



## Trade and food safety standards Digital technologies for trade and food safety

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### The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown low- and middle-income countries, especially those in Africa, to have varying levels of preparedness when it comes to crisis response. Many countries have failed to develop or complete their response plans for food safety emergencies in national food control systems, for example. This affects food businesses' ability to adapt in times of crisis to ensure the safety of the food they manufacture. As a result, food systems are compromised, especially inspection functions, with negative impacts on local and regional food trade.

COVID-19 has amplified existing trade bottlenecks, including inefficient paper-based analogue systems that rely on physical contact, customs and payment documentation for the movement of agricultural commodities across borders. Digitalization has the potential to facilitate international trade, including the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), with faster, more cost-efficient and less bureaucratic processes. E-certification can reduce the lengthy and costly official clearance processes required by food authorities, streamlining processes and establishing extensive food-composition databases. Using blockchain to augment the digital traceability of food may enable faster and more efficient food safety risk management globally. This comes at a time when the African Union Commission is establishing the African Food Safety Agency to coordinate food safety issues across the continent.

Digital technologies can also facilitate the marketing of produce from farmers to consumers both locally and across borders, especially with COVID-19 restrictions in place. Online produce sales can connect farmers to buyers of produce such as fresh fruits and vegetables and other perishables, allowing farmers to sell directly to consumers (for example, in cities) while ensuring food safety through digital traceability. Virtual markets can replace street markets in times of lockdown, generating higher volumes and prices than wholesale markets, as demonstrated in countries such as India.

In the context of COVID-19, digital solutions can enhance trade through the cross-border transfer of physical goods or services (for example, e-commerce) and increase the scale, scope and speed of trade by opening up new market opportunities and enabling access to distribution networks. In these challenging times and in the face of other major challenges across the continent, we must consider how AfCFTA could foster the widespread use of digital technologies to boost food safety and trade for Africa.

### Budget

USD 10 million

### Time frame

2020–2023

### SDGs



### Related FAO policy notes on COVID-19

- ▶ [Agri-food markets and trade policy in the time of COVID-19](#)
- ▶ [Ample supplies to help shield food markets from the COVID-19 crisis](#)
- ▶ [COVID-19: Channels of transmission to food and agriculture](#)
- ▶ [Preserving African food value chains in the midst of the coronavirus crisis](#)



## The action

- 1 The programme will undertake a **situational analysis of the challenges and opportunities at continental level** for the use of digital technologies for food safety and trade facilitation, particularly with regard to the availability of infrastructure, governance and data sharing between food businesses and regulators.
- 2 It will **assess the enabling environment at national level and within the continent's Regional Economic Communities (RECs)** for digital technologies in the domain of food safety and trade. This includes infrastructure for testing (such as laboratory systems), data collection and analysis and data sharing between food businesses and authorities.
- 3 The programme will facilitate **national and regional consultations on the needs and opportunities for digital technologies** in the domain of food safety and trade. The consultations will culminate in the establishment of a roadmap for the use of digital solutions and their implementation in selected pilot countries, combined with capacity development.
- 4 The programme will **foster digital technologies at local, national and regional level** to facilitate virtual markets and online sales, connecting farmers to consumers, in partnership with brokers, social entrepreneurs and non-governmental organizations.

## Expected results

The programme aims to scale up digital solutions to facilitate and increase intra-African agricultural and food trade through AfCFTA.

- 1 **There will be heightened national and REC-level awareness of digital technologies** as adaptation solutions for efficient and sustainable food control systems and trade in situations of crisis such COVID-19 and in the context of climate change.
- 2 **The enabling environment for digitalization** will be broadly understood, along with the limitations (accessibility, cost and content), associated risks (privacy protection, intellectual property) and key requirements for digital solutions.
- 3 **National and regional roadmaps will be established to implement digital solutions** to improve food safety and enhance trade and proofs of concept will be developed in selected countries.
- 4 **An enabling environment will be established to foster trade digitalization**, facilitating access to and the adoption of digital tools and innovation and improving access to trade-related information and e-commerce through online platforms.

## Partnerships

The African Union, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community, the Economic Community of Central African States, the Southern African Development Community, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the West African Economic and Monetary Union, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the International Trade Center, the International Food Policy Research Institute, international standard-setting bodies (such as Codex Alimentarius, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the International Plant Protection Convention), the Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Cooperation, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa and the World Health Organization.

## Programme links

This programme ties in with the following projects and initiatives led by FAO and its partners:  
FAO support to the COMESA trade facilitation programme (GCP/INT/387/COM); support for boosting intra-African trade in agricultural commodities and services to advance the implementation of the AfCFTA Agreement (TCP/RAF/3708).

## Country focus

Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, the Comoros, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gambia, the Niger, the Sudan, Switzerland, Togo, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe

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