



Reimagining Cooperation on Trade and Sustainability: An African Perspective

**The Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance, University of Cape Town
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The “Reimagining Cooperation on Trade and Sustainability: An African Perspective” workshop, convened by the **Remaking Trade for a Sustainable Future Project (RTP)** in collaboration with the **Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance**, the **Forum on Trade, Environment, & the SDGs (TESS)**, and the **German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS)**, brought together over 90 stakeholders from government, civil society, academia, international organizations, and the private sector. Discussions focused on aligning Africa’s trade and development goals with sustainability imperatives amid climate risks, geopolitical shifts, and structural inequalities. The sessions featured deep dialogue on trade governance, industrialisation, climate policy, and inclusive development, placing emphasis on African-led reform, digital transformation, and intra-African cooperation.

Session 1: Framing the African Context (AU/AfCFTA)

This session opened the workshop with a critical reflection on Africa’s role in the global trade system, calling attention to the continent’s history of robust policy blueprints and institutional visions that have often failed at the implementation stage. Discussions highlighted the urgent need to close the gap between vision and execution, with panellists advocating for a shift from fragmented national efforts to a unified continental approach, particularly in the face of increasing geopolitical instability. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) was presented as a potentially transformative tool to drive intra-African trade, address structural economic weaknesses, and reduce dependence on extractive exports. Participants stressed the importance of

building domestic demand, resolving the debt burden that limits fiscal space, and leveraging new technologies—especially digital infrastructure—to enable African-led economic pathways. The session underscored the importance of using the AfCFTA not just as a market integration instrument but also as a framework for reimagining Africa’s place in global economic governance.

Session 2: Sustainable Industrialisation and Inclusive Growth

This session challenged conventional definitions of industrialisation, presenting a broader and more inclusive vision that extends beyond manufacturing to encompass agribusiness, digital services, and informal economies. It highlighted the need for people-centered, environmentally conscious growth strategies that account for Africa’s unique demographic and development challenges. Panellists argued that industrialisation in Africa must be deeply rooted in the continent’s own priorities, leveraging its youthful population, cultural assets, and natural resources. The discussion emphasized the limitations of the current global trade system and the opportunities presented by the weakening of multilateral enforcement mechanisms, allowing for greater experimentation with local industrial policies. The AfCFTA was identified as a pivotal platform to facilitate regional value chains, promote green industrialisation, and build an integrated continental infrastructure. However, its success was seen as dependent on the enforcement of rules of origin, cross-border policy coordination, and targeted investment in skills and basic infrastructure such as power and logistics.

Session 3: Trade and the Climate Nexus

This session explored the intersection of global climate policy and international trade, focusing on how Africa can navigate emerging trade-related climate measures such as the European Union’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), due diligence requirements, and sustainability standards. These measures, while framed as tools for global climate action, were viewed by many participants as potential barriers to African development, particularly in sectors like agriculture, where many producers are resource-poor and face challenges complying with complex regulatory demands. The discussion warned of externally imposed definitions of sustainability that ignore local contexts and socio-economic needs. There was a strong call for Africa to assert its own priorities in climate-related trade policy, to protect domestic policy space, and to advocate for special and differential treatment in multilateral forums. The session also emphasized the need for regional cooperation in building green industrial capacity, increasing agricultural productivity, and ensuring that climate action does not become another vector of marginalization for African economies.

Keynote Address: Reform Challenges in the New Geopolitical Context

This keynote address focused on the urgent need for reform of global trade institutions, particularly the World Trade Organization (WTO), in light of growing unilateralism and geopolitical competition. The speaker emphasized that Africa must not wait to be invited into global reform

conversations but instead shape its own reform agenda through proposals like those submitted by the Africa Group (e.g., WTGC 778). These proposals advocate for reintroducing non-actionable subsidies to support industrial policy, recalibrating intellectual property rules for developmental outcomes, and defending special and differential treatment for developing countries. The address positioned the AfCFTA and Africa's broader integration efforts as platforms from which to project a more coherent African voice in global negotiations. It also noted the upcoming MC14 as a critical, albeit constrained, opportunity for Africa to influence WTO reform trajectories while cautioning against the risk of African priorities being sidelined in broader geopolitical contests.

Session 4: Critical Minerals and Extended Value Chains

This session highlighted the strategic importance of Africa's critical minerals—such as lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements—in the context of the global energy transition and digital transformation. Speakers stressed that the opportunity presented by the global demand for these minerals must be seized through a deliberate shift from raw extraction to domestic value addition and regional manufacturing. The Africa Green Minerals Strategy was presented as a guiding framework for this shift, with an emphasis on regional cooperation, infrastructure development, and technology transfer. Drawing lessons from Indonesia's success in localising its nickel value chain, panellists emphasized the importance of export conditionality, joint ventures, and targeted industrial policy. The discussion revealed that true transformation will require much more than mining—it must include building scientific capacity, recycling systems, environmental safeguards, and inclusive participation from artisanal miners and local communities. The continent was described as holding temporary leverage in global value chains, which must be strategically used before emerging technologies and recycling reduce global dependency on African supply.

Session 5: Role of Women, Youth, and Social Movements

This session shifted focus to the social dimensions of trade, questioning whether current trade frameworks, including the AfCFTA, are genuinely inclusive or merely pay lip service to the participation of women, youth, and informal sector workers. Panelists critiqued existing protocols as symbolic and lacking implementation mechanisms, stressing the need for deeper structural change to integrate the majority of Africa's workforce—who operate in the informal sector—into formal trade systems. The discussion emphasized that formalisation should be about access and protection, not just regulation and taxation. Participants also called for better data, gender-responsive impact assessments, and institutional mechanisms to ensure that the voices of grassroots actors are reflected in trade policymaking. The session made clear that sustainable and inclusive trade requires not just new rules, but a reconfiguration of who sets the rules and how they are implemented.

Session 6: Reform for Sustainable Development – Debt, Finance, and Climate Change

This session explored the intersection of trade, climate change, and the growing debt crisis facing African countries. Panellists argued that the current international financial architecture is not only outdated but actively undermines development by prioritising debt servicing over investment in health, education, and sustainability. The conversation emphasized how Africa's reliance on primary exports to earn foreign currency for debt repayment has locked many economies into a cycle of low value-add production. The growing burden of climate-related disasters further exacerbates these dynamics. Speakers called for a complete rethinking of global financial systems, proposing that climate justice, energy sovereignty, and sustainable industrial policy must be central to new financing models. They advocated for integrating debt relief and climate action, building regional credit agencies, and strengthening African development banks to reduce reliance on private capital with exploitative terms. The AfCFTA was identified as a promising platform to experiment with these new approaches, but it will require coherence between fiscal, trade, and industrial policy across the continent.

Session 7: Vision for Global Governance Reform and Trade System Reform

The closing session focused on the broader vision for Africa's role in reshaping global trade governance. Participants emphasized that reform of the WTO and other multilateral institutions must be guided by African values, priorities, and development goals—not imposed externally. The AfCFTA was framed as a foundation for building a stronger, more unified African voice in global trade negotiations, although internal fragmentation and under-resourced institutions remain challenges. The discussion raised concerns about the continued marginalisation of African interests in WTO reform, especially around the dispute settlement mechanism and intellectual property rules. There was consensus that while engagement with the WTO must continue, the real opportunity lies in strengthening Africa's own frameworks and institutions to drive development from within. This will require more deliberate investment in institutional capacity, policy coherence, and regional solidarity to avoid repeating the pitfalls of global systems that have long excluded African agency.

Keynote Address: Digital Opportunities for Africa

The keynote session on digital opportunities highlighted Africa's unique position in the global digital economy—leading in mobile money adoption yet underrepresented in digital services trade. The address emphasized the transformative potential of the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol, which aims to harmonize regulations on e-payments, data flows, and cross-border digital services. Challenges such as limited broadband infrastructure, high internet costs, fragmented regulations, and digital skill gaps were identified as key barriers. However, promising developments—rising venture capital, growing African tech platforms, and targeted initiatives for digital inclusion—were seen as pathways to accelerate progress. The session called for urgent investment in digital

infrastructure, data governance, and innovation ecosystems, ensuring Africa's digital transformation is inclusive, sovereign, and development driven.

Conclusion

In closing, participants pledged to accelerate AfCFTA implementation, strengthen regional integration, and promote inclusive trade that centres women, youth, and informal actors. Commitments also focused on building Africa-first strategies for sustainability, industrialisation, and digital transformation. The workshop underscored a clear resolve: Africa's trade future must be shaped by its own agency, priorities, and collective action.