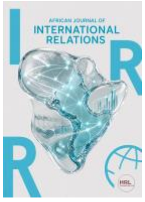

AFRICAN JOURNAL OF
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

VOLUME 1 | 2026 | PAGES 21-32 |

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Digital Reach to Trade Conversion

Institutionalising Kenya's Digital Trade Diplomacy, 2013–2022

Frank D. Ochieng[1], Boniface Kitaka Muoka[2], Evans Onyango[3]

[1] MA Student in Diplomacy and International Relations, Kenyatta University. [2,3] Lecturers, Department of Security & Diplomacy, Kenyatta University.

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Kenya used digital diplomacy to support international trade between 2013 and 2022 and why a wider online reach did not consistently become verifiable trade value. The study uses a retrospective qualitative case design. Data were collected through an online questionnaire completed by 37 respondents from government, trade and investment agencies, diplomatic missions, business organisations, development institutions, universities, and communication practice; the qualitative corpus comprised substantive open-ended responses from 20 participants. Reflexive thematic analysis identified five themes: uneven adoption and reach; continuity and efficiency; networked trade facilitation; governance, capability, and inclusion; and measurement and conversion. The findings indicate substantial use of digital diplomacy, particularly through social media, virtual meetings, trade promotion and online services. The strongest evidence concerned intermediate outcomes such as access, enquiries, stakeholder connection and agreement-making rather than independently verified transactions. Measurement was not absent, but it was heterogeneous and weakly integrated across institutions. The article develops the concept of a reach-conversion gap to describe this discontinuity. Using networked public diplomacy and liberal institutionalism, it argues that Kenya's digital trade diplomacy became network-rich but institutionally under-converted. Kenya should establish a shared lead-management protocol, hybrid diplomatic-commercial capabilities and a results architecture that traces reach, relationships, progression and conversion.

Keywords: digital diplomacy; economic diplomacy; international trade; Kenya; networked public diplomacy; trade promotion

HOW TO CITE

Ochieng, F. D., Muoka, B. K., & Onyango, E. (2026). From Digital Reach to Trade Conversion: Institutionalising Kenya's Digital Trade Diplomacy, 2013–2022. *African Journal of International Relations*, 1, 21-32.

Introduction

Digital technologies have changed who can participate in diplomacy, how quickly institutions can communicate, and how they maintain foreign-policy relationships. Ministries, diplomatic missions, trade agencies, firms, business associations and diasporas now interact through social media, websites, virtual meetings, online trade events and digital service platforms. These tools can widen access and reduce communication costs. They also alter diplomatic routines, professional roles and institutional authority (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Bjola & Holmes, 2015; Hedling & Bremberg, 2021).

Digital activity, however, is not synonymous with diplomatic effectiveness. Followers, posts, page views and event attendance are outputs. They do not, by themselves, show that a qualified buyer was identified, a regulatory barrier was resolved, an investment opportunity progressed, or an export transaction occurred. Platform visibility can therefore create an evaluative trap in which activity is treated as impact (Duncombe, 2018; Pamment, 2016). This distinction matters for trade-oriented diplomacy because commercial outcomes depend on sustained relationships, market intelligence, business matching, negotiation, and institutional follow-through.

Evidence from conventional economic diplomacy demonstrates why the conversion question matters. Diplomatic exchange is positively associated with bilateral exports within Africa, although its effects vary by institutional and regional context (Afesorgbor, 2019). A study of Portuguese representation in 144 partner countries likewise found that exports were higher where Portugal maintained economic-diplomacy offices (Fernandes & Forte, 2022). Digital tools can extend these established trade-promotion functions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, trade-promotion organisations across 57 countries widely adopted virtual trade fairs, business-to-business matching and e-commerce training, but the capacity to use these tools differed sharply by national income and institutional resources (Choi et al., 2023). The empirical issue is therefore not whether diplomacy has become digital. It is whether digital engagement is connected to the institutional processes through which trade value is created and verified.

Kenya and the significance of the 2013–2022 period

Kenya is an analytically important case, but it is not a proxy for Africa as a whole. Nairobi has a dense diplomatic, multilateral, commercial and technology ecosystem. Kenya's 2014 foreign-policy framework also placed economic diplomacy at the centre of efforts to expand markets, attract investment and strengthen regional economic organisations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2014). Digital communication consequently developed alongside an explicit economic-diplomacy agenda.

The period from 2013 to 2022 captures three connected developments. First, social media and online public communication became routine components of Kenyan diplomacy. Second, the government expanded digital public services and trade-related portals. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic made virtual meetings, hybrid negotiations, and online trade promotion operational necessities. Research on Kenya has documented the adoption of information and communication technologies within foreign affairs and the accelerated use of digital diplomacy during the pandemic (Mboya, 2021; Waithaka, 2018). African scholarship has also shown that digital adoption may widen diplomatic reach while reproducing constraints related to skills, infrastructure, institutional mandates, and access (Adesina, 2017; Endong, 2020; Toma Bilate & Zou, 2022; Wekesa et al., 2021).

What remains less clear is how expanded digital reach becomes trade value. Existing studies have examined digital diplomacy as communication, foreign-policy adaptation, public diplomacy, and soft power. Trade conversion receives less attention. Yet the path from a digital message to an economic outcome crosses several institutions. A mission may identify a buyer, a trade agency may provide market intelligence, a regulator may address standards, and a firm must be able to transact. A failure at any stage can terminate the opportunity even when the original campaign achieved strong visibility. Thus, this article addresses this problem through three questions:

i. How effective was Kenya's digital diplomacy in advancing international trade between 2013 and 2022?
ii. Which trade-promotion functions did digital diplomacy perform?
iii. Which institutional conditions enabled or constrained the conversion of digital engagement into trade-related outcomes?

The article advances one central claim. Kenya's digital diplomacy became network-rich but institutionally under-converted. Digital channels widened reach, sustained relationships, and supported trade facilitation, especially during the pandemic. Their contribution to trade outcomes remained uneven because institutions lacked a consistent pathway for qualifying opportunities, assigning follow-up, recording progress, and attributing results. This article calls that institutional discontinuity the reach-conversion gap.

Theoretical framework: Networked public diplomacy and liberal institutionalism

Networked public diplomacy provides the primary theoretical lens. It shifts attention from one-way broadcasting to relationships, collaboration, and the structures through which state and non-state actors create public value (Zaharna et al., 2013). From this perspective, a digital platform's diplomatic value lies less in the technology itself than in the quality of the network it enables. A successful network connects relevant actors, permits reciprocal communication, distributes knowledge and sustains cooperation over time.

This lens is particularly well suited to trade diplomacy. States do not produce commercial outcomes alone. Diplomatic missions, trade agencies, regulators, business associations, firms, diaspora networks and foreign partners each hold different resources. Digital diplomacy can reduce the distance among them, but a network produces value only when information and opportunities can move across organisational boundaries. A large audience with no referral route is visible but not operational.

Liberal institutionalism complements this relational account. Institutions can reduce uncertainty and transaction costs by supplying information, setting expectations and supporting repeated cooperation (Keohane, 1984). In digital trade diplomacy, those functions include credible market information, common definitions of a qualified lead, referral procedures, shared records and accountability for follow-up. The two perspectives therefore identify distinct but connected mechanisms. Networked public diplomacy explains how relationships and collaborative reach are created. Liberal institutionalism explains how rules and coordination can carry those relationships towards outcomes.

The reach-conversion gap occurs when the first mechanism grows faster than the second. Digital platforms increase connectivity, but fragmented mandates, uneven skills and incompatible measurement systems prevent that connectivity from progressing through a trade-promotion pipeline. The framework also explains why hybrid diplomacy matters. Online engagement can initiate or maintain a relationship, while trust-building, negotiation and transaction completion may require face-to-face or institutionally secured processes (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Hocking & Melissen, 2015).

Methods

Research design

The study used a retrospective qualitative case-study design. It examined practitioners' assessments of Kenya's digital trade diplomacy during 2013–2022 through data collected after the study period. A historical design based primarily on archives could have reconstructed policy sequences and trade trends. The present design served a different purpose: to explain how practitioners and informed stakeholders understood the functions, effectiveness and institutional constraints of digital diplomacy. It is therefore interpretive rather than causal.

The case was centred on Kenya, with participants drawn from institutions involved in foreign affairs, trade facilitation, investment promotion, business representation, diplomacy, development, research and communication. Most named state institutions were based in Nairobi. The sample also included private-sector and international perspectives that interacted with Kenya's trade and diplomatic system.

Sampling and participant profile

Purposive expert sampling targeted people with professional knowledge of digital communication, diplomacy, trade, investment, public administration, or related institutional processes. Thirty-seven respondents completed at least the demographic part of the questionnaire. Thirty-five reported a role, 36 reported gender, and all 37 reported professional experience and education. Twenty respondents supplied meaningful text to at least one open-ended substantive item. Individual items received between 13 and 20 recorded answers. One additional respondent entered only punctuation in four open-ended fields; we treated those entries as non-substantive and excluded them from thematic interpretation.

The analytic file did not record the number of invitations issued. Therefore, a conventional survey response rate could not be calculated. The sample was not designed to estimate population parameters. Its value lay in respondents' institutional range and professional experience. Thirty of the 37 participants (81.1%) reported at least 10 years of professional experience, and 22 (59.5%) held a master's or doctoral qualification.

Table 1

Sample characteristics

Dimension	Category	n	%
Organisation (n = 37)	National ministries and statutory agencies	18	48.6
	Private-sector organisations and business associations	7	18.9
	International/development organisations and diplomatic missions	7	18.9
	Universities, education and sector specialists	3	8.1
	Independent consultancy and media	2	5.4
Role (n = 35)	Leadership, management and advisory	11	31.4
	Administration, membership and business support	9	25.7
	Communication, marketing and media	8	22.9
	Technical and professional specialist	5	14.3
	Diplomatic officer	2	5.7
Gender (n = 36)	Women	20	55.6
	Men	16	44.4
Professional experience (n = 37)	Below 10 years	7	18.9
	10–20 years	21	56.8
	21–30 years	5	13.5
	30 years and above	4	10.8
Education (n = 37)	Diploma	2	5.4
	Bachelor's degree	12	32.4
	Master's degree	20	54.1
	Doctorate	2	5.4
	Other (PhD student)	1	2.7

Note. Percentages use the valid n for each dimension. Organisation categories were consolidated from the named and free-text responses. Role categories were derived from 35 free-text job titles. The source file recorded respondents from the Ministry of Foreign and Diaspora Affairs, the Ministry responsible for investments and trade, KenTrade, KenInvest, the Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, diplomatic missions, private organisations, universities, development organisations, consultancy and media.

Instrument and data collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire between 16 June and 1 July 2024. The instrument contained 22 items. The first five captured organisation, role, gender, professional experience, and education. Sixteen open-ended questions examined adoption, effectiveness, ethical and operational constraints, policy alignment, trade-promotion functions, partnerships, negotiation, adaptation, strategy, and measurement. One closed question asked whether the respondent's organisation had used digital diplomacy to promote international trade during 2013–2022.

The retrospective format allowed respondents to assess change across the full period, including the pandemic. It also created a risk of recall error. The analysis, therefore, treated claims about campaigns or outcomes as informed perceptions unless they could be corroborated within the dataset. Statements about trade growth, investment, or completed transactions were not converted into causal claims.

Data analysis

The analysis followed the six recursive phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All substantive responses were read repeatedly. Initial codes captured digital tools, actors, functions, benefits, constraints and forms of evidence. These codes were grouped into five higher-order themes: uneven adoption and reach; continuity and efficiency; networked trade facilitation; governance, capability, and inclusion; and measurement and conversion. Theme development was interpretive, moving recursively among coded extracts, candidate themes, the research questions, and the theoretical framework to test internal coherence and distinction.

An audit matrix retained the questionnaire item, source wording and anonymous label for each extract. The labels P01–P21 were used solely to preserve the link between quoted extracts and the audit trail; they were not treated as analytic categories and do not identify speakers in the thematic narrative. We excluded one record with no usable qualitative content. Counts document only sample composition and item completeness; they neither rank themes nor infer prevalence. Theme development considered convergent, divergent and negative cases, weighting responses by analytic relevance rather than length.

Analysis, rather than individual testimony, organises the findings. Each subsection first articulates the data-derived theme, then presents selected quotations as corroborating evidence, and finally develops the researcher's interpretation in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. Participant codes appear only after direct quotations and serve only as source markers. Capitalisation and obvious typographical errors were normalised where necessary, without changing meaning. Square brackets indicate clarifying insertions.

Limitations

Four limitations shape the conclusions. First, purposive sampling and the concentration of national institutions in Nairobi limit statistical generalisation. This was mitigated by seeking institutional diversity and by making an analytical, not population, claim. Second, item non-response reduced the qualitative evidence available across questions. The Methods report item completion transparently, and themes derive from the content and relevance of substantive responses, not response frequency. Recurrent themes are therefore interpretive patterns, not population-prevalence estimates.

Third, responses were collected in 2024 about the 2013–2022 period. Recall may compress events or attribute later practices to earlier years. The analysis consequently uses temporal claims cautiously and gives greatest weight to accounts that identified a period, mechanism or organisational practice. Fourth, the data are self-reported and vary in depth. Several answers describe perceived benefits without documentary or transactional evidence. The findings therefore establish how informed respondents understood mechanisms and constraints; they do not establish the causal effect of digital diplomacy on national trade flows.

These limits do not invalidate the study. They define the level at which its contribution is credible. The study diagnoses an institutional process and identifies testable mechanisms. Future research can examine those mechanisms through documentary process tracing, platform analytics, trade-promotion records, and firm-level transaction data.

Findings

The findings are organised around five data-derived themes rather than by participant or questionnaire item. Each subsection first states the issue deduced from the dataset, then uses selected anonymised quotations to validate that deduction, and finally presents the researcher's interpretation. Table 2 summarises this analytic sequence.

Table 2

Thematic matrix: From digital reach to trade conversion

Theme	Researcher's thematic deduction	Illustrative field extract	Researcher's interpretation
Uneven adoption and reach	Digital diplomacy was visible, but its depth, consistency and perceived commercial effect differed across institutions.	"Fair attempt has been made … specifically after 2018" (P20).	Adoption was substantial but neither universal nor fully institutionalised.
Continuity and efficiency	Virtual engagement reduced distance and maintained communication when physical mobility was constrained.	"When the world was cut off, engagements went on online" (P12).	Digital tools strengthened reach and continuity, especially after 2020, but remained complementary to in-person diplomacy.
Networked trade facilitation	Digital channels connected information, market promotion, stakeholder dialogue, business matching and public services.	A tea-promotion campaign generated "an increase in enquiries for Kenyan tea" (P07).	The strongest evidence concerns intermediate trade-promotion outcomes rather than completed transactions.
Governance, capability and inclusion	Fragmented signals, layered approvals, uneven skills, connectivity constraints, privacy and cyber risk obstructed follow-through.	"We still see … fragmented and conflicting signals on digital channels" (P19).	Weak coordination and unequal capability interrupted movement from engagement to outcome.
Measurement and conversion	Institutions measured different points in the results chain, while some tracking remained absent or unclear.	"It is difficult to decipher the link between digital diplomacy and foreign policy goals" (P20).	Measurement existed, but heterogeneous indicators did not form a common attribution framework.

Note. Participant codes appear only after illustrative quotations to maintain an audit trail. They identify neither the theme nor the importance or prevalence of a view. Quotations are from the 2024 field data.

Adoption was real but uneven

The analysis indicates that digital diplomacy was recognisable across Kenya's trade-facing institutions but uneven in depth, consistency, and perceived commercial effect. The theme of uneven adoption captures the difference between visible digital activity and its incomplete institutionalisation as a mode of trade promotion.

Illustrative extracts show both progress and reservation. Digital spaces brought "more structure and higher contract value" (P21), while the national effort was described as follows: "Fair attempt has been made … specifically after 2018" (P20). Yet progress was also characterised as occurring "largely through economic diplomacy rather than digital diplomacy" (P10). Other field evidence emphasised the continuing importance of face-to-face relationships or regarded digital diplomacy's commercial contribution as minimal.

Interpreted together, these contrasts show that digital tools entered practice without becoming a consistently institutionalised system of trade promotion. The disagreement concerns not whether digital activity existed, but whether institutions had embedded it deeply enough to produce a coherent and dependable commercial function.

Digital tools widened reach and preserved continuity

The analysis identifies reach and continuity as digital diplomacy's clearest contribution, particularly when physical mobility was constrained. Social media, websites, virtual meetings, and online events supported communication across distance, access to younger audiences, and faster information exchange at lower participation cost.

The pandemic made this contribution especially visible: "COVID-19 took us to the next level" and "when the world was cut off, engagements went on online" (P12). The field evidence also described some AfCFTA-related and bilateral activity as beginning online and concluding in person. Countervailing extracts characterised adoption as small-scale, responses as slow, and efficiency as still too early to assess.

The researcher interprets this pattern as expanded capacity for remote engagement rather than uniform institutional performance. Digital diplomacy functioned chiefly as a complement to conventional diplomacy: it maintained contact and reduced interruption, while trust-intensive negotiation and completion often still required physical or formally secured interaction.

Digital diplomacy supported networked trade functions

The analysis shows that digital diplomacy supported an interconnected set of trade-promotion functions. It disseminated information, promoted Kenyan products, maintained dialogue with foreign stakeholders, supported consultations, enabled business matching and document exchange, and provided digital public services. Within this network, KenTrade and KenInvest emerged as important nodes for trade information, facilitation, and investment promotion.

Illustrative field evidence included virtual trade meetings, Buy Kenya, Build Kenya, online tea promotion, digital payment and licensing, and AfCFTA social-media engagement. An Agriculture and Food Authority campaign to position Kenyan tea globally generated "an increase in enquiries for Kenyan tea" (P07). Other extracts connected business networks with advocacy for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises and associated digital engagement with wider youth participation.

The researcher interprets these functions as evidence of network expansion and movement from visibility to identifiable interest. They demonstrate progression through enquiries, connections, and facilitated engagement, but not completed exports. The reach-conversion gap lies in that distinction: opportunity expanded, yet conversion still depended on institutional follow-through.

Fragmentation, capability, and digital inequality constrained conversion

The analysis identifies fragmentation, uneven capability, and digital inequality as barriers to conversion. Conflicting messages weakened national coherence; layered approvals delayed responses; limited digital literacy reduced engagement quality; and high costs or weak connectivity restricted access. Cybersecurity, privacy, and misinformation further threatened credibility.

Field evidence identified these constraints across the process. Documentation and approval procedures were described as duplicative and insufficiently centralised, while digital channels carried "fragmented and conflicting signals" (P19). Other extracts identified unaffordable or inaccessible connectivity in frontier markets and interruptions caused by time-zone and connectivity difficulties. These concerns align with wider privacy, misinformation, and cyber-risk scholarship (Duncombe, 2018; Rashica, 2018).

Interpreted analytically, these barriers interrupted movement from contact to follow-up and from opportunity to outcome. Digital channels were most credible when they lowered initial-contact costs, maintained dialogue, and prepared formal engagement, not when they were expected to substitute for relationship-based diplomacy.

Measurement was present but institutionally inconsistent

The analysis shows that outcome tracking existed but lacked institutional consistency. Some institutions emphasised platform outputs and engagement, follower growth, events, surveys, and social-media monitoring, whereas others considered enquiries, commercial linkages, agreements, trade queries, investment data, and trade value. In parts of the system, tracking remained absent or unclear.

Illustrative extracts expose this inconsistency. Measurement was described as “not yet” established (P19), while its connection to foreign-policy goals was “difficult to decipher” (P20). Other field evidence treated positions, agreements, and protocols as outcomes, or relied on engagement, events, trade queries, non-tariff-barrier discussions, and bilateral trade value.

The researcher interprets this range as evidence that institutions measured different points in the results chain without integrating them. The problem was not a blanket absence; it was the lack of shared definitions and attribution procedures that could follow a digital contact from exposure through referral, assistance, agreement, and transaction. The reach-conversion gap was therefore institutional.

Discussion

A network-rich but under-converted system

The study finds that Kenya’s digital diplomacy contributed most clearly to reach, continuity and relational access. It enabled institutions to maintain contact, disseminate information and convene actors at lower geographical cost. These functions are consistent with research that treats digitalisation as a change in diplomatic practice rather than a simple change of platform (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022; Hedling & Bremberg, 2021).

The networked public diplomacy perspective explains both the achievement and the shortfall. Kenya’s digital channels increased potential connections among state institutions, missions, firms, and the public. Yet network size is not network performance. Commercial value depends on whether a relevant connection receives information, support, and follow-up. A digital campaign can generate attention while the trade opportunity stalls between agencies. The Kenyan case, therefore, extends networked public diplomacy by identifying conversion as a distinct institutional task.

The finding also qualifies liberal expectations about digital cooperation. Lower communication costs and faster exchange can facilitate coordination, but they do not remove organisational boundaries. Institutions still need rules, records, and accountability. Liberal institutionalism predicts that repeated cooperation becomes more effective when information and expectations are stabilised (Keohane, 1984). The data show the inverse: where approval routes, messages, and indicators differed, digital speed encountered bureaucratic friction.

The reach-conversion gap as an analytical contribution

The reach-conversion gap distinguishes four stages. Reach concerns exposure to a relevant audience. Relationship concerns reciprocal engagement and trust. Progression concerns identifiable movement, such as an enquiry, referral, meeting, proposal, regulatory action or agreement. Conversion concerns a verifiable economic result, such as an export transaction, investment commitment, market entry or sustained commercial relationship.

This staged model avoids two analytical errors. The first is to infer trade impact from platform activity. The second is to dismiss digital diplomacy because it cannot claim sole causation for aggregate trade flows. Trade outcomes have many causes, including prices, regulation, logistics, firm capability and political relations. Digital diplomacy can still make a demonstrable contribution when a traceable sequence links engagement to progression.

The model also connects the Kenyan case to wider evidence. Economic diplomacy and export-promotion institutions can affect trade by reducing information barriers and supporting market entry (Afesorgbor, 2019; Fernandes & Forte, 2022). Virtual trade-promotion tools expanded rapidly during the pandemic, but adoption depended on institutional resources and capability (Choi et al., 2023). Kenya's experience shows why both insights matter: digital tools create opportunities, while institutions determine whether those opportunities survive.

Coordination is conversion infrastructure

Treat coordination as productive infrastructure, not administrative overhead. Foreign affairs institutions provide access, political judgement and country knowledge. Trade and investment agencies contribute market intelligence and technical support. Missions understand local opportunity structures. Business associations and firms can qualify commercial demand and transact. A conversion system must connect these assets without eliminating their distinct expertise.

The appropriate model is governed decentralisation. National institutions should agree on objectives, lead definitions, minimum data standards and referral responsibilities. Missions should retain discretion to adapt messages and relationships to local markets. A central system would provide visibility and accountability, while local judgement would preserve diplomatic relevance.

This interpretation also explains why the paper should not generalise from Kenya to Africa. Institutional configurations differ across states. Kenya's relative digital capacity, diplomatic density and regional role make it a useful theory-building case, not a continental average. The concepts of networked reach and conversion are transferable; the empirical magnitude and institutional solution require testing elsewhere.

Credibility and inclusion are economic conditions

Field evidence on privacy, cyber risk, misinformation, and unequal access reveals conditions that are integral, not peripheral, to trade diplomacy. They affect trust and participation. A partner who doubts a platform's accuracy or security may refuse to share information. A Kenyan firm without affordable access cannot benefit from an online opportunity. A campaign that reaches only already-connected actors may widen visibility while reproducing market exclusion.

Credibility therefore links diplomatic communication to economic value. Institutions need verification procedures, clear spokesperson roles, data-protection safeguards and transparent correction practices. They also need offline or assisted channels for firms that cannot participate fully online. African digital strategies similarly stress inclusion, security and institutional capability as conditions of meaningful digital transformation (African Union, 2020).

Policy recommendations

Establish a national digital trade diplomacy framework

Kenya should adopt a joint framework linking foreign affairs, trade, investment, trade facilitation, export promotion and overseas missions. The framework should define priority markets, sectors, audiences, institutional roles and conversion outcomes. Each digital initiative should state its foreign-policy purpose and its intended trade pathway before launch.

Create a shared opportunity and referral protocol

Institutions should use a common definition of an enquiry, qualified lead, referral, assisted opportunity and completed outcome. Each opportunity should receive a unique identifier, named owner and next-action date. Service standards should specify when a mission, ministry or agency must acknowledge, refer and update a lead. Aggregated reporting can protect commercial confidentiality while making institutional performance visible.

Build hybrid diplomatic and commercial capability

Training should move beyond social-media operation. Diplomatic and trade staff need audience analysis, digital campaign design, market intelligence, lead qualification, online facilitation, intercultural communication, data protection, cyber awareness and contribution analysis. Joint teams and short rotations among missions, trade agencies and business organisations would help bridge professional silos. Hybrid practice should combine digital access with face-to-face engagement when trust, negotiation or transaction complexity requires it.

Use a common results architecture

Assess digital trade diplomacy through a staged framework rather than a single dashboard of platform metrics.

Table 3

Recommended results architecture for digital trade diplomacy

Stage	Evaluation question	Illustrative indicators	Minimum evidence
Reach	Did the initiative reach a relevant audience?	Target-market reach; relevant firms reached; sector-specific content use	Platform and website records segmented by audience
Relationship	Did relevant actors engage reciprocally?	Qualified event participation; buyer or investor enquiries; repeat engagement	Named organisation, contact consent and stated interest
Progression	Did the opportunity move through the system?	Referral completed; meeting held; proposal submitted; barrier addressed; agreement advanced	Dated actions, institutional owner and status history
Conversion	Did a verifiable economic outcome occur?	Export order; investment commitment; market entry; sustained commercial partnership	Transactional or documentary confirmation, with contribution narrative

Note. Attribution should be proportionate. The framework should record digital diplomacy's contribution to an outcome rather than claim sole causation. Commercially sensitive data can be reported in aggregated form.

Connect national practice to regional trade systems

Kenya should align digital trade diplomacy with EAC, COMESA and AfCFTA processes. Regional partners could develop interoperable referral standards, joint training and shared approaches to digital business matching. This would allow an opportunity identified through one mission or national agency to move across regional value chains. African evidence that diplomatic exchange can stimulate bilateral exports makes this coordination a substantive trade issue, not only a communication objective (Afesorgbor, 2019).

Treat ethics, security and inclusion as design requirements

Every programme should include data minimisation, consent, access control, verification and correction procedures. Procurement should avoid dependence on platform metrics that institutions cannot audit. Programmes for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises should offer assisted access, practical export-readiness support and alternatives where connectivity is weak. These safeguards protect trust and widen the pool of firms that can convert visibility into opportunity.

Conclusion

Kenya's digital diplomacy between 2013 and 2022 widened the country's diplomatic and commercial reach. It enabled faster information exchange, virtual engagement and continuity during the COVID-19 shock. The analysis also links digital tools with market promotion, stakeholder connection, trade facilitation and selected intermediate outcomes, including enquiries and agreements. These contributions were meaningful, but they were uneven.

The article's firm conclusion is that Kenya's central challenge is no longer digital presence. It is institutional conversion. The evidence does not support a claim that outcome measurement was absent everywhere. It shows something more consequential: institutions measured different parts of the results chain without a shared method for linking reach, relationships, progression and economic outcomes. Fragmented signals, uneven capability, layered approval and unequal access weakened that chain.

The reach-conversion gap therefore names a governance problem. Digital diplomacy generates trade value when networked relationships connect to clear responsibilities, credible information, timely follow-up, and verifiable results. Kenya can close the gap by governing digital trade diplomacy as a cross-institutional foreign-policy function rather than as a collection of communication channels. For international-relations scholarship, the wider implication is equally clear: assess digital diplomatic power not by visibility alone, but by the institutional capacity to convert connection into public and economic value.

Declarations

Ethics approval. We obtained ethical and institutional approvals for the underlying study. Details are omitted from the anonymised review manuscript and can be supplied to the editor.

Consent to participate. All participants provided informed consent.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding. The research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability. The de-identified analytic data are subject to the consent, ethical, and institutional conditions of the underlying study. They are not publicly available.

References

Adesina, O. S. (2017). Foreign policy in an era of digital diplomacy. *Cogent Social Sciences, 3*(1), 1297175. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1297175

Adler-Nissen, R., & Eggeling, K. A. (2022). Blended diplomacy: The entanglement and contestation of digital technologies in everyday diplomatic practice. *European Journal of International Relations, 28*(3), 640–666. https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221107837

Afesorgbor, S. K. (2019). Regional integration, bilateral diplomacy and African trade: Evidence from the gravity model. *African Development Review, 31*(4), 492–505. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8268.12405

African Union. (2020). *The digital transformation strategy for Africa (2020–2030).* https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38507-doc-dts-english.pdf

Bjola, C., & Holmes, M. (Eds.). (2015). *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice.* Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Choi, Y., Fernandes, A., Grover, A., Iacovone, L., & Olarreaga, M. (2023). *Trade promotion organizations in the pandemic world* (Policy Research Working Paper No. 10374). World Bank. http://hdl.handle.net/10986/39595

Duncombe, C. (2018). Twitter and the challenges of digital diplomacy. *SAIS Review of International Affairs, 38*(2), 91–100. https://doi.org/10.1353/sais.2018.0019

Endong, F. P. (2020). Digitization of African public diplomacy: Issues, challenges and opportunities. *International Journal for Digital Society, 11*(2), 1607–1618. https://doi.org/10.20533/ijds.2040.2570.2020.0201

Fernandes, A., & Forte, R. (2022). The impact of economic diplomacy on exports: The Portuguese case. *International Journal, 77*(2), 216–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207020221135382

Hedling, E., & Bremberg, N. (2021). Practice approaches to the digital transformations of diplomacy: Toward a new research agenda. *International Studies Review, 23*(4), 1595–1618. https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viab027

Hocking, B., & Melissen, J. (2015). *Diplomacy in the digital age.* Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael.

Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy.* Princeton University Press.

Mboya, C. (2021). Kenya's digital diplomacy amid COVID-19: New tools in an old toolbox? *South African Journal of International Affairs, 28*(3), 429–448. https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2021.1960596

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. (2014). *Kenya foreign policy.* https://repository.kippra.or.ke/handle/123456789/624

Pamment, J. (2016). Digital public diplomacy. In C. M. Constantinou, P. Kerr, & P. Sharp (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of diplomacy* (pp. 416–428). SAGE.

Rashica, V. (2018). The benefits and risks of digital diplomacy. *SEEU Review, 13*(1), 75–89. https://doi.org/10.2478/seeur-2018-0008

Toma Bilate, G., & Zou, X. (2022). Digital diplomacy and implementation challenges in Africa: Case study of Ethiopia. *Journal of African Foreign Affairs, 9*(2), 85–106. https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5658/2022/v9n2a5

Waithaka, I. N. (2018). *Digital diplomacy: The integration of information communication technologies in Kenya's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1963–2014* [Master's thesis, Kenyatta University]. Kenyatta University Institutional Repository. https://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/items/6dd47cb3-17db-46bf-b77c-4402467cf865

Wekesa, B., Turianskyi, Y., & Ayodele, O. (2021). Introduction to the special issue: Digital diplomacy in Africa. *South African Journal of International Affairs, 28*(3), 335–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2021.1961606

Zaharna, R. S., Arsenault, A., & Fisher, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Relational, networked and collaborative approaches to public diplomacy: The connective mindshift.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203082430