initiative in partnership with the African Union and UNESCO, pushing specifically for AI to be treated as a tool for economic and social development across the continent rather than reduced to a commercial or security concern. In practical terms, this meant advocating for AI governance frameworks that centre the needs of developing economies, prioritise skills development and job creation in line with SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, and ensure that the

benefits of AI are distributed rather than concentrated. Beyond AI, South Africa has used its multilateral positioning to advance continental positions on cybersecurity, digital trade, and the digital divide, issues that map directly onto SDG 10 on reduced inequalities and SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

What distinguishes South Africa's approach is not merely the breadth of its engagement but its deliberate function as a bridge between the African continent and the broader international community, and between the development imperatives of the Global South and the norm-setting processes of the Global North^{xxxix}. This bridging role, however, carries its own tension. South Africa's G20 prominence can create the impression of continental representation, where genuine continental consensus has not always been built. The most consequential question for South Africa's digital diplomacy is therefore not whether it has a seat at the global table, but whether the positions it advances there are truly co-authored with the continent it speaks for.

Ghana: Cybersecurity Diplomacy and Pandemic-Era Digital Resilience

Ghana has distinguished itself through its deliberate prioritisation of cybersecurity as a core element of its foreign policy, recognising that cyber resilience is simultaneously a national security imperative, an international relations asset, and a development necessity^{xl}. As African economies become more deeply integrated into global digital systems, the exposure to cyber threats grows proportionally, and Ghana's investment in bilateral and regional cybersecurity agreements speaks directly to SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, recognising that digital security is not separable from the broader project of building capable, trustworthy states. Ghana's approach reflects an understanding that cybersecurity diplomacy is not a niche technical concern but a foundational condition for the digital economy that every other SDG ambition depends upon.

Ghana's digital diplomacy was further tested and validated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it was among the first African countries to pivot decisively to virtual platforms to maintain international relations, foster multilateral collaborations, and advance ICT-driven development agendas at a time when traditional diplomatic channels were severely disrupted^{xli}. This was not merely an improvisation; it was a demonstration that digital resilience, when cultivated deliberately, becomes a diplomatic asset precisely when conventional tools fail. What makes Ghana's pandemic pivot significant beyond the moment is what it revealed: that countries that invest in digital diplomatic infrastructure before a crisis are better positioned to

lead during one. For a continent where crises, health, climate, and security are not hypothetical but recurring, this is a lesson with profound implications for how African governments should be building their diplomatic capabilities today.

However, the pandemic simultaneously exposed a far less flattering dimension of Africa's digital diplomatic moment. While Ghana and a handful of similarly positioned states demonstrated commendable agility, the majority of AU member states struggled to sustain meaningful diplomatic engagement through digital channels, revealing that the continent's digital readiness is profoundly uneven. This unevenness carries direct consequences for SDG achievement: when countries cannot participate effectively in the digital multilateral spaces where development financing, health coordination, and climate commitments are negotiated, they are structurally disadvantaged in securing the resources and partnerships that Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 require. The pandemic, in this sense, did not merely test digital diplomacy; it exposed the cost of its absence, and made visible the risk that digital inequality within Africa could solidify into a two-tier continental diplomacy, where digitally capable states like Ghana set agendas while others are left to endorse them. Both Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 implicitly acknowledge this logic, the former through its insistence on leaving no one behind in the digital transition, the latter through its vision of an Africa whose institutions are capable, responsive, and interconnected. For a continent where crises health, climate, security, are not hypothetical but recurring, this is a lesson with profound implications for how African governments should be building their diplomatic capabilities today, and for how the AU must continue to function: not merely as a convening body, but as the digital backbone of Africa's collective voice in global governance, one that actively works to close the digital divide among its own members before that divide permanently stratifies African influence on the world stage.

The African Union: Digital Tools for Peacebuilding and Digital Trade Integration

At the continental level, the African Union has increasingly integrated digital tools into its peacebuilding and conflict prevention architecture, recognising that digital diplomacy is not only about economic development but also about peace and security^{xlii}. Simultaneously, African countries are embedding digital technology into trade agreements with growing sophistication, addressing data flows, compliance frameworks, and digital market access as core components of trade diplomacy rather than afterthoughts. This evolution is most visibly captured in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)^{xliii}, which has the potential to create a unified digital market of over 1.4 billion people and reposition Africa as a significant

force in shaping the global rules of digital trade. Taken together, these country and continental examples confirm that Africa's digital diplomacy has matured considerably, evolving from reactive engagement to proactive, strategically coherent participation in the global digital order.

Recommendations

The challenges outlined in this paper are significant, but they are not insurmountable. What Africa needs now is not more frameworks; it has those, but concrete, executable actions that translate diplomatic ambition into structural change. Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 have already supplied the normative architecture; the deficit is not vision but implementation capacity, and closing that gap requires targeted institutional investments that convert continental commitments into operational realities. Five recommendations stand out as priorities.

First, the African Union should establish a dedicated AU Digital Standards Corps, comprising technical experts drawn from member states and mandated specifically to coordinate African participation in ISO and equivalent standard-setting bodies. Currently, the few African countries that engage these processes do so in isolation, arriving without coordinated continental positions and leaving without collective impact. A Digital Standards Corps would pool scarce expertise, ensure unified African delegations, and transform the continent's engagement from fragmented and reactive to strategic and consistent. This is not a new institution for its own sake; it is the missing link between Africa's normative digital ambitions and the technical processes that actually govern digital infrastructure. African exclusion from digital standard-setting is precisely the kind of structural inequity that SDG 17 was designed to address, and the establishment of a Digital Standards Corps would be a direct institutional response to that gap. Equally, Agenda 2063's vision of an integrated, innovation-driven Africa cannot be realised if the continent's digital infrastructure is built on standards designed elsewhere, for other contexts, reflecting other interests. Standard-setting is where the digital economy's power geometry is determined, and Africa's absence from those rooms has compounding consequences that no amount of downstream policy reform can fully correct.

From a digital diplomacy perspective, the Corps would also serve a function beyond technical representation. It would become a vehicle for building the kind of sustained, relationship-based engagement with international standard-setting communities that converts occasional participation into genuine influence. Digital diplomacy, at its most effective, is not episodic; it

is the product of continuous presence, institutional credibility, and accumulated trust. A permanent, well-resourced Corps would give Africa exactly this: a recognised, expert interlocutor that global bodies know, consult, and must reckon with. This is not a new institution for its own sake. It is the missing link between Africa's normative digital ambitions and the technical processes that actually govern the digital order.

Second, digital partnerships must be fundamentally reframed. Any partner, whether a state or a multilateral body, seeking preferential access to African digital markets or data should be required to actively support Africa's capacity to participate in ISO and equivalent bodies, through funding, technical assistance, and co-sponsorship of African delegations. Digital partnerships that do not address the standard-setting deficit are, at best, incomplete and, at worst, instruments that deepen structural dependency beneath the language of cooperation. Embedding this condition into bilateral and multilateral negotiations gives African negotiators a concrete new leverage point, one that is long overdue. The SDG framework provides both the moral and the procedural basis for this reframing. SDG 17 is unambiguous in its insistence that global partnerships for sustainable development must be equitable, with developed countries and capable multilateral actors bearing specific obligations to support developing nations' capacity to participate meaningfully in global governance processes. A digital partnership that extracts data or market access from African economies while doing nothing to strengthen Africa's voice in the bodies that govern those very markets is a partnership that fails the SDG 17 test entirely. Similarly, SDG 10, which calls for the reduction of inequalities within and between countries, applies with direct force to the structural inequalities embedded in current digital partnership models. Reframing partnership conditionalities is therefore not a confrontational posture; it is an entirely legitimate demand grounded in frameworks that Africa's partners have themselves endorsed.

From a digital diplomacy standpoint, embedding this condition into bilateral and multilateral negotiations gives African negotiators a concrete and principled new leverage point, one that is long overdue. Effective digital diplomacy is not only about securing favourable terms in individual agreements; it is about progressively reshaping the structural conditions under which all future agreements are negotiated. By making standard-setting support a non-negotiable element of digital partnership frameworks, African states would be doing precisely what sophisticated digital powers already do: using each negotiation to incrementally expand their systemic influence rather than simply extracting transactional gains. The AU has a critical

coordinating role to play here, ensuring that member states adopt this conditionality consistently rather than allowing partners to exploit fragmentation by negotiating separately with individual countries on more favourable terms. Agenda 2063's vision of an Africa that is a strong, united voice in global affairs demands exactly this kind of coordinated diplomatic discipline, the recognition that Africa's collective bargaining power is always greater than the sum of its individual negotiating positions, and that digital diplomacy is one of the most consequential arenas in which that collective power must now be deployed.

Third, and most urgently, the AfCFTA Secretariat must negotiate a dedicated Digital Standards Protocol with a clear delivery deadline of 2030. This protocol should establish common African positions on data interoperability, cybersecurity specifications, and AI technical standards for intra-African digital trade. The benefits are twofold: internally, it would dismantle the fragmentation that currently prevents African businesses from trading seamlessly across borders; externally, it would arm Africa with a unified technical position to bring to ISO, ITU, and other global standard-setting processes. A continent that cannot agree on its own technical standards cannot credibly demand influence over global ones. The 2030 deadline also performs a diplomatic function in its own right. By anchoring the protocol's delivery to the Agenda 2030 review cycle, the AfCFTA Secretariat and the AU would be creating a moment of international accountability, one at which Africa can demonstrate, in technical and measurable terms, the progress made toward digital integration and present unified positions that the global community must engage with seriously. Agenda 2063 envisions an Africa whose institutions are capable, integrated, and globally respected; a Digital Standards Protocol delivered by 2030 would be one of the most concrete demonstrations that this vision is being operationalised rather than merely proclaimed. A continent that cannot agree on its own technical standards cannot credibly demand influence over global ones, but a continent that has done so, within a decade, and in alignment with both its own long-range blueprint and the universal sustainability agenda, will have earned a seat at the table that no partner can reasonably deny.

Fourth, African foreign ministries must establish dedicated Digital Diplomacy Units staffed by professionals with hybrid expertise in international law, cyber policy, data governance, and digital trade. The AU should complement this with a continent-wide Digital Diplomacy Training Programme, ensuring member states can field technically competent negotiators rather than generalist diplomats routinely outmatched by the specialist teams that partner states deploy. Every other recommendation in this paper depends on human capacity to implement

it. SDG 4's commitment to relevant skills development and SDG 16's vision of capable, effective institutions both speak directly to this deficit, and no amount of architectural ambition will compensate for the absence of the people needed to execute it.

Lastly, a Digital Standards Protocol without enforcement is a declaration of intent, not a governance instrument. The AU and AfCFTA Secretariat must establish a Continental Digital Trade Dispute Resolution Mechanism as a companion to the Digital Standards Protocol, empowered to issue binding determinations on disputes involving data flows, cybersecurity compliance, and AI governance. It must be designed for accessibility, ensuring smaller economies are not disadvantaged in proceedings. SDG 16's demand for inclusive institutions that provide access to justice, and SDG 10's focus on reducing structural inequalities, both apply directly here. Externally, a credible enforcement architecture signals to global partners that Africa's digital market is governed by rules that are not merely written but upheld, a demonstration of institutional maturity that no diplomatic statement alone can substitute for.

Taken together, these recommendations are not aspirational gestures. They are the specific, executable steps that separate a continent that shapes the digital order from one that merely inherits it.

In conclusion, co-authorship requires more than presence; it requires preparation, coordination, and leverage. That means building an AU Digital Standards Corps to end Africa's absence from ISO processes, embedding standard-setting participation in every digital partnership agreement the continent signs, and delivering an AfCFTA Digital Standards Protocol before the SDG deadline closes. These are not aspirational gestures. They are the specific, executable steps that separate a continent that shapes the digital order from one that inherits it.

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