

The ECA is laying the foundations for an African digital economy that drives innovations

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Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

Dear Mr. Seck, we are very pleased to welcome you to this special issue of Global Africa journal dedicated to the digital economy in Africa. It is an honor to have you among our contributors, as an expert working within the United Nations. Your exceptional career as a researcher, with numerous awards, the latest being the ICT award, further enhances our enthusiasm. Could you introduce yourself to our readers?

Mactar Seck

Thank you very much for inviting me to this interview. I am a specialist in digital technology and innovation, with over twenty years of experience in fields such as telecommunications, ICT for development (ICT4D), digital economy, digital identity, and science and technology innovation (STI). My work spans a wide range of sectors, from digital policy strategy and regulatory frameworks to advanced technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud services, artificial intelligence, digital payment systems, and digital infrastructure.

Currently, I lead the Technology and Innovation Section of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and coordinate the Digital Excellence Center on digital identity, digital trade, and digital economy. As such, I have the privilege

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of supporting several African countries as well as international and regional organizations in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their digital policies and strategies to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I am also the ECA's focal point for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and the Internet Governance Forum.

Before joining the ECA, I held several key positions in Senegal, including Director General of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, Executive Secretary of the High Council for Industry in Senegal, and Chief of the Teleservices and Innovation Division at Sonatel. As a Senior Researcher within the TDF C2R Group France Telecom, I was also awarded a European patent on data/image compression systems.

In 1996, I was honored to receive the Grand Prix of the President of the Republic of Senegal for Science and Innovation. I am also a member of the National Academy of Sciences and Technology of Senegal.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

Could you briefly introduce the ECA, the United Nations commission specifically dedicated to the continent, and explain how the ECA supports Africa in economic and social development?

Mactar Seck

The ECA (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa) is part of the United Nations Secretariat. It is one of the five regional commissions of the UN, each dedicated to a specific continent. The ECA focuses on Africa, and its role is to support the socio-economic development of the countries.

We operate in many fields within the commission. We address issues related to economic and social development, macroeconomics, and digital technology, a sector that is essential for development, as you rightly mentioned in this issue. We also focus on issues related to education, regional integration, statistics, as well as environmental issues and climate change. In addition, we are committed to capacity-building through the [African Institute for Economic Development and Planning \(IDEP\)](#), located in Dakar.

The ECA supports the African Union and its member states. In a sense, we are a think tank, as many of the policies implemented or adopted by the African Union are initiated or strongly supported by the ECA. We assist the African Union in the development and implementation of numerous policies at the continental level. For example, we are involved in initiatives such as the [AfCFTA](#), (African Continental Free Trade Area), digital transformation, and trade.

The ECA is composed of five sub-regional offices, each dedicated to a specific region of the African continent: Central Africa in Yaoundé, West Africa in Niamey, North Africa in Rabat, Southern Africa in Lusaka, and East Africa in Kigali, Rwanda. The commission's headquarters is located in Ethiopia.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

The ECA has a remarkable distinction: it is the organization that hosted, at its headquarters in Addis Ababa, the first meeting that led to the creation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). This reflects the close relationship between the two institutions, with the ECA having played a key role in the founding of the OAU in 1963, which later evolved into the African Union in 2002.

Mactar Seck

Yes, it is a sacred union that has lasted for decades, dating back to the founding fathers of African independence. Recently, in November 2024, we inaugurated the renovated [Africa Hall](#). It is here that the first African leaders gathered to put into place the African Union, formerly the OAU. Two weeks ago, we were also honored to host a meeting on internet governance in this very hall an important event that allowed us to renew the memory of those historic moments.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

More than sixty years of shared existence, more than sixty years of support for Africa. Today, if you were to take stock, in which particular fields could you say there has truly been progress with the African Union?

Mactar Seck

I believe progress has been made in all social and economic fields. Compared to the years of independence, there has been a significant growth in GDP in many African countries. In terms of education, it is also clear that the system has significantly developed across the continent. Significant progress has been made in the economic, social, and technological fields. As for technology, which is my field of expertise, I can affirm that remarkable progress has been made from the independence years to today. Though challenges remain, the African continent continues to make progress in terms of technology.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

You have mentioned technology. Today, Africa is embarking on a new direction in terms of economy. It is striving to develop a digital economy, particularly through the AfCFTA (African Continental Free Trade Area). How can this new shift truly contribute to the continent's economic and social development?

Mactar Seck

First of all, it is important to take stock of the situation on the African continent. In 2024, 38% of the African population is connected to the internet, a significant improvement compared to the year 2000, when the rate was only 2.6%. But why is digital technology so essential for Africa?

By 2050, young Africans under the age of 35 will represent 42% of the world's youth population. This will make Africa the youngest continent in the world, which is a major asset. Combined with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and blockchain, this potential positions Africa uniquely to play a key role in the global economy of tomorrow. To harness this potential, it is essential to train our youth in these new technologies, especially artificial intelligence. In parallel, it is essential to create a conducive environment for the development of technology infrastructure, by involving the private sector more. Governments, in turn, should act as facilitators by supporting businesses and encouraging market expansion.

Thus, Africa will not only be able to benefit from these new technologies, but will also move from being a simple consumer to becoming a producer. This is a vital transformation, as the continent already possesses the necessary assets. For example, if we look at the dynamism of cultural industries, such as Nollywood (the Nigerian film industry), or emerging industries in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Morocco, it is clear that Africa has immense potential. Based on information technology, these industries can play a key role in accelerating the continent's economic development.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

Among all the projects you have mentioned, particularly those related to infrastructure, which ones are the ECA working on with the African Union to truly boost this digital economy?

Mactar Seck

We are working on many initiatives to boost the digital economy in Africa. By 2025, this digital economy is expected to be worth 180 billion dollars for the continent, which presents a significant opportunity. However, several challenges must be overcome, and the ECA is actively addressing these issues in collaboration with the African Union and member states. Nevertheless, certain prerequisites are essential to achieve this goal.

The first challenge is connectivity. Currently, only 38% of the African population is connected to the Internet, with the figure dropping to 25% in rural areas. In addition, there is a significant 13-point gap between men and women in terms of internet access. These inequalities are hindering the development of the digital economy. To address this, the ECA advocates for policies that encourage private sector investment in infrastructure, while also promoting the use of technologies that are adapted to the continent's realities.

Another key priority is the harmonization of policies at the regional and continental levels. Economic integration, particularly with the implementation of the AfCFTA, requires coherent regulatory frameworks. The goal is to transform the continent into a unified digital space, ready to assert itself on the global stage.

Network security is also at the heart of our priorities. Cybercrime represents 10% of Africa's GDP. This is an issue that requires particular attention. Indeed, without appropriate implementation tools, capacity-building policies, and effective measures to fight against this scourge, all investments made in digital technology development in Africa risk being rendered useless by cybercrime. This is a threat that goes beyond simple data breaches. It touches on state sovereignty, terrorism, and the stability of nations. To counter these risks, the ECA, with the support of the African Union and its member states, as well as its partners, is developing robust strategies, strengthening local capacities, and establishing infrastructures such as the African Cybersecurity Centre in Togo.

In parallel, education and innovation are key levers for preparing for the future. With 42% of the world's youth population expected to be African by 2050, the continent has an exceptional pool of talent. The ECA advocates for increased access to training in new technologies and the promotion of innovation. However, it emphasizes the need to avoid overly strict regulations that could hinder the emergence of innovative solutions, particularly in fields such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, and biotechnology.

The data issue is also essential. Indeed, data is now considered the «new oil» and represents another strategic focus. Effective management of these data can generate added value and create jobs while ensuring the continent's digital sovereignty.

Finally, the ECA is working to make this digital transition inclusive. Whether it concerns people in rural areas, women, or individuals with disabilities, everyone must be able to participate in this revolution. Considered a fundamental right, universal access to the internet is a key objective.

Through these initiatives, and in partnership with the African Union and African governments, the ECA is laying the foundations for a digital economy that will not only consume innovations but become a key stakeholder in their development. With its dynamism and potential, Africa has everything it takes to play a pivotal role in the global digital economy.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

In your previous statements, you mentioned twice the key term sovereignty. Do you believe that African states can truly claim sovereignty when they are not able to produce the infrastructures that are at the heart of this digital economy? You have mentioned many fields in which where we are still lacking, so how can we aspire to sovereignty if our states remain inefficient?

Mactar Seck

You raise a crucial point. How can we aspire to digital sovereignty when, currently, Africa represents only 0.1% of global platforms? How can we claim digital sovereignty when Africa accounts for less than 1% of research in the field of technology? You have to start somewhere. Today, I believe there is growing awareness among all African states that achieving digital sovereignty is a must for the continent to exist in the world of tomorrow. This world is already being built, and it is firmly digital. Across all sectors today, digital technology has become fully integrated. It is, therefore, essential to take this into consideration.

I am pleased to tell you that African countries are fully aware of this. We support them in important fields such as training, capacity-building, intellectual property, which is fundamental for stimulating research and innovation, as well as in developing the regulatory frameworks and tools needed to protect themselves at the national, continental, and global levels. This is not a process that will happen overnight, but what is important is that there is real awareness and many initiatives underway in several African countries. I am confident that by 2030, when the Sustainable Development Goals are achieved, Africa will be able to claim its digital sovereignty.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

As you have pointed out, research plays an important role in this quest for sovereignty. What initiatives is the ECA taking to support African universities in the development of digital technology and digital economy?

Mactar Seck:

In the field of digital economy, we are implementing many initiatives to support universities. We have created an [African Research Universities Alliance](#), a platform for exchange aimed at promoting the sharing of knowledge on technology advancements and the latest tools in this field. We have also launched a concept called « [Origin](#) », which focuses on solving African problems with African solutions. This concept is currently being promoted in several universities and countries.

Regarding research, although it is mainly the domain of UNESCO, we also collaborate with a number of universities. Two years ago, we established the [African Research Center for Artificial Intelligence](#), located in Congo, to develop the continent's intellectual capacity in various sectors such as agriculture, health, economics, the environment, and many others. Additionally, we are in the process of implementing the [Steam Center](#) in Kigali, Rwanda, to provide the younger generation with the tools they need to be ready to tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

And in this process, what role do the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) play in your initiatives?

Mactar Seck

The RECs were created by the ECA, and we ensure they are involved in all our initiatives. It is essential to adopt an approach that is at the same time national, sub-regional, and continental. The RECs play a key role at the sub-regional level, before moving to a continental approach. We work closely with all the regional communities across the continent. In the technology sector, for example, we collaborate with them on policy harmonization in fields such as technology, science, and innovation. The RECs represent a very important framework for the development of the continent.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

The African Union launched the AfCFTA as part of Agenda 2063. If you were to evaluate it at this stage and analyze the trajectory it is following, do you think we are on the right path? In your view, can this new economic approach by the African Union truly help African states overcome their economic challenges?

Mactar Seck

The ECA has played a significant role in the AfCFTA implementation, which represents a very positive approach for Africa's economy and the continent's regional integration. It is true that it was a bit challenging at the beginning, but today, I believe the AfCFTA is moving in the right direction. More countries are joining, and numerous initiatives are underway within this area. The ECA also plays a key role in its development. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we created a platform to

enable African states to directly purchase masks, ventilators, and vaccines to fight against the health crisis. In parallel, we establish an economic platform within the AfCFTA to facilitate trade between African countries. This platform, for instance, provided fertilizers to several African countries during the crisis linked to the war in Ukraine. These initiatives show that the AfCFTA is operating well, and although its launch was slow, all African countries are now acknowledging its importance. I am therefore very optimistic about the future of the AfCFTA, and I am convinced it will be a crucial tool for trade integration in Africa by 2030 and 2050.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

The African Union is charting a new path to offer solutions suited to the young Africans you mentioned earlier. In this context, what about the ECA? With its renewed strategy, incorporating new working methods and approaches, what are the ECA's latest initiatives to support this transformation?

Mactar Seck

I believe that the ECA has been committed to the structural transformation of the continent for several years now. Recently, many initiatives have been implemented to this end. As you have noticed, the ECA is now focusing much of its efforts on key fields such as technology, youth training, capacity building, promoting innovation, and supporting Africa in expanding its economic process. We are also conducting studies on taxation, particularly on how to use digital taxation to improve revenue collection and create more jobs for the youth. The ECA is therefore fully involved in this transformation and will continue to support the African Union in implementing its new policy.

Ibrahima Kane and Mame-Penda Ba

Will all of this change international economic relations on a global scale?

Mactar Seck

Yes, it will change, InSha'Allah. Africa's strength is in its demographic dividend. This potential can be fully harnessed, but it requires one fundamental condition: the training of our youth. It is also crucial to implement attractive policies at the national, sub-regional, and continental levels that encourage development and private sector investment across all economic sectors. We must also facilitate access for African private companies to markets across the continent. If we succeed in achieving this at all these levels, Africa will play a key role in tomorrow's world.