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COVER STORY

WARMATE JONES IDIKIO

Building the missing link in Africa's trade integration

VICE PRESIDENT, LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE, ALL-AFRICA ASSOCIATION FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

FROM THE EDITORS

Editor's note

Leaders Connecting Africa's Trade

Titles say little about how a leader actually works. That is why we spent this edition with Warmate Jones Idikio, Vice President, Legal and Compliance at All-Africa Association for Small and Medium Enterprises.

From the Yenagoa Chamber of Commerce in Nigeria to legal and compliance at the All-Africa Association for Small and Medium Enterprises, Warmate Jones Idikio on law as an enabler of trade across the continent.

Our cover story follows Warmate through the choices that shaped the work, from the early years to the decisions being made now, and asks what other leaders can take from them.

Also in this edition: Africa's trade bottleneck is finance, not tariffs. Fifty countries have ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area. For the small firms it is meant to serve, the binding constraints are now trade credit and the cost of moving money across borders.

Then: What a fractional CIO is for, and when to hire a full-time one. Part-time senior technology leadership has become a serious option for growing companies. What it can do, what it cannot, and the signs that the business has outgrown it.

And: Satya Nadella and the culture reset behind Microsoft's cloud turn. Before the cloud deals and the AI partnership came a quieter change: how Microsoft argued, decided and learned. What a decade of Nadella's leadership shows about fixing culture before strategy.

We hope you find something here worth taking into your next meeting. ■

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COVER STORY

Warmate Jones Idikio

Building the missing link in Africa's trade integration

VICE PRESIDENT, LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE, ALL-AFRICA ASSOCIATION FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

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Trade across Africa has never been a simple act of buying and selling. It lives in border towns where paperwork outweighs products, in markets where ambition travels faster than infrastructure, and in enterprises whose reach is limited not by ideas but by access. Between promise and practice sits a wide space where policy often speaks one language and entrepreneurs live another. This space has long shaped the continent's economic rhythm, determining who scales, who stalls, and who remains invisible despite driving employment, production, and survival economies across borders.

It is within this space that Warmate Jones IDIKIO stepped forward, founding the AfCFTA Roundtable to close the distance between continental ambition and everyday enterprise. Drawing from years of legal practice, policy advocacy, and direct engagement with small and medium businesses, Warmate recognised that Africa's largest trade agreement would only succeed if it became intelligible, practical, and usable for those expected to power it.

The Origins of an Enterprise-Led Vision

Warmate's conviction that Africa's growth must be driven by enterprise-led policy was shaped long before continental trade became a central focus of his work. His professional journey began over three decades ago as an attorney in a law firm specialising in Maritime Law. That early exposure to trade-related legal frameworks laid the foundation for his understanding of commerce beyond borders.

Even earlier, a year of National Service proved transformational. During this period, Warmate encountered informal cross-border trade on a scale that revealed the true economic force of small and medium enterprises across Africa. What stood out was not only the volume of activity but the absence of regulation, coordination, and strategic policy to harness the wealth being generated.

This pattern repeated itself across African borders. Commercial spaces flourished informally, yet policy structures lagged behind. Later, his appointment as Director General of the Yenagoa Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, provided the platform to translate observation into advocacy. Representing SMEs at the subnational level, Warmate became deeply involved in strategic stakeholder engagements that contributed to Nigeria's national response and eventual decision to sign the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement, a defining turning point in his continental trade leadership journey.

These convictions did not remain confined to institutions. On November 11, 2023, Warmate took them directly into the public arena by running for the office of Governor of Bayelsa State, Nigeria, seeking to advance the enterprise-led development agenda he had long championed.

Grounding AfCFTA in the Real Economy

Warmate founded the AfCFTA Roundtable at a time when confusion and scepticism surrounded the Africa Continental Free Trade Area Agreement, particularly among small businesses. His decision was informed by firsthand experience during nationwide stakeholder consultations held by the Nigerian government ahead of signing the agreement.

Throughout these engagements, Warmate observed recurring misconceptions about AfCFTA. Many SMEs feared increased competition and potential loss of business, yet few understood the broader benefits of value addition, industrialisation, and expanded market access. A lack of credible cost-benefit analysis had created space for misinformation, threatening to slow implementation not only in Nigeria but across the continent.

The AfCFTA Roundtable was established to address these gaps directly. Its objective was to contextualise AfCFTA for SMEs that operate largely in the informal sector, yet account for up to 80 percent of employment in many African economies and contribute significantly to GDP. Over time, the initiative evolved into a voluntary network of 107 members from diverse professional backgrounds across Africa, united by a shared commitment to inclusive continental trade. Today, the Roundtable engages at local, national, regional, continental, and international levels.

Designing the Infrastructure of Inclusion

For Warmate, effective policy implementation begins with engagement at the grassroots. Interactions with local entrepreneurs and SMEs consistently produce two critical outcomes. First, they enable a clearer understanding of complex trade and policy frameworks. Second, they generate feedback essential for monitoring, evaluation, and policy refinement.

The AfCFTA Roundtable actively seeks platforms for dialogue with SMEs across Africa. Since 2023, it has also been involved in mentoring students and early-stage entrepreneurs, simplifying the policy, legal, and trade dimensions of AfCFTA into practical knowledge.

One of the Roundtable's most significant initiatives is the proposal for an Export Development Hub involving four subnational governments in Nigeria, collectively referred to as the BAAR States: Bayelsa, Abia, Akwa-Ibom, and Rivers. Warmate led the development of a draft agreement outlining the structure and implementation of the hub, with projected impact on more than one million entrepreneurs and SMEs engaged in manufacturing, agriculture, value addition, and services.

This initiative reflects a deliberate strategy to influence trade policy from the ground up, scaling AfCFTA provisions region by region and country by country. For Warmate, sustainable continental integration is not achieved through policy alone, but through practical structures that empower enterprises where economic activity truly begins.

Scaling Across Borders

Drawing from more than a decade of hands-on work with small and medium enterprises, Warmate identifies mobility as one of the most paradoxical barriers to intra-African business expansion. While the Africa Continental Free Trade Area was designed to promote a single market, the free movement of people remains heavily constrained.

Separate and often burdensome visa requirements across African countries continue to restrict the ability of entrepreneurs to move, negotiate, and expand operations across borders. The prevailing justification offered by governments is the potential loss of revenue. However, Warmate notes that this short-term concern undermines the long-term economic benefits of seamless continental trade.

Beyond mobility, the free movement of goods is also obstructed by non-tariff barriers at border points. These include undocumented charges, prolonged clearance delays, and excessive procedural requirements that increase costs and discourage cross-border commerce.

Warmate points to consistent advocacy by Business Membership Organizations and Civil Society Organizations as a catalyst for progress. Several African countries have begun implementing visa-on-arrival policies for African nationals. However, he stresses that removing non-tariff barriers requires more than policy statements. Governments must demonstrate political commitment by actively monitoring border officials and imposing sanctions on those who violate trade protocols. Such action, he argues, would send a powerful signal of genuine intent to implement continental trade agreements.

Over time, the initiative evolved into a voluntary network of 107 members from diverse professional backgrounds across Africa, united by a shared commitment to inclusive continental trade.

Law as an Enabler of Continental Trade Integration

In his role as Vice President for Legal and Compliance at the All-Africa Association for Small and Medium Enterprises, Warmate views legal frameworks as foundational to private sector growth. Where such frameworks exist and are properly implemented, trade flourishes. Where they are absent or poorly enforced, growth is stifled.

He describes the Africa Continental Free Trade Area as one of the most important legal instruments for Africa's economic integration. The agreement provides a coordinated regulatory structure aimed at lowering trade costs, expanding markets, and encouraging cross-border investment.

Central to this framework are rules of origin and the


Photo: Malik Buraimoh / Unsplash

phased elimination of tariffs. Warmate explains that rules of origin define which products qualify for tariff preferences within Africa, based on whether goods are wholly obtained or substantially transformed on the continent. When correctly implemented, these rules incentivise regional manufacturing and value addition, reinforcing AfCFTA's broader industrialisation objectives.

By harmonising trade rules and reducing uncertainty, legal frameworks such as AfCFTA create conditions for increased intra-African trade and sustained private sector expansion.

Subnational Leadership as a Catalyst for Investment

Warmate's role as Chairman of BayelsaPRIME places him at the convergence of public sector leadership and private investment strategy. He believes that investment flows to environments where opportunity is clearly defined and governance is predictable.

The BayelsaPRIME programme, he explains, was designed around a principle of structured preparation. Rather than relying on chance, the initiative focuses on building layered systems that progressively strengthen the investment ecosystem.

From his experience, Warmate outlines several key priorities for subnational governments. First, state actors must consistently assess their competitive positioning in relation to other regions competing for the same investors. Second, policy decisions should be guided by both economic value and social cohesion, ensuring strong vertical and horizontal linkages across industries.

He describes the concept of "layering" as the strategic organisation of opportunity-related information, data, policy frameworks, and measurable outcomes. This approach relies on continuous evaluation and deliberately integrates private sector input into decision-making processes.

Such environments, Warmate notes, generate strong linkages for local enterprises, particularly in value-added sectors. The result is industrial growth, economic diversification, and sustained expansion at the subnational level.

The Anatomy of Partnerships That Create Lasting Impact

Warmate believes that truly effective partnerships begin with clarity of purpose. In his words, partnership represents the intersection of divergent interests woven into a single fabric defined by a shared objective. Across national and international development platforms, he has seen partnerships serve as powerful vehicles for sustainable economic impact when they are structured with intention rather than convenience.

From his experience, effective partnerships must be rooted in clearly articulated, policy-driven visions that define measurable outcomes. Without this foundation, collaboration risks becoming symbolic rather than transformational. Equally important is a shared commitment among partners. When all parties align around common goals, dedication becomes unwavering and outcomes more achievable.

Warmate also stresses the importance of clearly defined processes for resource planning, mobilisation, and allocation. Active participation by all partners across these stages strengthens ownership and accountability. Transparency, open communication, and mutual accountability are essential, particularly when challenges arise. Too often, he observes, partnerships falter when blame replaces collaboration. Shared responsibility in addressing setbacks, rather than fault-finding, is what sustains long-term impact.

Education as the Backbone of Africa's AfCFTA Readiness

With Africa's population exceeding 1.5 billion and a median age of just over 19 years, Warmate sees education and skills development as central to the continent's economic future. He situates AfCFTA within the broader vision of the African Economic Community, established under the Abuja Treaty, which aims to foster self-reliant and integrated development across the continent.

For Warmate, Africa's youthful demographics present both opportunity and urgency. To fully leverage AfCFTA, education systems must be recalibrated to align with future economic realities shaped by technology, industrialisation, and innovation. He argues that Africa must prioritise skills over credentials, embedding practical, industry-relevant competencies into the learning process.

National and subnational governments, he adds, must restructure science and technical education policies with clear medium- and long-term outcomes. Industrialisation, in his view, will only be possible through education that produces technologically capable, industry-ready young people. The content and context of Africa's education systems must reflect this imperative.

Reframing Africa's Trade Narrative on the Global Stage

Warmate approaches Africa's global trade perception through data rather than sentiment. He notes that the continent's trade profile remains heavily concentrated in extracted resources, particularly fuels, mining products, and agricultural commodities. Price volatility in these sectors has left many African economies vulnerable, contributing to rising food import bills, limited industrial capacity, and constrained growth.

He advocates for a deliberate shift in narrative. Africa must increasingly present itself as a destination for value-added production rather than a source of raw materials. This transition requires strong institutions, long-term leadership vision, and sustained private sector investment in manufacturing and processing.

Warmate also highlights the rapid emergence of Africa's knowledge economy. However, he cautions that research and development must be strategically deployed to support industrial growth. Harnessing knowledge effectively, he argues, is essential to reposition Africa as a credible, long-term trade partner in the global economy.

Aligning Trade Ambition with SME Reality

AfCFTA projections point to a continental market of 1.7 billion people by 2030, with a rapidly expanding middle class and trillions of dollars in potential trade and investment. Yet Warmate asks a critical question. How can these ambitions translate into tangible benefits for Africa's nearly 100 million small and medium enterprises.

He identifies access to finance as a foundational challenge. Many SMEs remain informal and small because they lack the capital needed to scale. Traditional financial institutions often view them as high-risk. Warmate advocates for subnational SME Trust Funds focused on value addition and exports,

offering grants, loans, and credit guarantees. He also calls for stronger institutional support for cooperative societies.

Cross-border payments present another barrier. Multiple currency regimes complicate transactions, despite initiatives like the Pan-African Payment and Settlement System developed by Afreximbank. While PAPSS offers a pathway to local currency settlements, Warmate notes that governments remain cautious due to infrastructural and currency risks. He recommends partnerships with fintech firms and currency-hedging mechanisms to make local currency trade more viable.

Market access remains constrained by weak infrastructure, restrictive visa regimes, and inconsistent regulatory environments. Warmate points to the African Union Protocol on Free Movement of Persons as a critical instrument that must be domesticated into national law. Dedicated institutions, he argues, are needed to implement these policies efficiently and encourage cross-border investment.

The Economics of Plain Language

Warmate consistently emphasises the importance of simplifying policy language. For many SMEs, trade regulations are inaccessible, written in complex legal terms that alienate rather than empower. This gap breeds misunderstanding, distrust, and disengagement from formal economic systems.

Simplification, he explains, is not cosmetic. It is a structural intervention that enables comprehension, builds trust, and encourages participation. When businesses understand policy, they engage more actively. Engagement creates linkages, which in turn strengthen firm-level capacity, domestic sourcing, and value addition.

As domestic value-added ratios increase, firms become better positioned to participate in global value chains. Simplified policy communication, Warmate argues, is therefore a direct pathway to inclusive growth and export readiness.

Defining AfCFTA Success for the Everyday Entrepreneur

From Warmate's perspective, success under AfCFTA is measured not in treaties or projections, but in the lived experience of everyday entrepreneurs. They understand the promise of a single African market, freer movement, expanded access, and increased income. What they seek is implementation that matches intent.

For them, success means frictionless access to markets, elimination of non-tariff barriers, simplified customs documentation, affordable transport, reliable infrastructure, and accessible finance. These are the practical outcomes that determine whether AfCFTA delivers real value.

Warmate sees leadership as a bridge between policy ambition and entrepreneurial reality. His role, as he defines it, is to translate AfCFTA into actionable knowledge, convene meaningful policy dialogue, provide market intelligence, interpret trade rules clearly, and advocate relentlessly for improved access to finance.

In doing so, he believes leaders can help shape an AfCFTA environment where opportunity is not theoretical, but tangible, inclusive, and sustainable across the continent. ■



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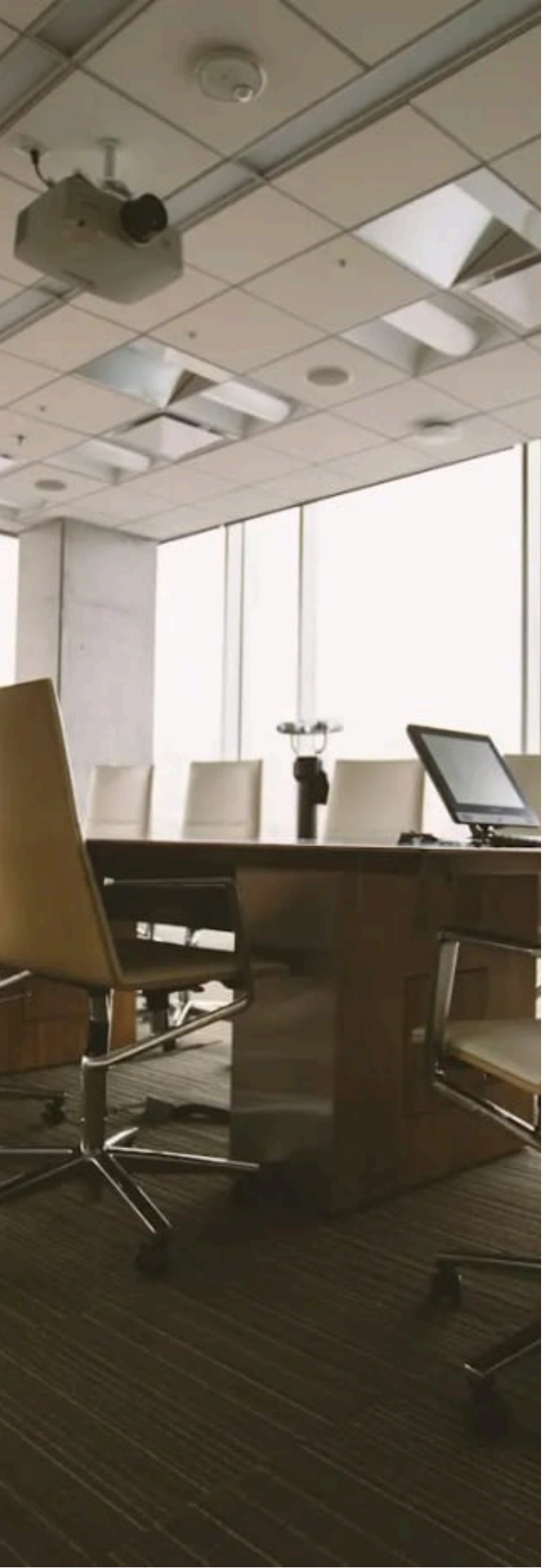

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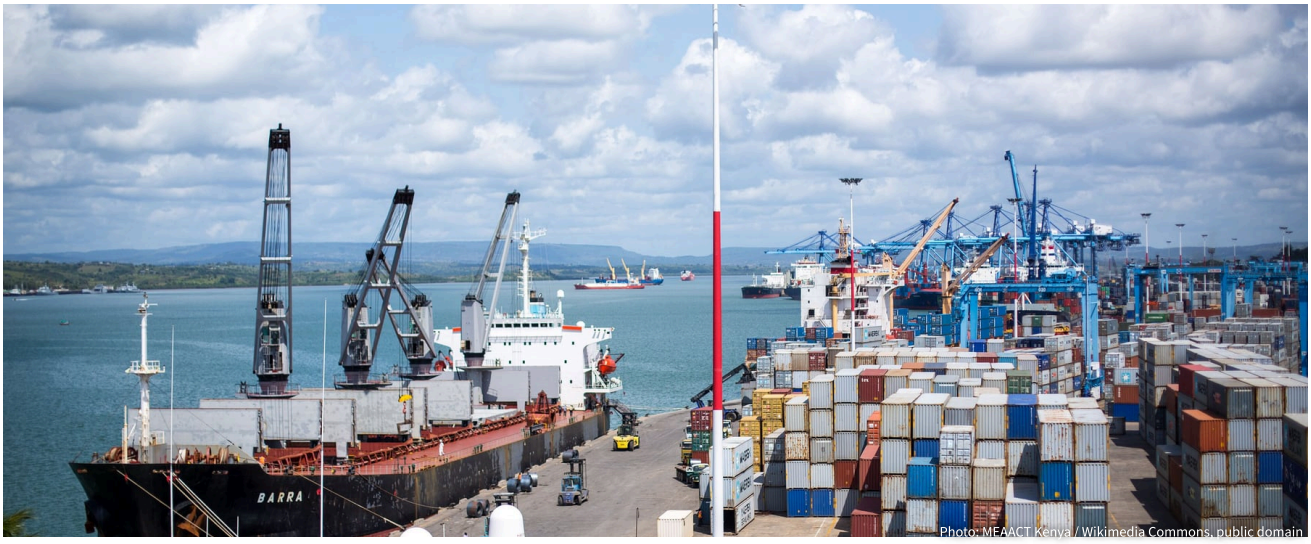
ANALYSIS

Africa's trade bottleneck is finance, not tariffs

Fifty countries have ratified the African Continental Free Trade Area. For the small firms it is meant to serve, the binding constraints are now trade credit and the cost of moving money across borders.



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On paper, the African Continental Free Trade Area has largely won its argument. Fifty countries have now ratified the agreement, Somalia most recently, and 54 African Union members have signed it.

In practice, trade between African countries remains small. Intra-African trade grew 5.5 per cent in 2025 but still accounts for only about 14 per cent of the continent's total trade, according to figures reported by Xinhua from an Afreximbank forum in Gaborone in late 2026. A senior Afreximbank executive told the same forum that only 12 of the 50 ratifying countries were actively trading under the agreement.

The prize was never mainly about tariffs

The World Bank's 2020 assessment put the potential gain from full implementation at a 7 per cent rise in regional income, about $450 billion, by 2035, with 30 million people lifted out of extreme poverty. Most of that, $292 billion, was expected to come not from tariff cuts but from trade facilitation: less red tape, lower compliance costs and simpler customs procedures.

The same analysis expected exports within the continent to rise by 81 per cent, against 19 per cent for exports to the rest of the world. In

other words, the agreement's value depends heavily on firms trading with neighbours they have rarely sold to before, and that is exactly the trade that is hardest to finance and pay for.

That matters for how business leaders read the agreement. Tariff schedules are negotiated by governments. Much of the facilitation agenda, from finance to payments to paperwork, is built and run by banks and companies.

The finance gap that smaller firms fall into

The African Development Bank's latest trade finance report estimates unmet demand at between $74 billion and $92 billion in 2024. The lower figure alone equals 5.4 per cent of the region's merchandise trade. Commercial banks intermediated an average of 23 per cent of Africa's trade over 2020 to 2024, down from 40 per cent in 2011 to 2019.

Small and medium-sized firms are often described as Africa's missing middle, too big for microfinance yet too small to interest corporate banks. They feel the gap most. Development finance institutions have stepped in, facilitating about $32 billion of trade finance a year between 2020 and 2024, and the bank estimates the gap could have exceeded $100 billion a year without that support.

Foreign exchange is part of the problem. Limited currency liquidity was the main constraint for 36 per cent of banks surveyed in 2020 to 2024, double the 18 per cent recorded in 2015 to 2019. The bank warns that if correspondent banks become more cautious, the gap could widen to between $86.6 billion and $102.6 billion by 2027.

There are encouraging signs. Intra-African trade made up 34 per cent of the trade financed by banks in 2020 to 2024, an 89 per cent increase on 2011 to 2019 levels. Six of the top seven confirming banks in the latest survey were African, against only two in the top ten in earlier editions.

The cost of paying in someone else's currency

The second constraint is payments. For years a payment between two African countries could travel through a correspondent bank outside the continent and be converted into dollars or euros on the way. The UN's Africa Renewal reported the case of a printing business owner

BY THE NUMBERS

$74bn

Africa's estimated trade finance gap in 2024, lower bound

African Development Bank, 2026

$5bn

Yearly cost of settling intra-African trade in foreign currencies

Afreximbank via Xinhua, 2026

$292bn

Projected AfCFTA income gain from trade facilitation by 2035

World Bank, 2020

in Freetown who, in 2021, paid $165 in fees to send $10,000 to a supplier in Nigeria, with the money taking three days to arrive.

Afreximbank estimates that settling intra-African trade in foreign currencies costs the continent more than $5 billion a year. The Pan-African Payment and Settlement System, built by Afreximbank with the AfCFTA Secretariat and launched in January 2022, is designed to cut that cost by settling payments in local currencies. In its pilot, accounts were debited and credited within ten seconds. It now operates across more than 30 countries.

Infrastructure is only half the job. Bank of Botswana's governor has argued that the system's success depends on central banks cooperating on oversight, anti-money-laundering safeguards and interoperability, and that fragmented rules push trade into informal channels.

What business leaders can do now

The tools exist; adoption is the gap. Only 28 per cent of banks surveyed by the African Development Bank had adopted digital trade finance tools or platforms. Companies can push that number up from the demand side.

For finance and technology chiefs at African corporates and multinationals, three moves follow. Connect treasury systems to local-currency settlement where partner banks offer it, and measure what correspondent routes really cost. Use supply-chain finance and factoring to extend the company's credit standing to smaller suppliers who struggle to borrow on their own. Digitise trade documents, because finance follows paperwork that a bank can verify quickly.

Ratification has done its part. What remains is financial plumbing, and that is a job for companies and banks as much as for governments.

Sources: africa.com; gtreview.com; thestar.com.my; worldbank.org; africarenewal.un.org; papss.com; zawya.com. ■

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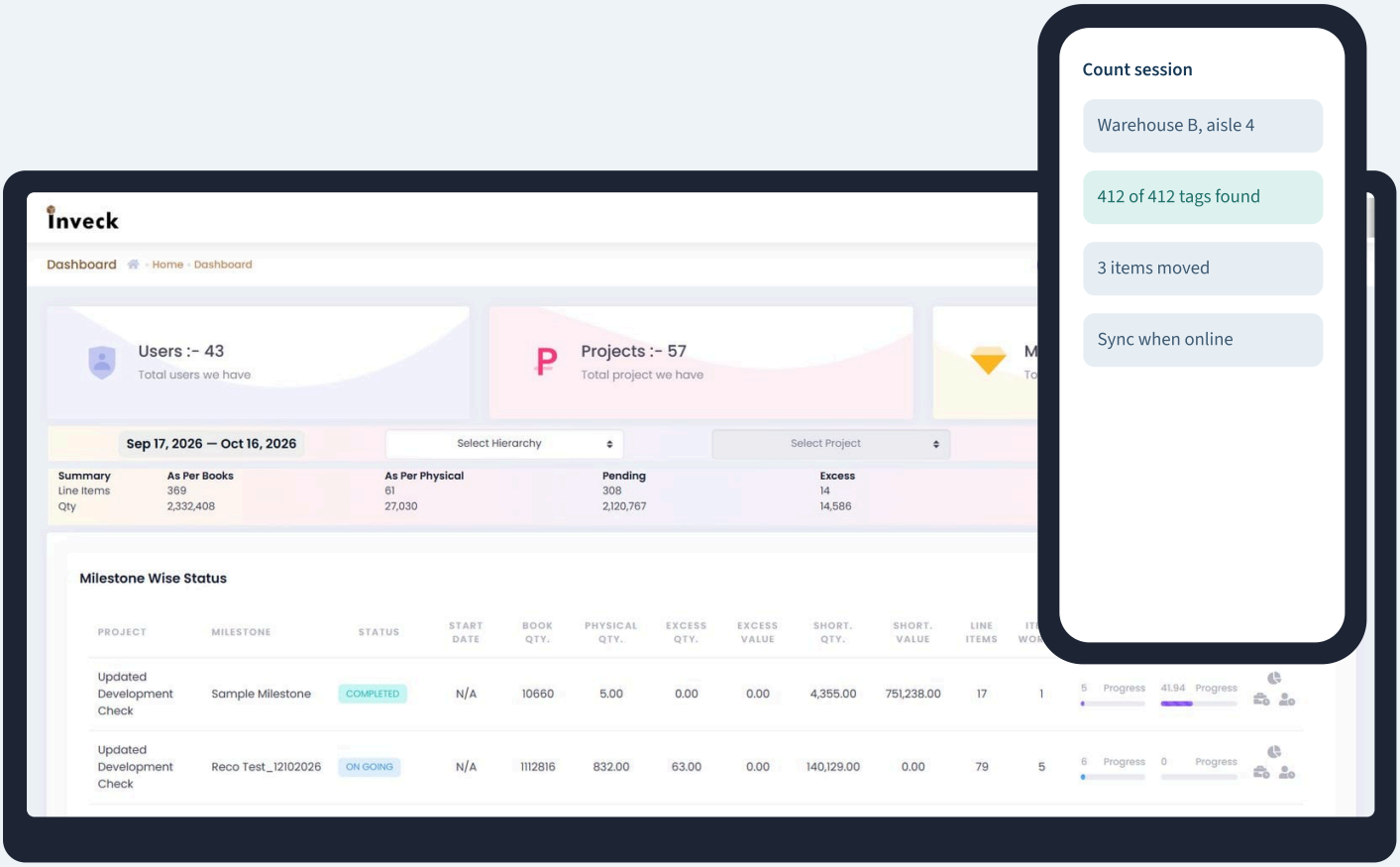

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ANALYSIS

What a fractional CIO is for, and when to hire a full-time one

Part-time senior technology leadership has become a serious option for growing companies. What it can do, what it cannot, and the signs that the business has outgrown it.

A growing company reaches a point where technology decisions are made by whoever happens to be nearest. The finance director signs software contracts, an operations manager chooses the warehouse system, and an IT manager hired to keep laptops working now fields questions from the board about ransomware. The conventional answer is a chief information officer. A quicker and cheaper one is a fractional CIO: an experienced technology executive who works for several companies at once, a few days a month each.

The arrangement can work very well. It can also become an expensive way of postponing a decision. The difference lies in being clear about what part-time leadership is for and what it is not.

What it does well

A good fractional CIO brings judgement formed across many organisations, which is precisely what a mid-sized company tends to lack. The first use of that judgement is strategy: a short document that ties technology spending to the business plan, names the three or four things that matter most and, just as usefully, what the

company will stop doing. The second is vendor selection. Someone who has negotiated many software contracts knows where the renewal uplifts, automatic renewals and exit costs hide.

The third is security posture: an honest assessment of where the company stands, the basic controls in place, customer and insurer questionnaires answered accurately rather than optimistically, and a plain account of which risks are being carried. The fourth is board reporting, turning technical status into the decisions and risks directors need to see. The fifth, and often the most valuable, is hiring. Few chief executives can judge a candidate for head of infrastructure or security lead. A fractional CIO can write the role, sit on the panel and tell a confident interviewee from a competent one.

What it cannot do

Part-time leadership has limits that no contract can remove. A fractional CIO is not in the building when the payroll system fails on a Thursday afternoon, and cannot run delivery day to day: the stand-ups, the slipping project, the supplier who needs chasing. The relationships that make a technology function effective are built in corridors, and someone present a few days a month will always know the business less well than its own managers.

Accountability is thinner, too. A fractional CIO has other clients and an understandable interest in renewing the engagement. Acquirers and large customers doing due diligence may also want a named, full-time executive answerable for security.

How to structure the engagement

The role should report to the chief executive; placed under finance, it tends to become a cost-control function. Beyond that, settle five things in writing before the first day.

- Scope. Three or four outcomes for the first six months, not a list of activities. “A security baseline agreed and funded” is an outcome; “attend weekly meetings” is not.
- Hours. A fixed number of days a month, with agreed terms for incidents and for months when the work runs over.
- Decision rights. What the fractional CIO can approve alone, such as vendor choices and spending below a set threshold, and what needs the chief executive. Without this, the role becomes an adviser whose recommendations wait in inboxes.
- Delivery. A named internal owner, usually the IT manager or head of operations, accountable for getting things done. The fractional CIO owns direction; the internal owner owns execution.
- Conflicts. Disclosure of any commercial relationship with suppliers, including referral fees and reseller arrangements, and a commitment not to recommend firms that pay the adviser.

Signs the company has outgrown it

Decisions start waiting for the next visit. The allocated days are exceeded month after month. Technology becomes part of what customers buy. The internal team grows to the point where its managers need managing, not just direction. A large programme begins, such as replacing the core finance system or integrating an acquisition, that needs daily leadership. And the board, an investor or a major customer starts asking who, by name, is accountable for security.

Two or more of these at once is a strong

signal. The economics usually confirm it: when the fractional fees approach the cost of a full-time salary, the company is paying for a full-time CIO without having one.

Handing over

The best fractional engagements plan their own end. The fractional CIO knows the role best and should draft the successor's job description. Decide early whether the incumbent is a candidate for the full-time post; if so, they should stay off the interview panel.

Arrange a period of overlap, and insist on a written handover. It should cover the strategy, every decision taken to accept a risk and who took it, open security issues, a candid assessment of each member of the team, and the vendor contracts with their renewal and notice dates. The new CIO should also be told, in front of the team, that earlier decisions are open to review. A successor who inherits a plan that cannot be questioned will either follow it without conviction or abandon it without explanation.

Of all those documents, the contracts list is the one most often missing and most urgently needed. A new CIO who discovers in the third month that the largest software licence renewed automatically in the first has lost the best chance to renegotiate it. ■

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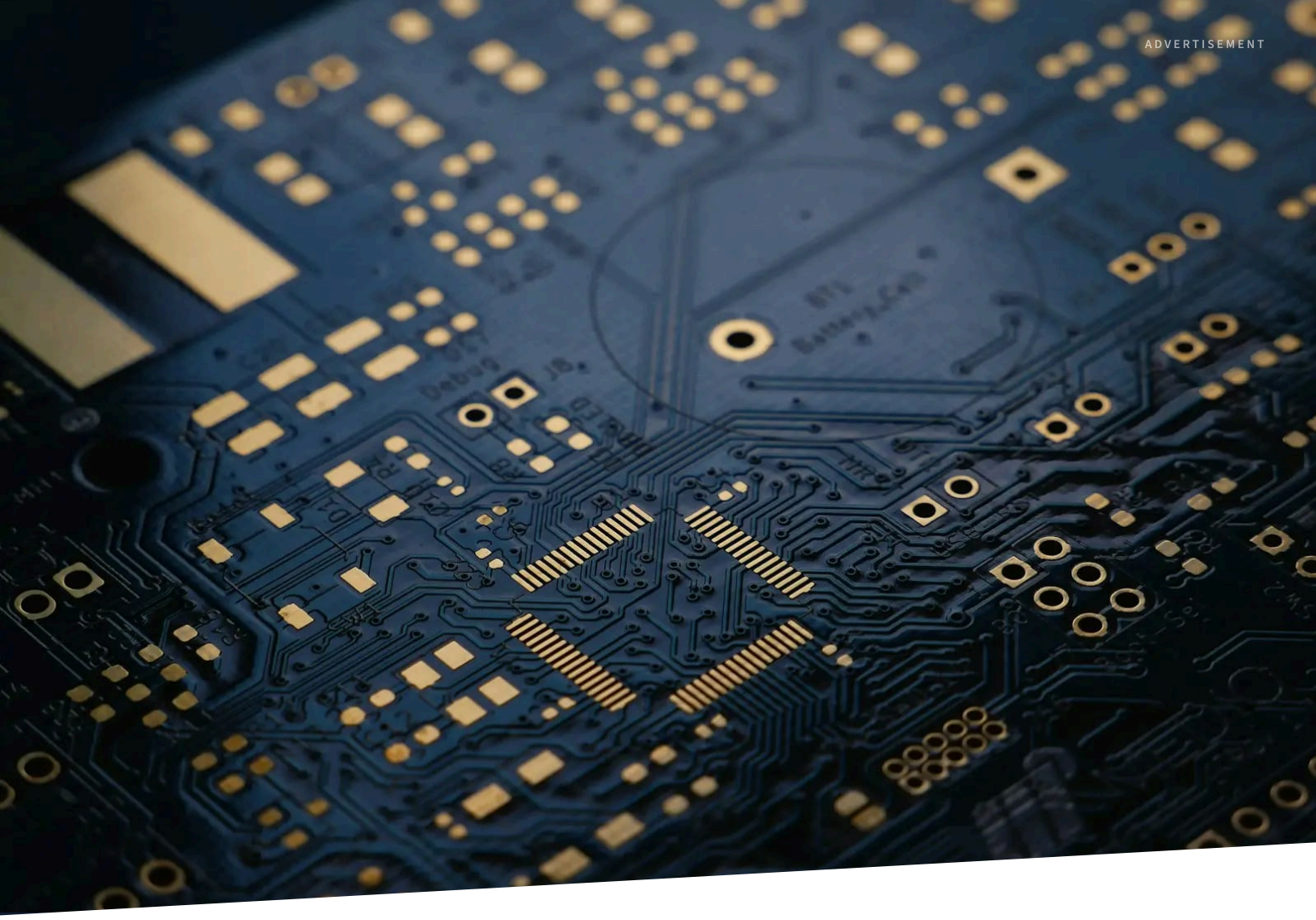

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Satya Nadella and the culture reset behind Microsoft's cloud turn

Before the cloud deals and the AI partnership came a quieter change: how Microsoft argued, decided and learned. What a decade of Nadella's leadership shows about fixing culture before strategy.

When Satya Nadella became Microsoft's third chief executive in February 2014, the company was profitable, enormous and widely described as having missed the move to mobile. A decade later it was one of the most valuable companies in the world, built around cloud services and artificial intelligence. The products changed, but the more instructive part of the story is what changed first: how the company decided, argued and learned.

An engineer who came up through the back office

Nadella joined Microsoft in 1992 and spent much of his career in the businesses customers rarely see: servers, developer tools and, later, the cloud and enterprise group that ran Azure. That background matters. He arrived in the top job already convinced that the company's future lay in infrastructure sold to other businesses, rather than in defending the Windows desktop.

Culture before strategy

His best-known early move was not a product but a vocabulary. Nadella borrowed the psychologist Carol Dweck's idea of a growth mindset and asked a famously competitive company to value learning over being right. Internal rivalry gave way, at least in part, to collaboration across divisions. In his 2017 book Hit Refresh he described the cultural shift as the precondition for everything else.

The practical consequences were visible quickly. Microsoft put Office on rival platforms, embraced Linux and open-source software it had once fought, and treated partners as partners. Each of those decisions made commercial sense only if the company stopped measuring itself by Windows.

Bets that compound

The acquisitions followed the same logic: LinkedIn in 2016, GitHub in 2018 and Activision Blizzard, completed in 2023 after a long regulatory review. So did the early and much-enlarged investment in OpenAI, which put Microsoft at the centre of the generative-AI boom and turned Azure into the platform many enterprises use to run it. Nadella became chairman of the board in 2021.

What other leaders can take from it

- Fix how decisions are made before choosing what to decide. A strategy that depends on teams sharing work will fail in a culture that rewards hoarding it.



Satya Nadella

CHAIRMAN AND CEO, MICROSOFT

Photograph: Brian Smale and Microsoft, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0

- Let go of the measure you grew up with. Microsoft's turn required treating its most famous product as one business among several.
- Make partnerships do real work. The OpenAI relationship gave Microsoft speed it could not have built alone, at the price of depending on another organisation's choices.

For technology leaders inside large organisations, the lesson is uncomfortable and useful: the platform you modernise matters less than whether the people around it are allowed to learn in public. ■

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