

The South Africa - UK International Economic Partnership (IEP)

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND: ACCELERATING INCLUSION OUTCOMES IN THE 2024-2029 MEDIUM-TERM DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Policy Brief

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DESCRIPTION OF THE SOUTH AFRICA – UK INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIP (IEP) PROJECT

The International Economic Partnership (IEP) is a programme which works through the global economic governance system to strengthen the influence of coalitions between South Africa, the UK and other low or middle-income countries, to bring about better pro-poor, inclusive policymaking, and a stronger economic recovery from COVID-19. Specifically, the programme aims to forge new ways of collaboration between the UK and South African governments by supporting South Africa's G20 presidency in 2025, unlocking structural barriers to growth and promoting economic policy coordination. The IEP is implemented by DNA Economics, Economic Research Southern Africa (ERSA) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and runs until 2027. This research paper has been delivered as part of this partnership.

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Acronyms

Term/Abbreviation	Definition
AU	African Union
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
ASIDI	Accelerated School Infrastructure Development Initiative
DPME	Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ELP	Early Learning Programmes
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HIV	Human Immune Deficiency Virus
ILO	International Labour Organization
IWOSS	Industries without Smokestacks
MTDP	Medium-Term Development Plan
MTSF	Medium-Term Strategic Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NEET	Not in employment, education, or training
NPC	National Planning Commission
SAMRC	South African Medical Research Council
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SMMEs	Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1 Introduction

On 27 April 2024, South Africa commemorated 30 years of democracy, marking a significant milestone in its history. As much as South Africa has reason to celebrate its many achievements, the country finds itself at a critical juncture as the journey towards socio-economic transformation remains incomplete. In charting a path forward, South Africa must confront the stark realities of inequality, poverty, and widespread unemployment that undermine efforts to build an inclusive society and economy.

This commitment is embodied in the 2012 National Development Plan (NDP). The NDP acknowledges that certain groups - specifically women, young people, persons with disabilities and rural residents - experience the highest levels of unemployment and exclusion. To sustain an inclusive growth trajectory and realize South Africa's full economic potential, the plan recognizes the importance of empowering and leveraging the participation of all citizens, particularly those from these marginalized groups in South Africa's socio-economic transformation.

Despite making up most of the population, women, youth, and persons with disabilities contribute disproportionately less to South Africa's GDP. Progress towards advancing gender equality, inclusion and empowerment has been uneven, with distinct challenges preventing the full and equal economic participation of these groups.

Women face barriers such as the gender wage gap, the burden of unpaid care work, patriarchal structures, discriminatory social norms and gender-based violence. Youth, on the other hand, grapple with rising unemployment rates due to disparities in access to quality education and skills training, and a mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market demands. Persons with disabilities encounter significant barriers to inclusion, including accessibility concerns in both physical and digital environments, discrimination and social stigma. These barriers tend to exclude them from full participation in education and employment, leading to a disproportionate concentration in precarious informal sector work.

The NDP is being implemented through three consecutive five-year medium-term plans. Medium-Term Strategic Frameworks (MTSF) 2014-2019 and 2019-2024. The medium-term plan for 2024-2029 will now be called the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP). Implementation of the 2024-29 MTDP, however, takes place amidst sluggish progress towards NDP goals and Vision 2030.

Despite these challenges, dynamic regional and global shifts present significant opportunities. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), accelerating digitalization and the imperative for decisive climate action offer new avenues for growth and development. South Africa's G20 Presidency in 2025 creates additional opportunities to advance inclusivity goals amidst these shifts. This includes catalysing investment in green job sectors and fostering partnerships that enhance access to robust digital skills, finance, and entrepreneurship.

The 2024-2029 MTDP presents new opportunities for advancing gender, youth and persons with disabilities mainstreaming and inclusivity outcomes in development planning and policy.

However, to unlock the full socio-economic potential of women, youth and persons with disabilities, South Africa must address the root causes of gender inequalities and exclusion through evidence-based policies and interventions.

To achieve this, it is essential to formulate precise and quantifiable indicators to track the implementation of outcomes in the plan and inform evidence-based decision-making in crucial areas such as employment, education, skills development and training, health, inclusive and sustainable trade, digitalization and other domains. This includes through tools for enforcing intervention, aimed at closing gender gaps and inequalities in economic participation and other aspects of human development.

The objective of this Policy Brief is to provide insights to support the design of evidence-based tools for enforcing interventions in the 2024-2029 MTDP and measuring their implementation. It provides a summary of the more detailed *Leaving No One behind: Accelerating Inclusion Outcomes in the 2024-2029 Medium-Term Development Plan* research paper.

Section 2 provides a high-level overview of the intersection of labour market and human development barriers that prevent people from marginalized groups - especially women, youth and persons with disabilities - from realizing their full capabilities. Section 3 focuses on two key areas with transformative potential for reducing economic precarity and enhancing human development outcomes: implementation of AfCFTA Protocols on Women and Youth in Trade and Digital Trade and inclusive digitalization, with emphasis on e-commerce as a tool for inclusion and economic empowerment.

Looking ahead to South Africa's G20 Presidency in 2025, the paper identifies a strategic opportunity to catalyze partnerships to accelerate the empowerment of women, youth and persons with disabilities.

The Policy Brief paper concludes with practical insights, presenting a set of indicators developed as a key outcome of a workshop convened on 18 March 2024 by the National Planning Commission and partners, in collaboration with the UK-funded International Economic Partnership programme.

2 Distinguishing the challenges for women, youth and persons with disabilities

This section drills deeper into the labour market challenges and barriers to human development faced by women, youth, and persons with disabilities. It builds upon the 2021 technical paper *Planning Perspectives on Advancing Women's Emancipation and Gender Equality* (NPC, 2021a), updating key findings and identifying specific areas that should be prioritized in medium and long-term planning. Additionally, section 2 contributes new data to complement insights from *The Status of Disability in South Africa 2020* (NPC 2020) technical paper.

2.1 Women

Poverty and economic vulnerability in South Africa are inextricably linked to gender and geographic disparities, with female-headed households at heightened risks of poverty and hardship and disproportionately concentrated in rural areas of the country (Inclusive Society Institute, 2023). While most employed people are employees rather than business owners, only 25% of women are employers (Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2023: Q4). The total unemployment rate has been steadily rising since 2015, with women particularly affected. In the fourth quarter of 2023, the unemployment rate reached 32.1%, with women more likely to be unemployed (34.4%) than men (30.1%) (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Women are less likely than men to participate in the labour force, and when they do, they tend to

earn lower wages. In 2023, the labour force participation rate for women stood at 53.4%, compared to 64.9% for men (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

Employment in the non-agricultural formal sector accounts for a notable 45% of the country's total female labour force, compared to 10.1% of women working in the non-agricultural informal sector (Statistics South Africa, 2024). In the fourth quarter of 2023, women held 35% of managerial occupations and 51% of elementary occupations (including domestic work). As of the fourth quarter of 2023, women made up 31,8% of the agricultural sector, 33% of the manufacturing sector and 46% of the trade sector. They continue to dominate care-based work, such as private households (72%) and community and social services (62%) (this also include positions within government). Women are well-represented in the finance subsector, with 1.302 million female employees in Q4 2023, accounting for 44% of the sector.

The unequal distribution of unpaid care work between young women and men in South Africa is a significant barrier to gender equality in education and beyond. Recent data from Statistics South Africa (2023) illustrates this disparity: 13% of young women who left school prematurely cited family commitments as the primary reason, compared to just 1% of young men. Participatory research conducted by ActionAid, South Africa (2023) corroborates the substantial responsibility that adolescent girls shoulder for unpaid care tasks within the household. Gender-based violence (GBV) is the most pressing women's rights issue that citizens believe the government and society must prioritize and address urgently (Afrobarometer, 2023). The economic toll of GBV is staggering, with research suggesting that GBV cost South Africa over R36-billion in 2019 alone when considering out-of-pocket medical costs for victims (almost R10-billion), human capital loss (R26-billion) and judicial costs (R104-million). However, the costs are likely much higher; this includes significant hidden costs associated with providing healing and restoration services to children exposed to domestic violence and/or GBV (Davis and Barnard, 2022; Daily Maverick, 2022). GBV and HIV are inextricably linked in South Africa, as GBV puts women at greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and living with HIV increases the risk of GBV (Leburu and Phetlho-Thekisho, 2015).

Women's limited access to land in South Africa has far-reaching implications for their economic empowerment and resilience to climate change. Many women, particularly in poor, rural areas, rely on access to land to perform subsistence farming, produce food and provide for their children (ActionAid, n.d.). However, there are pronounced gender disparities in land rights, with men holding 71% of agricultural land compared to only 13% owned by women (Department of Rural Development and Land Affairs, 2017 Land Audit Report). Women's control of land is further restricted by a lack of implementation of existing laws, absence of legal safeguards against land grabbing as well as traditional practices and patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender inequality in land rights. These barriers not only prevent women from engaging in food production and land-based livelihoods, but also limit their ability to adapt to the increasing impacts of climate change.

The Accelerated School Infrastructure Development Initiative (ASIDI), launched in 2011, aims to eradicate school infrastructure backlogs, prioritizing safe and dignified sanitation as a foundation for a healthy and dignified life. Yet, progress towards meeting these objectives has been uneven. According to the 2021 National Education Infrastructure Management System Report, 22% of schools still made use of pit latrines and 25% had unreliable water supply (Department of Basic Education, 2021). The lack of safe and hygienic facilities in schools disproportionately affects female students, leading to increased absenteeism and drop-out rates. Inadequate facilities, particularly during menstruation and concerns for personal

safety, decreases the likelihood that girls attend school (IOL, 2022). This disruption in girls' education further entrenches gender inequalities, as girls fall further behind their male peers in academic progress and future prospects.

2.2 Youth

Youth unemployment remains a critical issue in South Africa, with 59.4% of young people aged 15-24 unemployed in the fourth quarter of 2023 (Statistics South Africa, 2024). Young women are disproportionately affected, with an unemployment rate of 53.9% compared to 46.1% for young men. The total number of unemployed youth increased by 87 000 to 4.7 million, while the number of employed youth decreased by 97 000 to 5.9 million. Additionally, 45.1% of young women aged 15 to 34 were not in employment, education, or training (NEET), compared to 39.4% of young men (Statistics South Africa, 2024).

Youth tend to be involved in primary agriculture, including crop production (maize and vegetables) and animal production (livestock rearing, breeding, poultry and piggery). However, their involvement in mid-point activities like agro-processing and agricultural engineering remains limited (DALRRD, 2023). A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) study (2022) found that younger workers have advanced faster in transport and storage, information and communications, financial intermediation, real estate and business activities, while construction, trade, hotels and restaurants are absorbing younger and older workers alike, with promising trends for young women. Youth are increasingly gaining employment in health-related services, even surpassing adult employment growth.

A South African case study on youth unemployment assessed the potential of industries without smokestacks (IWOSS) sectors of tourism, horticulture, agro-processing and transit trade (logistics) to create several types of jobs across the skills spectrum. The study found that IWOSS - notably tourism and horticulture - have a role to play in generating the number and type of jobs required to address youth unemployment (Rooney and Asmal, 2021). However, the study also highlighted the heterogeneity of skills requirements across firms and industries, emphasizing the importance of addressing sector-specific constraints and considering differences between and within sectors when designing employment policies (Allen et al., 2021). Additionally, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has considered the potential of emerging sectors like the "green," "blue," digital, creative, and care economies to provide decent jobs for young people while contributing to environmental sustainability (ILO, 2022).

Unemployment is largely exacerbated by an unevenly developed and unequal education system and educational levels. Approximately two-thirds (66.3%) of learners were still in school by the age of 18 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). In the fourth quarter of 2023, around 3.4 million out of 10.2 million young South Africans aged 15-24 years (33%) were not in employment, education, or training (NEET). This included 1.7 million women and girls and 1.6 million men and boys. The overall NEET rate for this age group decreased by 0.7 percentage points compared to Q4 2022. However, the NEET rate for young women remained higher than for young men in both Q4 2022 and Q4 2023. High NEET rates indicate that many young South Africans are disengaged from the labour market and educational opportunities, lacking the skills and training necessary to compete in the modern economy (Mncayi, 2021). The mismatch between educational outcomes and job market requirements is a critical issue to address for

improving youth employment prospects and supporting inclusive economic growth in South Africa (DHET, 2024).

Disengagement from the labour market and education is closely tied to broader health and well-being disparities, which perpetuate intergenerational poverty. In 2017, the two leading underlying natural causes of death for youth ages 15 to 29 were tuberculosis (7.3%) and HIV (5.5%) (Statistics South Africa, 2017). A recent study found a “massive, disproportionate and enduring” homicide risk among South African men, underscoring a significant gap in the country’s prevention and policy response (Matzopoulos et al., 2023). Poverty is frequently linked to heightened stress, social exclusion, violence, and trauma, all of which increase the risk of mental illness (Cooper, De Lannoy, & Rule, 2015). A recent UNICEF survey (2023) found that 70% of South Africans aged 15 to 24 felt they needed mental health support. In South Africa, 9% of all teenage deaths are due to suicide (Western Cape Government, 2022).

Adolescent pregnancy is on the rise, with over 150 000 young girls falling pregnant in the 2022/3 financial year. These numbers do not factor in backstreet abortions, home births, miscarriages and babies whose births are not registered (SABC News, 2023). The intersection of early motherhood and HIV infection heightens the vulnerability of adolescent mothers and their children, significantly impacting their health, education, future employment prospects and overall well-being. In 2019, 106 383 live births were recorded among adolescents aged 10-19, while the HIV prevalence rate among youth aged 15-24 was 5.5% in 2021 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Substance abuse and crime further affect youth safety, health, and educational outcomes. Nearly 50% of high school learners have experimented with alcohol, and 13% have used cannabis at least once (Mmereki et al., 2022). While murder and attempted murder rates of children (aged 0 to 17) decreased by 10.7% and 12.7% respectively in the fourth quarter of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022, assaults on children increased by 11.9% (SAPS, 2023). This increase casts a shadow over these improvements, especially considering the likelihood of under-reported cases.

2.3 Persons with disabilities

The 2022 Census reveals that 6% of South Africans aged five and above have disabilities, with a higher prevalence among women (7%) compared to men (4.9%) (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Disability rates vary by population group, with the White population experiencing a higher rate of 9.5% in 2022, up from 6.5% in 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The prevalence of disability increases significantly with age, affecting 37% of those aged 65 and older and 56.5% of those aged 85 and above. There has also been a sharp rise in disability among children aged five to nine, from 2.1% in 2011 to 10.6% in 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Multidimensional poverty is more prevalent among persons with disabilities, with 49.9% of those with significant functional difficulty and 32.6% with some difficulty experiencing poverty, compared to 17.4% of those without any difficulty. Disability intersects with race, gender, age and location. This intersection leads to negative outcomes in education, employment, and income for all persons with disabilities, particularly Black women, perpetuating inequalities and the cycle of exclusion (Moodley & Graham, 2015).

Persons with disabilities face significantly lower employment prospects and higher rates of economic inactivity (Igei K., 2018). They are more likely to be employed in the informal sector, characterized by precarious working conditions, low wages, limited workplace rights, and minimal social protection. Despite the private sector slightly outperforming the government in employing persons with disabilities,

both sectors fail to ensure equitable representation. In 2023, individuals with disabilities held only 1.7% of top management positions in the private sector and 1.4% in government, with underrepresentation across all skill levels (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023).

Persons with disabilities encounter numerous barriers that discourage and prevent them from entering and remaining in the labour market, especially in a challenging environment like South Africa. A significant barrier is the lack of accessible public transport for commuting between home and work (Tinta et al., 2020). Cramm et al. (2013) highlight stark employment disparities between disabled and non-disabled youth in South Africa, with disabled youth experiencing an unemployment rate of 32.9% compared to 13.1% for their non-disabled peers. This disparity is attributed to a confluence of factors, including limited job opportunities, inadequate skills development and distinct barriers faced by disabled youth, such as discriminatory societal attitudes and poor health. Career advancement is another challenge, with many reaching a plateau due to a lack of understanding and awareness about disabilities among managers and colleagues. Discriminatory human resource promotion practices and prejudice against invisible disabilities exacerbate these challenges (Coetzee et al., 2017).

The South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) identifies significant barriers to healthcare access for persons with disabilities, particularly in rural areas. Many clinics lack essential accessibility features, and information in Braille or sign language interpretation is nearly non-existent. Healthcare affordability is a major concern due to additional disability-related costs, compounded by the fact that persons with disabilities generally have lower incomes than those without disabilities. There is also a significant shortage of disability-specific care providers, with services such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and psychiatry being particularly scarce. These challenges contribute to a stark disparity in life expectancy; on average, persons with disabilities have a 20-year shorter life expectancy compared to their non-disabled peers (SAMRC, 2023).

3 Moving the Needle on Gender Mainstreaming and Inclusion

This policy brief has demonstrated that women, youth and persons with disabilities in South Africa confront a range of constraints and distinct barriers, limiting their economic opportunities, human development and contribution to sustainable development. Against this backdrop, AfCFTA and agreed Protocols emerge as a catalyst for empowering these groups. Implemented through a gender-responsive and inclusive lens, all AfCFTA Protocols provide a framework for addressing gender gaps and a range of barriers that impede the full and equal participation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in intra-African trade (Bayat, 2022). AfCFTA Protocols on Digital Trade and Women and Youth in Trade are particularly instrumental, serving as enablers for addressing broader economic inclusion and empowerment outcomes for women, youth and persons with disabilities in intra-Africa trade and the digital economy.

AfCFTA implementation is unfolding in an era of accelerating digitalization¹, where advanced and emerging technologies are revolutionizing skills required in the workforce. As a defining feature of digitalization, e-commerce presents new opportunities in the context of South Africa's job crisis for employment, entrepreneurship and breaking gender barriers. Truly inclusive digitalization, however, requires a transition to digitalization that is environmentally sustainable. South Africa will succeed Brazil as G20 President in 2025, creating new opportunities to advance inclusivity goals and extend the benefits of inclusive digitalization. This includes through collaboration to bridge the digital skills gap and empower women, youth and persons with disabilities with robust digital skills to enable full and equal participation in the digital economy. It also includes catalysing investment in green, blue and digital jobs and leveraging partnerships to enhance access to finance and entrepreneurship.

As South Africa navigates this complex terrain, the 2024-29 MTDP presents a strategic opportunity to identify interventions that leverage the potential of the AfCFTA, inclusive digitalization and climate action for a more equitable and sustainable future.

3.1 AfCFTA as a catalyst for inclusion

The signing of the Agreement establishing the AfCFTA by 44 African Union (AU) Member States on 21 March 2018, marked a historic milestone in Africa's economic integration agenda. The AfCFTA Agreement entered into force on 30 May 2019 after reaching the required threshold of 22 ratifications, and on 1 January 2021, trading officially began under the Agreement. In boosting intra-African trade, the AfCFTA offers State Parties new opportunities for harnessing trade as a powerful driver of inclusive socio-economic growth and development. If fully implemented, the AfCFTA Agreement would ease the flow of goods, services, and investment across a market of more than 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion (World Bank-AfCFTA Secretariat, 2022). To advance these objectives, the AfCFTA is being built and implemented through various phases of negotiations.

The AfCFTA Agreement in Phase I has agreed Protocols on Trade in Goods, Trade in Services and Rules and Procedures on the Settlement of Disputes, while negotiations on Phase II includes Protocols on Intellectual Property Rights, Competition Policy, Investment and Digital Trade, as well as a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade. South Africa launched its first shipment under the AfCFTA on 31 January 2024, with a first shipment destined for Ghana and Kenya (DIRCO, 2024). Crucial to the single market created under the AfCFTA are new trade and economic opportunities for women, including in productive sectors where women are disproportionately employed, such as agriculture, manufacturing (clothing and textiles) and services (UN Women, 2022) or through small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) - both formal and informal.

While Africa's exports to the rest of the world are dominated by raw materials, intra-African trade is more diversified and includes a larger share of processed goods. Research on the economic and distributional impacts of the AfCFTA estimate a significant change to sectoral patterns of trade, towards more sophisticated goods and higher value-added services. Notable increases in exports are expected in textiles and apparel; chemical, rubber, wood and paper, plastic products; and processed foods. Tourism

1Digitalization refers to employing digital technologies and data and their interconnections, leading to the creation of new activities or modifications to existing ones. It is separate from digitization which involves converting analog data and processes into machine-readable formats. The various forms of digitization and digitalization drive a broader process known as digital transformation. See in this regard IMF-OECD-UNCTAD-WTO "Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade". Available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/dtlec2023d8_en.pdf.

and transport are expected to expand significantly for trade in services, with digitalization singled out for its potential to increase intra-African trade gains in the services sector (World Bank-AfCFTA Secretariat; 2022; ATPC-UNECA).

The AfCFTA unlocks opportunities for small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs), many of which are women-and youth-owned and key drivers of job creation, to increase their participation in cross-border value chains and expand into continental markets (UNDP, 2021). These businesses, however, are disproportionately affected by a range of trade-related barriers and other challenges that impede their ability to enter and effectively participate in markets. Women and youth-owned businesses in South Africa confront similar challenges as other SMMEs, but with nuanced differences in how these challenges are experienced. This stems from age, gender, cultural beliefs and norms, and historical factors (SEDA, 2019). Key barriers for women entrepreneurs include limited access to finance, business knowledge, profitable markets, compliance requirements, networks and support structures (Competition Commission, 2023). Women traders and customs agents in South Africa experience greater trade facilitation challenges compared to men, including in relation to clearance of export/import declarations, cargo inspection procedures and compliance procedures and documentation (World Bank, 2021).

On the other hand, youth entrepreneurs are hindered by a lack of access to sufficient capital, markets, poor marketing and branding skills, suitable infrastructure (including working space and ICT), as well as business management and educational skills (UNCTAD-DSBD, 2023). Access to finance is a critical lever for enhancing the capacity of both women and youth entrepreneurs to grow their businesses and expand into intra-African trade. But it is not enough. Targeted interventions that address nuanced challenges confronting women and youth-owned businesses are required for these enterprises to overcome low productivity, exploit economies of scale, and successfully expand into continental markets and value chains.

AfCFTA employment gains are expected in agriculture. In South Africa's rural society, women play a vital role in agricultural food production and household labour (Presidential Advisory, 2019). UNDP research (2021) shows that the production of high-value agricultural commodities and agri-food products selected for development and expansion through AfCFTA regional value chains, present new empowerment opportunities for women and youth. Identifying niche agricultural sectors and other high-yield opportunities that provide linkages to value-added industries could further improve economic participation, while the progression from subsistence to market-oriented systems under the AfCFTA could enhance food security outcomes. Additionally, South Africa's agribusiness sector that is expected to reach USD 75 billion by 2030, presents innovative job opportunities for youth (UNDP, 2022).

Liberalisation under the AfCFTA is expected to boost manufacturing, with the promise of new wage employment in traditional manufacturing sectors that are expected to expand. This includes in the textiles, apparel and cotton subsectors where women are disproportionately employed, as well as in non-traditional export sectors that emerge as high growth drivers with the potential for employment generation. Wages of female workers are expected to be 11.2 percent higher in 2035, and male workers' wages could grow by 9.8 percent (World Bank-AfCFTA Secretariat, 2022). AfCFTA progressive liberalization of trade in services in priority sectors including tourism, transport, business, financial and communication services also creates new avenues for women and youth-owned businesses to provide cross-border services in these sectors. For women and youth entrepreneurs, the AfCFTA offers a concrete platform to scale their ventures in cultural, eco-tourism, and adventure tourism across new

continental markets. Additionally, the AfCFTA could support women and youth in the informal sector, including in crafts and food production, to extract more value from tourism value chains. Finally, the AfCFTA could be leveraged to promote accessible tourism infrastructure, creating new economic and employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Trade policy is a powerful instrument for fostering inclusive economic growth and development, but it is not a panacea for addressing the multifaceted barriers that limit the equal participation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in trade and the digital economy. Despite the potential, women, youth and persons with disabilities will not be able to leverage new opportunities created through the AfCFTA unless gender inequalities and other structural barriers to their inclusion, including in agriculture, manufacturing, and services (discussed in Section 2), are addressed in policy reforms and complementary measures. In agriculture, for example, closing the gender gap in land ownership and enhancing women farmers' access to finance and other productive resources such as credit, seeds and fertilizers can advance participation in higher-value added segments of regional agricultural value chains created through the AfCFTA. Closely linked to this is the need to examine and address gender inequalities at various nodes of agricultural value chains to ensure that women can harness new value chain opportunities. Additionally, improving women's access to skills and climate resilient agro-ecological techniques can improve their ability to adapt and mitigate the impact of climate change.²

Addressing gender inequalities in the manufacturing sector, together with targeted retraining and upskilling strategies would enable women to adapt to the changing skill-sets required by the expansion of export-oriented manufacturing and more technical sectors, such as mining, vehicles and transport equipment. Facilitating the movement of persons to supply services, in line with AfCFTA objectives, could benefit women in South Africa's tourism sector. However women in tourism are often concentrated in lower-level roles with limited earning potential. Ensuring access to higher-skilled and better-paying jobs in Africa's tourism industry requires overcoming structural barriers and gender-specific constraints that women face. It also requires addressing the education and skills gap, especially for youth (see Section 3.1.2 above) to enter more skills-intensive sectors and exploit employment opportunities in higher-skilled occupations (Allen et al., 2021).

AfCFTA Protocols on Women and Youth in Trade and Digital Trade provide a framework to ensure equal benefits for women, youth and persons with disabilities from AfCFTA economic and entrepreneurship opportunities. However, translating commitments of the protocols into concrete action and outcomes require a targeted implementation strategy. This is important for defining policy priorities, reforms and complementary measures, setting objectives and outlining actions for the inclusive implementation of the protocols. An implementation strategy should include actions to identify new opportunities and address gender-distinct constraints and other barriers faced by women, youth and persons with disabilities in cross-border trade, including e-commerce. Box 1 outlines key actions for a gender-responsive, inclusive strategy to implement the AfCFTA Protocols on Women and Youth in Trade and Digital Trade.

² For a more detailed discussion on how climate resilient agro-ecological techniques are supporting women cooperatives to shift from traditional towards conservation agriculture, see UN Women (2021) "Empowering Women through Climate-Resilient Agriculture in West and Central Africa": https://wrdd.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/EN%20Women%20in%20Climate%20Resilient%20Agriculture%20in%20WCA_0.pdf.

3.2. Inclusive Digitalisation

AfCFTA implementation is unfolding in an era of accelerating digitalisation,³ where advanced and emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), generative AI, Blockchain, spatial omics, sustainable computing and designer phages are reshaping economies, societies, and communities (WEF, 2023). These technologies are also revolutionizing the skills required in the workforce, necessitating new competencies and continuous learning. As a defining feature of digitalization, e-commerce has emerged as the 'great equaliser' in South Africa, with the potential to create new jobs, address the high unemployment rate and spur inclusive economic growth (Business Day, 2022). E-commerce has expanded rapidly, with online sales surging by 30% in 2022 to surpass the R50bn milestone. Online sales also outpaced traditional retail sales which increased by only 1.7% in the same period (BizCommunity, 2024). Amazon's entry into the South African market is anticipated to unlock significant economic opportunities, catalysing job creation and empowering small businesses with a digital platform to show case and scale their products (Malinga, 2024)

Beyond the economic dimension, e-commerce supports inclusivity, creating new opportunities for marginalized groups to overcome traditional barriers to economic participation and empowerment. E-commerce offers SMEs the opportunity to reach new customers and tap into regional and global markets through online product listings (Business Day, 2024). E-commerce further enables women to balance entrepreneurial pursuits with family responsibilities, providing them with greater financial independence and agency. The flexibility and accessibility of digital jobs can also be advantageous for young women with disabilities who confront societal or family pressure that discourages their formal employment (Datta and Singh, 2021).

Gains from e-commerce are linked to internet penetration. South Africa has experienced a steady expansion of internet access and connectivity in recent years. According to Census 2022 estimates, 79% of the country has some form of internet access, while the number of households without internet access decreased from 64.8% in 2011 to 21.1% in 2022 (South African Government, 2024). The South African Government has implemented a number of measures to narrow the digital divide and bring more people online, including through the flagship SA Connect broadband connectivity project. Ensuring that the benefits of digitalization are accessible to all, however, remains a challenge. Rural areas have particularly low digital connectivity rates, with intermittent electricity supply and a lack of reliable and affordable internet access that exacerbates existing inequalities across metropolitan centres and rural villages and different groups (Bvuma, 2021).

Unlocking the full potential of e-commerce requires bridging the digital divide. There are multiple aspects of digital divides that include the capabilities gap, particularly in terms of digital skills and training required for youth to engage in e-commerce and other digital jobs (ILO-Department of Communications and Technology, 2020). Women are also less likely than men to have acquired the right digital skills and training to participate in the digital economy (Malinga, 2023). Additionally, online abuse, including

³ *Digitalization refers to employing digital technologies and data and their interconnections, leading to the creation of new activities or modifications to existing ones. It is separate from digitization which involves converting analog data and processes into machine-readable formats. The various forms of digitization and digitalization drive a broader process known as digital transformation. See in this regard IMF-OECD-UNCTAD-WTO Handbook on Measuring Digital Trade. Available at: https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/dtlecdc2023d8_en.pdf.*

harassment, stalking, and defamation impacts women to a greater extent than men, with implications for their ability to access the internet and participate in e-commerce (Ismail et al., 2021).

The digital skills gap⁴ is a key barrier to inclusion and opportunity in the digital age, including in e-commerce. Driving inclusion in digitalization will require bridging the digital skills gap to better prepare women, youth and persons with disabilities with a wide range of digital skills to participate in the digital economy and drive digital growth.⁵ These skills range from basic digital literacy needed to access technologies, to transversal ICT skills which enable the meaningful use of technologies in daily life and work, to intermediate and advanced digital skills (ILO, 2022b).

The digital gap is particularly acute for persons with disabilities, who often face additional challenges due to gender and socio-economic status (ILO, 2022c).⁶ Upskilling and reskilling across academia, government, and industry are essential for closing the digital skills gap and developing comprehensive strategies for the future of work. Addressing these gaps ensures that persons with disabilities are not left behind and can access new job and entrepreneurship opportunities in the digital economy. This effort also requires integrating accessibility features, such as screen readers and voice control, into websites, apps, and other digital devices. The design of accessible features and environments should be undertaken in close collaboration with people with disabilities so that barriers may be removed and replaced with enablers for access and participation (UNICEF, 2023). However, it is important to ensure that equipping persons with disabilities with digital skills for e-commerce and other jobs in the digital economy does not lead to isolation.

Truly inclusive digitalization requires a transition to digitalization that is environmentally sustainable.

The shift to e-commerce is taking place as growing climate change impacts are experienced across the globe. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2023) reports a continued increase in global greenhouse gas emissions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and patterns of consumption and production. South Africa is both a contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change (NDP, 2012), underscoring the importance of environmentally sustainable digitalization that is just and inclusive, and contributes to the broader goal of sustainable development. It is worth noting that SMMEs, women, youth, persons with disabilities and other marginalized groups face multiple, intersecting forms of inequalities that can exacerbate their vulnerability to negative environmental impacts across the e-commerce supply chain.

As e-commerce continues to expand in South Africa, it becomes increasingly important to foster more inclusive and environmentally sustainable practices that advance climate action goals (Digital Watch Observatory, 2023). At the same time, the expansion of global digital platforms into South Africa must prioritize and uphold workers' rights, health, safety, and well-being (Oxfam America, 2024). AfCFTA

⁴ Defined by the ILO as a gap in capacity, knowledge, and skills needed to access and analyse information. It is such skills and capacities that determine the extent to which workers, businesses and societies can truly enjoy the benefits of the digital revolution. See ILO (2022b). ILO (2022b). *Changing demand for skills in digital economies and societies Literature review and case studies from low-and middle-income countries*. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/changing-demand-skills-digital-economies-and-societies-literature-review>.

⁵ See in this regard, Department of Communications & Digital Technologies-ILO-ITU-UNDP-GIZ Joint Programme on Digital Skills for Decent Jobs for Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training, South Africa. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---africa/---ro-abidjan/---ilo-pretoria/documents/genericdocument/wcms_851818.pdf

⁶ See: ILO (2022c) *Inclusion of persons with disabilities in the digital and green economy*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---ddg_p/documents/publication/wcms_840306.pdf.

Protocols on Women and Youth in Trade and Digital Trade offer a transformative opportunity for South Africa to prioritize inclusive digitalization and harness the power of e-commerce for sustainable development.

Box 1: Towards inclusive implementation of AfCFTA Protocols on Women and Youth in Trade, and Digital Trade

AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth

- Identify sectors with high employment multipliers, including agriculture (crop farming, horticulture, fresh and dried fruit and nuts, agribusiness, and agro-processing), manufacturing (textiles, apparel, cotton, minerals), services (tourism and logistics), and emerging opportunities in the green and blue economies.
- Identify value chains with forward linkages to value-added sectors and the potential to create more jobs; address gender inequalities and inclusion barriers at different nodes of these chains.
- Create trade finance facilities and guarantee schemes to improve access to finance for women and youth entrepreneurs.
- Implement gender-sensitive trade facilitation measures, including improved access to information on border regulations and procedures and women's desks at border crossings to address the distinct barriers confronting women small-scale traders.
- Foster regional networks and platforms for women and youth entrepreneurs to connect, share best practices, and access market intelligence across Africa.
- Facilitate technology transfer and innovation through regional collaboration and public-private partnerships.
- Develop and implement targeted export-readiness and entrepreneurship training.
- Implement retraining and upskilling programmes in response to the expansion of export-oriented manufacturing sectors, including mining, vehicles, and transport equipment.
- Identify and address gender-distinct barriers in the five priority sectors of the AfCFTA Protocol on Trade in Services and the broader services sector.
- Provide training on climate-resilient agro-ecological techniques to help women and youth farmers adapt to and mitigate the impact of climate change.

AfCFTA Protocol on Digital Trade

- Develop and implement digital skills training programmes ranging from basic digital literacy to advanced skills and online entrepreneurship. Ensure these programmes are accessible and inclusive, providing tools and resources designed to enable persons with disabilities to effectively navigate and utilize digital platforms.
- Develop and enforce legislation that address online harassment, cyberstalking, and other forms of digital violence. Establish accessible reporting mechanisms and provide support services for victims of online abuse.
- Prioritize the removal of non-tariff barriers (NTBs) such as complex regulations, the digital divide, and technical and infrastructure barriers, that hinder the participation of women, youth, and persons with

disabilities in digital trade. Reinforce mechanisms for reporting and monitoring NTBs and ensure the active participation of these groups in the process.

- Promote digital trade incubators and accelerators that provide mentorship, networking and access to finance for digital start-ups and online businesses-led by women, youth and persons with disabilities.
- Introduce regulations and incentives that encourage the development of user-friendly, accessible digital payment platforms tailored to the needs of women, youth, and persons with disabilities.
- Require the incorporation of features like simplified interfaces, voice assistance, and language support to accommodate diverse abilities and digital literacy levels.
- Establish standards to ensure that payment systems are secure, affordable, and interoperable.
- Collaborate with e-commerce platforms, businesses, and consumers on initiatives for building environmental sustainability in e-commerce.
- Promote public-private partnerships to support capacity building and training for sustainable e-commerce and climate action.

A gender-responsive, inclusive strategy to implement AfCFTA Protocols on Women and Youth in Trade, and Digital Trade can support:

- Collection of data disaggregated by gender, age, and disability.
- Gender-responsive budgeting and resource allocation.
- Inclusion of women, youth and persons with disabilities in trade policy agenda setting, negotiations and decision-making processes.
- Collaboration and coordination to advance inclusive AfCFTA implementation among Government, the private sector and civil society, including grass-roots organizations and informal cross-border trader associations.
- Clear targets, indicators and accountability mechanisms.

Source: Author, based on: (Bayat, 2022; UNDP-AfCFTA Secretariat-UN Women, 2022; FinMark Trust, 2022, UNDP, 2021).

4 Leveraging the 2024-29 Medium-Term National Development Plan as a Tool for Gender Equality and Inclusion

The forthcoming 2024-29 MTDP, set to be adopted by South Africa's 7th democratic administration in September 2024, is dedicated to translating the goals of the governing party/parties and the goals of the NDP - eradicating income poverty, reducing unemployment to 6 per cent, and decreasing inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient - into actionable medium-term priorities. As noted earlier, these priorities range from building a capable, ethical state to promoting social cohesion, ensuring safe communities, and fostering a better Africa and world. To ensure that the benefits of development are distributed equitably and no one is left behind, the plan will mainstream the perspectives of women, youth, and persons with disabilities across all seven priorities.

The 2024-2029 MTDP offers an opportunity to advance gender mainstreaming and inclusion goals in development planning and policy. Central to achieving this objective is the formulation of precise and quantifiable indicators that track the implementation of outcomes in the plan. These indicators should be anchored in a comprehensive understanding of the complex, intersectional challenges that confront women, youth, and persons with disabilities in South Africa.

To advance these efforts, a workshop titled *Mainstreaming Gender, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities for the Medium-Term Development Plan for South Africa* was convened on 18 March 2024 by the National Planning Commission in the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) and the National Treasury, in collaboration with the UK-funded International Economic Partnership programme. The workshop aimed to share best practices, understand the current landscape, and identify the distinct challenges faced by women, youth and persons with disabilities in South Africa. A comprehensive set of indicators for the MTDP 2024-29 was formulated as a key outcome of the workshop (Annex A).

The indicators aim to measure progress, ensure accountability and inform evidence-based decision-making in areas spanning employment, education, skills development and training, to health and other essential domains. These indicators will serve as the basis of the NPC's advice to DPME on policy reforms and targeted interventions to eliminate gender gaps, address intersecting forms of discrimination, and dismantle barriers that disproportionately impact women, youth and persons with disabilities. This is key to empowering and leveraging the participation of all for a more equitable, just and prosperous South Africa.

Annex A: Indicators for Gender, Youth and Persons with Disabilities

For the purpose of this research paper, indicators are defined as criteria or measures against which changes can be assessed. They may be pointers, facts, numbers, opinions or perceptions – used to signify changes in specific conditions or progress towards particular objectives. See CIDA (1997) Guide to Gender-Sensitive Indicators. Canadian International Development Agency.

1. Gender

a) Improved Educational Outcomes

- Net enrolment rate in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, disaggregated by sex.
- Completion rate in primary, secondary, and tertiary education, disaggregated by sex.
- Percentage of female students receiving incentives (e.g., scholarships, stipends) to enrol and remain in education, disaggregated by level of education and type of incentive.
- Proportion of schools with gender-responsive infrastructure (separate toilets for girls and boys, menstrual hygiene facilities), disaggregated by level of education and location (urban/rural).
- Percentage of curricula and teaching materials reviewed and revised to be gender-responsive, disaggregated by subject area and level of education.
- Percentage of women enrolled in STEM fields in tertiary education.
- Proportion of tertiary education institutions with official quotas for women in STEM.

b) Increased Participation in the Formal Economy

- Overall increase in female labour force participation by age, sector and type of employment.
- Proportion of women with secure rights to land, property, and other productive resources, disaggregated by type of tenure.
- Percentage of land titles issued exclusively to women.
- Proportion of financial service providers offering women-only financial products and services.
- Number of initiatives implemented to support women's transition from the informal to the formal economy.
- Percentage of women-owned SMMEs receiving support interventions (digital literacy, digital skills, other).

c) Enhancing Empowerment

- Proportion of employed women in managerial positions.
- Increase in the percentage of women in professional, technical, managerial, and administrative positions.
- Increase in the number of parliamentary seats held by women.

- Increase in the number of decision-making ministerial posts occupied by women.
- Percentage of women in senior leadership positions in the private sector, disaggregated by industry.
- Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, disaggregated by sex.
- Percentage of women receiving regular cash transfers (social protection, basic income), disaggregated by type of transfer.
- Percentage of women participating in high-value agricultural value chains, disaggregated by type of value chain.

d) Supportive Employment Policies

- Length of statutory maternity leave.
- Proportion of women in the workforce covered by maternity leave benefits.
- Number of government-supported childcare facilities.
- Existence and enforcement of policies addressing wage inequalities between men and women (binary indicator: yes/no).
- Increase in government ministries and departments implementing gender mainstreaming policies and meeting electoral quotas for women's representation.

e) Health and Well-being

- Number of new or strengthened policies and action plans aimed at improving women's health and well-being, disaggregated by focus area (reproductive health, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, other).
- Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 years).
- Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel.
- Maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births).
- Number of health facilities providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, disaggregated by location (urban/rural).
- Proportion of women aged 15-49 who received HIV testing and counselling in the last 12 months and know their results.
- Percentage of women who report facing barriers in accessing health care services, disaggregated by type of barrier (e.g., cost, distance, lack of information).

f) Gender-based Violence

- Target to achieve a significant reduction in all forms of violence against women and children.
- Percentage of reported domestic violence cases that received counselling from qualified personnel.
- Number of new or strengthened laws, policies, and action plans to combat violence against women and girls, including domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and trafficking

- Percentage of population who believe violence against women is always unacceptable and is a criminal offense, disaggregated by sex and age.
- Number of safe shelter spaces for survivors of domestic violence, disaggregated by location (urban/rural).
- Percentage of justice system personnel who have received gender-sensitivity training, disaggregated by role (e.g. judges, prosecutors, police).
- Percentage of girls under 18 who have undergone ukuthwala (abduction for marriage) or ukuhlolwa (virginity inspection) in the last 12 months.

2. Youth

a) Literacy

- Net enrolment rate in primary, secondary and tertiary education, disaggregated by sex and age
- Youth literacy rate, disaggregated by sex.

b) Labour Force Participation

- Proportion of youth enrolled in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) aligned with skills required by the South African labour market.
- Number of apprenticeship programmes established or strengthened, disaggregated by sector.
- Youth employment rate in agro-processing, tourism, green, blue, digital and creative industries, disaggregated sex and sector.

c) Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health

- Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women).
- Proportion of schools that have mainstreamed sex education in the curriculum, disaggregated by level (primary, secondary) and type of school (public, private).
- Proportion of adolescents with access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, disaggregated by sex and location (urban/rural).

d) Increased Health and Well-being

- Number of health sciences programmes with established quotas for youth enrolment, disaggregated by level of education.
- Proportion of youth with knowledge of HIV prevention and transmission, disaggregated by sex and age group.
- Adolescent pregnancy rate (pregnancies per 1,000 women aged 15-19 years).
- Proportion of youth who report substance abuse, disaggregated by sex, type of substance. alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs), and frequency of use.

- Proportion of youth who have accessed sexual and reproductive health care services, disaggregated by sex, type of service (e.g., contraception, STI screening), and location (urban/rural).

3. Persons with Disabilities

a) Inclusive Education

- Number of families with children with disabilities receiving government incentives to support their education.
- Proportion of teachers trained in special needs education, disaggregated by level of education and type of disability.

b) Increased Employment Opportunities

- Proportion of public and private sector organizations that have implemented employment quotas for persons with disabilities, disaggregated by sector and size of organisation.
- Wage gap between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities in comparable positions.
- Number of persons with disabilities employed in key sectors, including tourism, disaggregated by sex, age, type of disability, and occupation.
- Number of persons with disabilities who have received entrepreneurship training and support to start or expand businesses, disaggregated by sex and type of disability.

c) Increased Provision of Social Services

- Number of social service providers offering specialized support for families caring for adults or children with disabilities, disaggregated by type of service and location (urban/rural).
- Number of social service personnel trained in providing support to families caring for persons with disabilities, disaggregated by type of training and occupation.
- Number of incentivized packages or programmes available for persons with disabilities, disaggregated by type of package and purpose.

d) Accessible and Inclusive Public Infrastructure

- Public transportation vehicles that are accessible for persons with disabilities, disaggregated by accessibility feature (ramps, designated seating, audio announcements).
- Public buildings that are fully accessible for persons with disabilities, disaggregated by type of building and accessibility feature (e.g., ramps, braille signage, accessible toilets).

- Number of reported incidents of violence, harassment or discrimination against persons with disabilities in public spaces, disaggregated by sex, age, type of disability, and location (urban/rural).
- Proportion of persons with disabilities who report feeling safe and comfortable while using public transportation and accessing public spaces, disaggregated by sex, age, type of disability, and location (urban/rural).

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