

INTERNATIONAL E-COMMERCE IN AFRICA: THE WAY FORWARD



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Abstract for trade information services

ID=43172

2015

C-10 000 INT

International Trade Centre (ITC)

International E-Commerce in Africa: The Way Forward.

Geneva: ITC, 2015. xii, 47 pages (Technical paper)

Doc.No. EC-15-364.E

The paper discussing the barriers hampering development of e-commerce in Africa - gives an overview of the e-commerce potential throughout Africa; explores common barriers grouped into four broad areas - financial, infrastructure, socio-political and digital divide, each of which is discussed in a separate chapter; seeks to identify the reasons for these barriers, using insights provided by e-commerce entrepreneurs in several African countries; presents examples of local successes such as Nigeria, alongside examples which illustrate the challenges to replicating such successes elsewhere on the continent; suggests avenues for reducing the obstacles and facilitating international e-commerce on the continent; includes endnotes and sources (pp. 45-47).

Descriptors: **Africa; Electronic Commerce, Information and Communication Technologies, SMEs.**

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English

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Foreword

The landscape of trade is constantly evolving. And the way that goods and services cross borders is transforming. Businesses today can use the Internet to manage almost every business process, from product sourcing and purchase to financial management, sales, marketing and distribution, cutting down on costs and reaching new markets.

The growth of e-commerce is a unique opportunity to open access to international markets for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing and least developed countries (LDCs). E-commerce – estimated at over US\$15 trillion for annual business-to-business transactions and well over US\$1 trillion for annual business-to-consumer trade – is now business as usual in developed countries. However, this is not the case in many developing countries where use of e-commerce remains low. The current share of consumer e-commerce by African enterprises, for example, is below 2%, and has enormous potential. By 2018, the African e-commerce market is projected to soar to US\$ 50 billion, from just US\$ 8 billion in 2013.

Field experience in developing countries and LDCs confirms that to realize this potential, additional support is required to help SMEs overcome the barriers to trading through online channels and marketplaces. These barriers are not new, but take on greater importance when transactions become digital.

Receiving international payments is a key part of trade, whether online or offline. Without an international bank account or credit card enterprises may not be able to list products on well-known online marketplaces. Some (in particular those for digital goods) may allow enterprises to list products, but exclude them from having an account to receive payments. These restrictions are not the result of government policy or company weakness but are decided by private owners of e-marketplaces and payment platforms, who determine transaction risks. Work is also needed to better position Africa as a new source of opportunities and growth for their platforms.

Selling online requires enterprises to master information and communications technologies, and develop suitable packaging, attractive product descriptions and well-managed inventory of stock, production and orders. For small enterprises, especially from LDCs, the learning curve is very steep. Getting it wrong can have serious consequences.

In a virtual marketplace, meeting consumer needs and expectations becomes even more important. Word of mouth, electronic messaging and buying on the basis of personal recommendation can make or break commercial reputations. These reputations are quickly built and destroyed on the Internet. But using the platforms offers a great opportunity for African businesses, given that many African countries have been quick to adopt mobile technologies, with a young and innovative population of enthusiastic social media users. There is great potential here.

This is why ITC's interventions on e-commerce have evolved in recent years, from general awareness-raising to specific support and coaching: taking groups of enterprises through the steps of preparing their goods and services for sale, and accompanying them as they develop their trade through online channels.

We sought to learn from the testimonial of managers from across Africa. Their own words outline their challenges in selling products and services online. We identified recurrent issues and proposed some practical actions that African firms can take, collectively or with the help of international partners. Access to better training and coaching can reduce some barriers. More comprehensive solutions require new forms of partnership and innovative approaches from government, trade and investment support institutions, and enterprises themselves. This paper provides insights to shape such solutions. We hope that businesses in Africa interested in taking advantage of e-commerce will be inspired by it.



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Acknowledgements

ITC would like to acknowledge the support of its parent organizations, UNCTAD and WTO, in their efforts to disseminate understanding and advance the agenda for improving access to e-commerce, in developing countries and beyond. It further acknowledges the work of UNCTAD's ICT Analysis Section in producing the *Information Economy Report 2015: Unlocking the Potential of E-commerce for Developing Countries*, and UNCTAD's work with ITC on e-business in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society.

ITC wishes to thank Usman Ahmed, Head of Global Public Policy at PayPal, for his expert comments and review.

The case studies for this paper were developed by Abdel Basset Boulelouah and Mohamed Es Fih, International Trade Centre. The paper was written by consultant Kim Andreasson under the supervision of James Howe, International Trade Centre, with writing and editorial contributions from Erica Meltzer.

Editorial management and production was led by Natalie Domeisen with Evelyn Seltier. Serge Adeagbo and Franco Iacovino provided digital printing services.

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