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Author:

Paul Frimpong
Executive Director, **ACCPA**

From Diplomatic Pledge to Institutional Mechanism

At the 2024 FOCAC Beijing Summit, China and African countries committed to establishing a China–Africa Digital Technology Cooperation Centre and advancing 20 digital infrastructure and transformation demonstration projects. The Centre’s opening in Hangzhou in August 2026 marks a shift from diplomatic intent towards institutional implementation. Yet institutions matter only through what they enable. Its significance will depend less on projects announced than on whether cooperation strengthens African skills, enterprises, research systems and policy capacity. The central question is whether this architecture can help African countries become producers and shapers of digital technologies—or merely more efficient adopters of solutions developed elsewhere.

Africa’s Digital Transformation Challenge

Africa’s digital economy has expanded through mobile connectivity, fintech, e-commerce and digital entrepreneurship, with innovators applying technology across finance, agriculture, healthcare, education and trade. Yet progress remains constrained by costly and uneven connectivity, infrastructure gaps, limited advanced skills, weak research systems, cybersecurity vulnerabilities and low technology-production capacity.

As a result, many African economies remain users and importers rather than producers and owners of digital technologies. Genuine transformation must therefore extend beyond connectivity, platform adoption and digitised public services. It should raise productivity, advance industrialisation, create decent employment, strengthen institutions and enable African firms and researchers to create technology. The Cooperation Centre and its demonstration projects should ultimately be judged against these outcomes, not by the number of projects launched.

Digital Transformation Requires an Ecosystem, Not Isolated Technologies

Digital transformation is often reduced to expanding internet access, acquiring technologies or digitising public services. China’s experience suggests a broader lesson: transformation depends on an ecosystem linking infrastructure, finance, skills, production, research and public institutions.

Creative industries show these connections. Animation, gaming and digital content generate value only when talent is supported by intellectual-property protection, finance and distribution platforms. Likewise, e-commerce requires trusted payments, cross-border settlement, logistics and competitive producers—interdependencies illustrated by LianLian Digital and Alibaba’s Cross-Border Live Streaming Base.

Connectivity and 5G provide a foundation, but their developmental value lies in what they enable, from emergency response and urban management to automation and industrial efficiency. Huawei, Beijing Global Safety Technology, Hikrobot and Inventronics represent different parts of this wider architecture. Africa need not reproduce these models wholesale. The relevant lesson is that isolated projects rarely transform economies; digital progress becomes developmental when technology strengthens enterprise, productive capacity, skills and institutions.

The Potential Role of the CADT Cooperation Centre

This ecosystem perspective helps clarify the potential role of the China–Africa Digital Technology Cooperation Centre. Rather than functioning primarily as a showcase for Chinese technologies, the Centre could become a practical bridge between African development priorities and the expertise, enterprises and institutions capable of responding to them.

Its most valuable role may be to help African governments identify appropriate solutions before projects are selected. A country seeking to digitise agricultural value chains, strengthen emergency-response systems or expand affordable rural connectivity requires more than access to a technology provider. It needs support in assessing local conditions, comparing available options, designing workable projects and developing the skills required to operate them sustainably.

The Centre could also connect African governments, businesses, universities and research institutions with Chinese partners, while coordinating knowledge exchange, professional training and the proposed demonstration projects. Importantly, it could provide a space where technologies are adapted to African economic, institutional and social realities rather than transferred as ready-made solutions.

Its success, however, should not be measured by the number of conferences held, delegations received or agreements signed. The more meaningful indicators will be whether the partnerships it facilitates solve real problems, strengthen African institutions, expand local participation and leave behind capabilities that can be sustained and replicated.

The Potential Role of the CADT Cooperation Centre

The China–Africa Digital Technology Cooperation Centre could help address a persistent weakness in Africa–China engagement: the gap between broad commitments and coordinated implementation. Its value would lie in matching clearly defined African priorities with appropriate technical expertise, financing options and implementation partners, rather than promoting technologies in search of markets.

Properly structured, the Centre could connect African governments and enterprises with Chinese technology companies, universities and research institutions. It could also coordinate the 20 proposed demonstration projects, support policy dialogue and standards development, and facilitate practical training for African engineers, regulators and professionals. Such coordination is particularly important because technologies developed for one environment cannot always be transferred unchanged to another. Differences in infrastructure, affordability, institutional capacity and social conditions require solutions to be adapted locally.

The Centre should therefore function as more than an information hub or diplomatic platform. It could become a mechanism for translating cooperation into projects that respond to real development needs and strengthen African capabilities. Its success should not be measured by conferences convened, delegations received or agreements signed, but by whether the cooperation it facilitates produces sustainable solutions, stronger institutions, meaningful local participation and measurable development outcomes.

From Technology Exhibition to Development Partnership

Exposure to sophisticated technologies can generate excitement and expand the range of possibilities African policymakers consider. Yet demonstration is not development. A technology becomes developmentally valuable only when it responds to a genuine local need, can operate within existing conditions and strengthens the capacity of local institutions and people.

This places project design at the centre of the proposed cooperation. African governments and institutions must help define the problems to be addressed from the outset, rather than being invited after solutions have already been selected. African engineers, researchers, universities and businesses should participate in implementation, supported by practical knowledge-sharing and credible technology-transfer arrangements. Otherwise, the demonstration projects may produce impressive installations while leaving countries dependent on external expertise for operation, maintenance and future expansion.

Affordability, infrastructure readiness and data governance are equally important. A technically advanced system may offer limited value if it cannot function reliably, be maintained locally or be expanded beyond a single pilot location. Projects involving public services must also establish who owns, stores and controls the data generated.

The movement from technology exhibition to development partnership occurs when African actors participate not merely as users or recipients, but as co-designers, implementers and knowledge producers. The real test is therefore not whether the technologies work, but whether they help African countries build capabilities that endure after the initial project ends.

The Importance of African Agency

Responsibility for converting digital cooperation into development cannot rest with China alone. African governments, regional bodies and institutions must determine what they want from the partnership. This requires clear national and regional priorities, well-developed investible projects, and coordination among ministries responsible for technology, industry, education, trade and finance.

African negotiators should also secure meaningful local-content, technology-transfer and skills-development provisions. Universities, research centres, start-ups and domestic enterprises must participate in designing and implementing projects, rather than being included only as end users. At the same time, credible data-governance, cybersecurity and procurement frameworks are necessary to protect public interests and build trust.

Above all, digital cooperation must be connected to wider strategies for industrialisation, employment and productive transformation. Fragmented projects selected because they are readily available, rather than because they fit national development plans, will produce limited long-term value. External cooperation can support Africa's digital ambitions, but it cannot substitute for domestic strategy, institutional coordination and political ownership.

How Should the 20 Demonstration Projects Be Judged?

The 20 demonstration projects require a clear framework for assessing development impact. Five tests are particularly important: relevance—whether a project addresses an identified development priority; capability—whether it transfers skills and strengthens institutions; local participation—whether African firms, researchers and professionals hold substantive roles; sustainability—whether the project can be financed, operated and maintained locally; and scalability—whether it can move beyond a single pilot.

Data protection, cybersecurity, employment effects and public accountability should apply across all five tests. These criteria would shift attention from projects announced to capabilities and public value created.

Conclusion

The Centre represents an important step towards converting FOCAC commitments into sustained cooperation, but its establishment should not be mistaken for success. Its significance will ultimately depend on whether it facilitates locally grounded partnerships that solve development problems, strengthen African capabilities and produce benefits that endure beyond individual projects.



CONTACT

PLOT No. 49, Haatso RD, North Legon
Accra, Ghana
+233 303 965259

info@africachinacentre.org

www.africachinacentre.org