Global Trade Digitalisation and Inclusive Economic Growth

Why coordinated adoption is essential to turn digital capability into economic growth

The International Centre for Digital Trade and Innovation (IC4DTI), TradeTech Solutions Ltd **and the** Teesside Digital Trade Testbed | Joint Global Strategic Discussion Paper | 5 November 2026

Executive Summary

(For the full paper, click here.)

This paper examines the benefits of trade digitalisation, the barriers and their causes, and potential solutions. It seeks to encourage organisations able to accelerate adoption by micro, small and medium-sized enterprises to act.

It should be noted that AI is a supporting capability**.** Digital trade does not depend on AI. However, effective AI use depends on reliable digital information and connected processes.

The economic opportunity is substantial. OECD modelling indicates up to 18% higher global goods exports from coordinated border reforms. The WTO's 2015 assessment estimated up to US$1 trillion in additional annual exports from full implementation of its Trade Facilitation Agreement. These scenarios concern wider reforms than community services alone.

To benefit from this potential, businesses must address three connected imperatives:

1. statutory compliance
2. market competitiveness; and
3. trade expansion

However, available technology and statutory compliance alone cannot ensure effective adoption. Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises face significant barriers to adoption. These include

1. fragmented provision of services and information
2. limited awareness; and
3. severe implementation difficulties.

A new, coordinated approach is required to bridge these gaps.

To help SMEs adopt and utilise suitable digital services effectively, this paper proposes the establishment of Digital Business Communities (DBCs). They combine a single digital reference point with trading opportunities and, critically, proactive management.

However, a single, national DBC is not necessary to provide effective solutions. Individual DBCs focused on the commercial interests of their community are much easier to construct and manage. These individual DBCs can then be connected as deemed appropriate to provide wider market access to their members.

It is recommended that these communities are built upon existing, trusted business relationships of organisations such as telcos and banks. These private-sector owners, supported by specialist service providers, can own, finance and promote their DBCs. As a return on this investment, the DBCs can provide a direct financial return to the owners through a blend of sales commissions, advertising and increased sales. Indirect benefits include client retention and market differentiation.

NGOs, charitable organisations, development agencies and philanthropic funds can also own DBCs or finance chambers, trade associations and large cooperatives to operate them. Their development mandates can support participation by micro-enterprises and groups that face barriers to established business networks.

Training and mentoring are central to this approach. Producers need practical help to meet buyer specifications and manage transactions. That support can prepare them to undertake higher-value activities such as grading, processing, packaging and branding.

Reliable transaction records can improve the basis for finance decisions. Connections with suitable lenders and buyers can help suppliers obtain working capital on better terms, while longer-term finance can support investment in supply-chain progression. The ADB estimated a global trade finance gap of US$2.5 trillion in 2025, illustrating the scale of unmet demand.

Timely action matters. Changing requirements and trading practices create both pressure and opportunity. The IC4DTI, and TradeTech Solutions partnership can help organisations coordinate a practical response.

To explore how a Digital Business Community could benefit your organisation, or to discuss the findings of this paper in detail, please contact **Nick Daniel** or **Ian Dunning**, or **Nick Davies** to arrange a no commitment consultation.