Article

From Thousands of African Languages to a Pan-African Language for the African Continental Free Trade Area: A Framework Promoting Kiswahili as Common Language for Intra-African Trade

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AIB Insights

This paper proposes a framework for promoting Kiswahili as the pan-African trade language to support the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in achieving its goal of boosting intra-African trade on a continent that has over 3,000 spoken languages and no common lingua franca. We draw from Scott's (1995) institutional theory to structure the promotion of Kiswahili around the regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars. The framework aims to stimulate scholarly discussion on a pan-African trade language and serve as a tool for policymakers at national and supranational levels to promote Kiswahili as a pan-African language for trade.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith emphasized language's critical role in international trade. Similarly, a pan-African *lingua franca* could support the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) in boosting intra-African trade, socio-economic transformation, and poverty reduction. Launched in 2019, AfCFTA—the world's largest free trade area—encompasses 1.5 billion people across 55 countries with a combined GDP of $3.4 trillion. It aims to increase trade by 109% and lift 50 million Africans out of poverty by 2035. However, Africa's 3,000+ languages pose a major barrier to these goals. Research highlights the economic benefits of a common trade language (Egger & Toubal, 2016; Hutchinson, 2002). Broadly, prior work on the benefits of common trade language draws from various theoretical perspectives, including gravity models (Frankel, 1997), cultural proximity theory (Felbermayr & Toubal, 2010), economic integration theory (Baldwin, 2006), information asymmetry and signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and transaction costs theory (Oh, Selmier, & Lien, 2011)[1]. Unfortunately, none of these theories focus on how a subregional language can be expanded to other subregions to become a common regional or continental language. Kiswahili's growing use in East and Southern Africa, alongside its adoption by the African Union, East African Community (EAC), and Southern African Development Community (SADC), demonstrates the need for a shared language in intra-African trade. However, no formal strategy exists to promote a common language for intra-regional trade across the continent. Drawing on institutional theory that suggests that the organizational behavior is heavily shaped by the rules, norms, beliefs and practices of its environment, this article proposes a framework based on regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars to promote Kiswahili as the common language for intra-African trade. These three pillars provide a structured approach to establishing a common language by ensuring policy enforcement and standardization (regulative), fostering norms and values (normative), and shaping collective understanding and practices (cognitive), all of which are crucial for Kiswahili's adoption as a pan-African trade language. We also outline a 25-year roadmap to guide policymakers in implementing this vision.

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1   Gravity models suggest that using a common language for trade increases bilateral trade (by more than 30% according to some economists) because it helps to reduce communication costs by allowing a direct communication and making trade easier (Frankel, 1997). The cultural proximity perspective suggests that common language contributes to reduce cultural differences and that this contributes to reduce miscommunication and lack of trust and as such helps to trade more easily (Felbermayr & Toubal, 2010). The economic integration perspective advocates that using a common language facilitates trade policies harmonization between countries that are trading and that this helps to increase the volume of trade between these countries (Baldwin, 2006). As for the information asymmetry and signalling theory (Spence, 1973), these theories suggest that using a common language reduces the information asymmetry between traders and helps to build trust which reduces transactions costs and to increase the volume of trade. These different perspectives are consistent with the transaction costs perspective that suggests that a common language reduces transactions costs of trade and increases the volume of trade (Oh, Selmier, & Lien, 2011).

NAVIGATING AFRICA'S LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY: THE IMPORTANCE AND CHALLENGES OF ADOPTING KISWAHILI FOR INTRA-AFRICAN TRADE

Africa has the world's most linguistically diverse landscape, with over 3,000 languages (Boston University, 2025). Nigeria, DRC, and Ethiopia have over 525, 242, and 109 languages, respectively, while Ghana and Benin together have more than 130 languages (Business Insider Africa, 2024). This diversity, amplified by colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese (Kanana, 2013), poses a challenge to AfCFTA's intra-African trade by hindering communication among traders, businesses, and policymakers (Fanjanirina, 2023). A common language is crucial for overcoming these barriers, as seen in other regional economic integrations (e.g., EU, Mercosur, USMCA).

Kiswahili is a strong candidate for a pan-African trade language. Rooted in Bantu with Arabic influences, it is spoken by over 200 million people in East, Central, and Southern Africa (UNESCO, 2024). As an official language of the East African Community (EAC) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Kiswahili has become the language of more than 400 million consumers. With 35-40% of its vocabulary derived from Arabic, it is accessible to Northern Africa's 250 million Arabic speakers. Recognized as a trade language in 14 countries and a working language of the African Union, it extends its reach to 1.5 billion people. UNESCO's World Kiswahili Language Day highlights its growing significance, alongside its expansion in African educational institutions. While Arabic is a potential contender, its use is largely confined to Northern Africa and lacks Kiswahili's economic and pan-African influence.

The transition to Kiswahili as a common language for intra-African trade is not without challenges. Africa's linguistic diversity is deeply tied to cultural identity, and some nations may see Kiswahili's adoption as an imposition (Mwangi, Nandi, & Okhuosi, 2023). Moreover, political resistance could arise due to the financial costs of education, infrastructure, and policy implementation it requires (UNESCO, 2024). Businesses may also resist, given the time required for mastery, and non-African firms might face difficulties. Unlike Rwanda's shift to English, which aligned with global trade, prioritizing Kiswahili may pose challenges in engaging global partners. Overcoming these challenges requires investment in education, infrastructure, and policies, alongside a shift of mindset (Chrysostome, Munthali, & Ado, 2019) and crafting a superordinate, culture-transcending identity through strategic educational and cultural initiatives that promote multilingualism and position Kiswahili as a common rather than a replacement language.

Despite these challenges, the transition to Kiswahili as a pan-African language for trade offers significant benefits. It enhances economic integration by reducing language barriers, harmonizing trade policies, and fostering trust in trade (Cuypers, Ertug, & Hennart, 2015; Dow, Cuypers, & Ertug, 2016). More broadly, Kiswahili promotes a shared African identity, free from colonial influence, and mitigates social and economic disparities related to colonial languages (Meija-Martinez, 2017). Its success in unifying diverse groups in East Africa (Habwe, 2009) suggests that its broader adoption could mitigate some challenges associated with colonial languages. However, Kiswahili's dominance may also deepen regional differences.

In the section below, we draw on institutional theory—regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars—to explain how the transition to Kiswahili as a pan-African language for intra-African trade can be effectively framed and implemented.

TOWARDS AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY-BASED MODEL OF ESTABLISHING KISWAHILI AS PAN-AFRICAN LANGUAGE FOR INTRA-AFRICAN TRADE

Institutions are the "rules of the game in a society" (North, 1990: 3). Institutional theory identifies three key pillars—regulative, normative, and cognitive—that shape social behavior through rules, norms, and routines (Scott, 1995). We argue that institutions play a crucial role in establishing a common language for intra-regional trade. Specifically, the three pillars influence African traders to adopt Kiswahili for intra-African transactions by conferring legitimacy through compliance with institutional norms. Regulative, normative, and cognitive pressures create coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism, driving traders toward Kiswahili. Below, we outline mechanisms for promoting Kiswahili as a pan-African trade language based on these institutional pillars.

REGULATIVE PILLARS: COERCIVE ISOMORPHISM FOR USING KISWAHILI AS COMMON LANGUAGE

The regulative institutional pillar enforces behavior through regulations, monitoring, and sanctions (Bruton, Ahlstrom, & Li, 2010), shaping actions via rewards and penalties (Scott, 1995). This pillar is key to promoting Kiswahili as a pan-African trade language through three mechanisms: harmonized trade policies, education initiatives, and financial incentives.

First, AfCFTA can institutionalize Kiswahili in intra-African trade through regulatory enforcement at national levels. Thus, like the African Union (AU), other pan-Africa institutions, namely African Development Bank (ADB), and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), can recognize Kiswahili alongside English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic as an official trade language. National governments and other institutions like AU mandating its use in customs forms, product descriptions, certifications, and legal documents would ensure uniformity, reduce linguistic barriers, and enhance trade efficiency. Formalizing Kiswahili in negotiations would improve accessibility and transparency for businesses, particularly those less proficient in colonial languages.

Second, education and training can expand Kiswahili's role in intra-African trade. AfCFTA could establish

Table 1. Notable Examples of Normative Pillars

Examples of Normative Pillar	Website	Rules
East African Business Council	https://eabc-online.com/	EABC encourages businesses to use Kiswahili in trade documentation and customer communications.
Southern African Development Community	https://www.sadc.int/	SADC encourages its members to adopt Kiswahili as a working language in business and trade contexts across the region.
Tanzania Chamber of Commerce, Industry, and Agriculture	https://tccia.or.tz/	TCCIA requires Kiswahili to be used alongside English in official communications and business transactions within Tanzania.
Kenya National Chamber of Commerce and Industry	https://www.kenyachamber.or.ke/	KNCCI encourages members to use Kiswahili in business-to-business interactions and networking events
Kenya Bureau of Standards	https://www.kebs.org/	KEBS mandates that product labels in certain industries, such as food and healthcare, include Kiswahili translations.
The East African Kiswahili Commission	https://kiswahili.eac.int/	EAKC encourages the use of Kiswahili for official business and public life within the Community EAKC promotes the standardization of Kiswahili in businesses and trade associations.

Kiswahili Institutes in all African countries, modeled after the Goethe Institute, *Alliance Francaise*, the British Council and Confucius Institute, to provide language training tailored to trade professionals, fostering economic integration. Universities and vocational institutions, with support from African National Education Commissions, could integrate Kiswahili for business and trade into curricula and through specialized programs, making it an integral part of higher education.

Third, the establishment of incentives can encourage Kiswahili adoption for intra-African trade. Governments can offer financial incentives for businesses that use Kiswahili in trade operations. Also, AfCFTA, African Union and other supranational African regional economic blocs and supranational organizations could offer tax breaks, reduced tariffs, subsidies, and preferential loans to businesses using Kiswahili for trade. Such incentives could be particularly beneficial to SMEs to expand their reach in the broader African markets. Additionally, government bodies could provide funding for certified Kiswahili translation and interpretation services within trade institutions along with digital translation tools like DeepL, which would further support linguistic accessibility in intra-African trade.

NORMATIVE PILLARS: NORMATIVE ISOMORPHISM FOR USING KISWAHILI AS A COMMON LANGUAGE

The normative institutional pillar focuses on cultural norms, values, and expectations that shape behavior in social and commercial contexts (Bruton et al., 2010). These norms guide actions by defining what is considered appropriate. Normative institutions influence behavior through a social obligation to comply. Table 1 presents notable examples of normative pillar that support Kiswahili for cross-border trade. This pillar is key to promoting Kiswahili as a pan-African trade language through two mechanisms: exemplar nations as role models, and endorsement by trade professional associations and business networks.

Specifically, the first mechanism is the role model influence of countries where Kiswahili is well-established, such as Tanzania and Kenya. These nations serve as good examples and can demonstrate how Kiswahili facilitates trade, enhances communication, and strengthens regional cohesion (Xinhua, 2023). By acting as role models, they can inspire other African nations to adopt Kiswahili for trade.

The second mechanism is via different African trade professional associations and business networks, such as the Africa Business Council (AFBC), African Chambers of Commerce, and East African Business Council. These organizations can promote Kiswahili as a standard language for trade by incorporating it into professional codes of conduct. For example, trade unions can include Kiswahili in negotiation protocols, while business associations can encourage its use in industry-specific communication at events like trade fairs and conferences. Additionally, organizations can use Kiswahili in internal communications, meetings, marketing, and customer relations to reinforce African unity and cultural values.

COGNITIVE PILLARS: MIMETIC ISOMORPHISM FOR USING KISWAHILI AS A COMMON LANGUAGE

The cognitive pillar refers to shared beliefs, mental models, and knowledge systems that shape how individuals and organizations understand and engage with the world (Scott, 2007). It emphasizes how cultural contexts shape individual interpretations and beliefs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Applying this to Kiswahili's promotion as a language for intra-African trade shows how its successful use can inspire its adoption by fostering positive perceptions and shared mental models among African traders and businesses. This pillar is key to promoting Kiswahili as a pan-African trade language through three mechanisms: promoting success stories, symbolic use of Kiswahili in pan-African trade events, and integrating Kiswahili into specific industries.

Regarding the first mechanism which is promoting success stories of businesses using Kiswahili, highlighting East African countries like Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda, where Kiswahili supports trade, can inspire other regions. These stories, shared through media and business networks, reduce linguistic barriers, build trust, and encourage Kiswahili integration in branding, advertising, and customer service. Featuring banks, shipping companies, and trade enterprises using Kiswahili in advertisements also serves as a powerful signal, demonstrating the practical benefits of adoption.

As for the second mechanism that is the symbolic use of Kiswahili in major pan-African trade events, trade fairs like the Intra-African Trade Fair (IATF) can help institutionalize Kiswahili by incorporating it into signage, promotional materials, and event proceedings, showcasing its role in facilitating trade. Additionally, Kiswahili's use in grassroots movements and informal networks, such as East African women traders, can further strengthen its symbolic significance across the continent, thereby inspiring counterparts across Africa.

Finally, about the third mechanism, namely the integration of Kiswahili into specific industries, the telecommunications industry in East Africa is a great example. Safaricom's Kiswahili slogans, like *Twende Tukiuke* ("Let's Go Beyond"), build relatability and loyalty with local customers. Likewise, campaigns like *Lipa Mdogo Mdogo* ("Pay Little by Little") and *M-Pesa* ("Mobile Money") foster accessibility and trust, reinforcing Safaricom's market leadership. Similarly, Vodacom's *Cheka kwa Vodacom* ("Laugh with Vodacom") and Equity Bank's *Pamoja na Wewe* ("Together with You") strengthen cognitive associations between Kiswahili and empowerment, embedding it into the socio-economic fabric as a unifying trade language.

To sum, Kiswahili can be institutionalized as a unified language for intra-African trade through the use of regulative mechanisms (harmonized trade policies, education initiatives, financial incentives), normative mechanisms (regional leadership, African trade associations, business networks), and cognitive mechanisms (success stories, symbolic uses, industry examples). Given Africa's dynamic institutional environment, we acknowledge that regulatory and normative changes could impact the adoption process. To address this, we propose a flexible and adaptive governance framework that includes policy reviews, stakeholder consultations, and monitoring to assess the language's effectiveness in trade facilitation. This approach ensures adaptability to political, economic, and social changes over the next 25 years. Figure 1 illustrates the Pan-African Language Development model for Intra-Africa Trade, and Table 2 presents a 25-year phased implementation roadmap for Kiswahili in intra-African trade. A 25-year time frame was chosen to allow for a gradual, phased implementation of Kiswahili as a common Pan-African trade language, aligning with the long-term goals of initiatives like the African Union's Agenda 2063, and providing enough time for policy development, education, and infrastructure adjustments, and regional cooperation while adapting to the evolving linguistic and political landscape.

CONCLUSION

This paper draws from institutional theory to propose a framework for promoting Kiswahili as the common language for intra-African trade. It suggests that AfCFTA policymakers and African governments should prioritize Kiswahili as the language for intra-African trade by adopting the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive initiatives outlined in this paper (See Table 2). Promoting Kiswahili will reduce trade costs and boost economic integration, but will require substantial investment in language education, translation infrastructure, and policy harmonization. The proposed framework offers a theoretical foundation for scholars exploring the socio-economic and cultural impact of a common trade language in Africa. However, its reliance on Scott's (1995) institutional theory overlooks linguistic theories and African languages and cultural specificities. Future research could address these gaps by investigating the linguistic dimensions of promoting Kiswahili, testing the framework in sub-regional contexts (e.g., East, Southern, Northern Africa), and examining how regional economic integrations affect language adoption. Additionally, research could explore how historical political ties with former European colonizers influence Kiswahili's promotion for intra-African trade. Given Africa's evolving institutional landscape, we recommend periodic reviews of the proposed policy initiatives to ensure adaptability to political, economic, and social changes over the next 25 years. Some potential challenges may arise during periodic reviews such as resistance to change from stakeholders, inconsistencies in implementation across regions, and unforeseen political and socio-cultural factors that may affect the policy's effectiveness. To address these challenges, we propose strategies such as engaging key stakeholders in continuous dialogue, establishing a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, and ensuring flexibility in policy adjustments. These actions will help mitigate potential risks and contribute to the successful implementation of Kiswahili's adoption as a pan-African trade language.
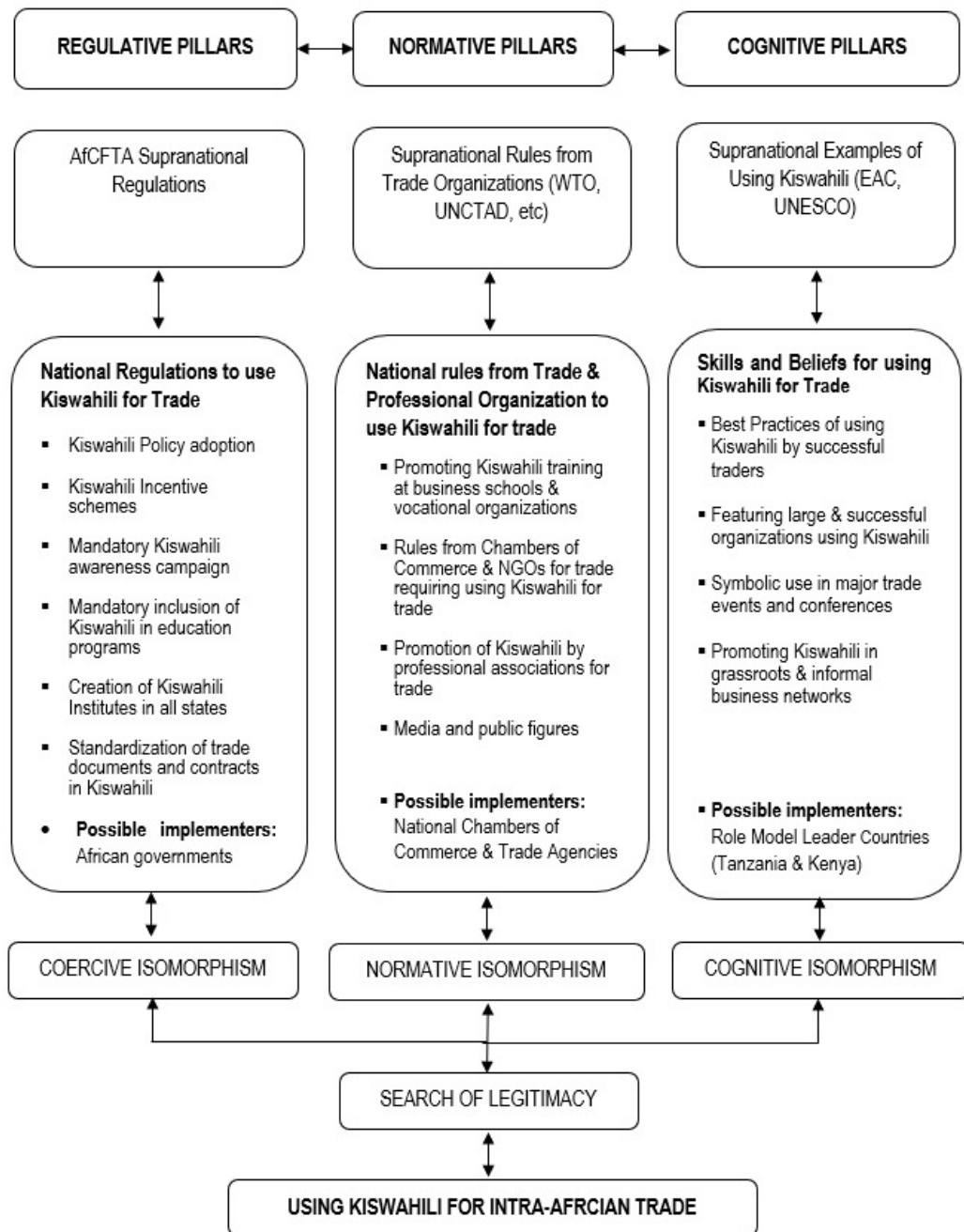
Figure 1. Model of Pan-Africa Language Development for Intra-Africa Trade

Table 2. Roadmap of 25 Years Strategic Plan for Establishing Kiswahili as a Pan-African Trade Language

Phases	Regulative Pillar	Normative Pillar	Cognitive Pillar
Phase 1: Foundation & Awareness (Years 1-5)	• **Resolution recognizing Kiswahili** as language for trade in Africa[a b] • **Kiswahili Strategic Plan**[c] • **Kiswahili official endorsement**[c d]	• **AfCFTA & EAC partnership** to champion Kiswahili promotion[c] • **Cultural Promotion of Kiswahili** with events showing Kiswahili's benefits[f]	• **Awareness campaigns** on benefits of Kiswahili for trade in Africa[c] • **Promoting Kiswahili Role Models**[c] • **Design training materials** for Kiswahili in trade[c]
Phase 2: Building Capacity & Infrastructure (Years 6-10)	• **Kiswahili Policy Adoption:** Mandate Kiswahili in Regional Economic Blocs: COMESA, ECOWAS, SADC, ECCAS, etc[a c] • **Launch Kiswahili Incentives Programs** for businesses using Kiswahili for trade[a b c d] • **Launch of Formal Campaigns of Awareness Programs** in all Africa[b c] • **Creation of Kiswahili Institute** to teach Kiswahili in all African countries[c] • **Kiswahili as second language in Africa** mainstream education programs[b g]	• **Kiswahili Embedding in Business Schools curriculum** & certifications programs[b g] • **Promoting Kiswahili in business networks** & organizations[e] • **Kiswahili Workshops** featuring its benefits for trade[e i]	• **Resource Development:** Translate key texts for trade and technical fields in Kiswahili[b] • **Develop digital Kiswahili** learning tools and business translation apps[c] • **Pan-African Artists as Kiswahili influencers**[i] • **Celebration & Mentorship** of firms standing as Kiswahili role models[c i h]
Phase 3: Scaling & Integration (Years 11-15)	• **Kiswahili as 2nd language required** for documents of cross-border trade[a b c] • **Periodic Reviews to** update frameworks for Kiswahili integration in AfCFTA agreements[b c]	• **Kiswahili training at technical & vocational institutions**[g] • **Kiswahili as Employee Hiring Criteria**[e h i]	• **Partnership** with local communities & medias to promote Kiswahili for trade[b c j]
Phase 4: Consolidation & Pan-African Institutionalization (Years 16-20)	• **Kiswahili Policy Act of African Union** to enforce Kiswahili as a co-official language for trade across African states[c]	• **Annual Kiswahili Awards** recognizing businesses excelling in using Kiswahili for trade[e h i] • **Kiswahili as a Social Norm by** embedding Kiswahili in media & cultural programs[e h i j]	• **Awards for Kiswahili Champions**[c f] • **National Featuring of successful businesses** using Kiswahili for trade[e h i]
Phase 5: Full Adoption & Standardization (Years 21-25)	• **Continental Law:** Official Kiswahili trade language under AfCFTA[c] • **Standardization of** trade and contracts documentation in Kiswahili[b c]	• **Business Standard:** Use Kiswahili as primary brand language across regions[h] • **Trade & business network:** Launch Kiswahili-focused trade networks to sustain long-term engagement[e]	• **Grandiose Annual Celebration of Kiswahili Day**[b c e h i] • **Kiswahili as** a cultural symbol in major continental trade events[i]

Key Possible implementers: [a] African Union, [b] National Government; [c] AfCFTA; [d] regional economic blocs; [e] Trade professional associations and business networks; [f] Role model countries (Kenya & Tanzania); [g] Universities and vocational institutions; [h] Business organisations; [i] Intra-African Trade Fair; [j] informal networks

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