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GFTN
GLOBAL FINANCE & TECHNOLOGY NETWORK

Empowering Economic Inclusion in Africa

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Introduction

This report captures the key insights and emerging trends discussed on the main stage at the Inclusive FinTech Festival 2025, hosted by the Global Finance & Technology Network (GFTN), Kigali International Financial Centre (KIFC) and the National Bank of Rwanda (NBR). It explores themes such as financial inclusion, sustainability, the future of financial services in Africa, and diverse perspectives from a pool of countries.

Industry leaders, policymakers, entrepreneurs & inspirational changemakers came together to share their expertise on critical topics, including emerging technologies such as blockchain and artificial intelligence. However, the central theme of the forum remained driving financial inclusion in Africa.

The report highlights the key takeaways from the Inclusive FinTech Forum 2025.

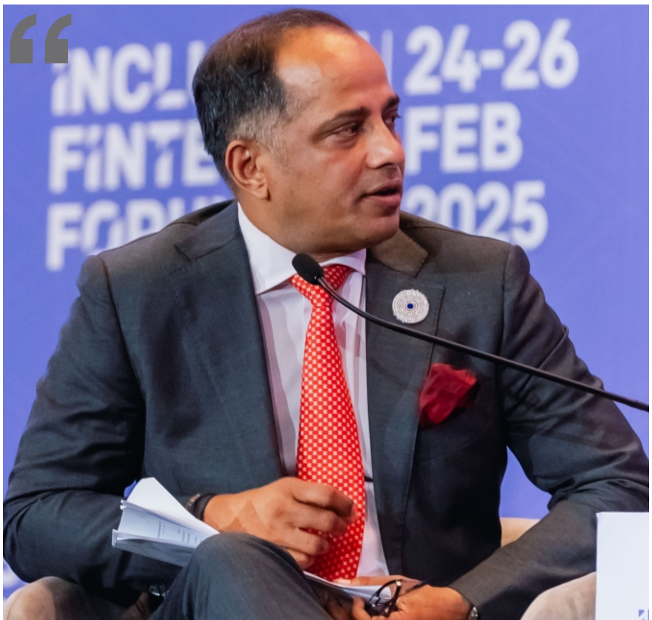
Why Policy Harmonisation is Key for Policymakers

> *"Digital public infrastructure (DPI) is more than just a tool – it's a public good that can transform societies." – World Economic Forum*

A panel comprising Cornelius Karlens Dekop, Governor, Bank of Botswana, Denny Kalyalya, Governor, Bank of Zambia, Lacina Koné, Director General and Chief Executive Officer, Smart Africa and John Rwangombwa, Governor, National Bank of Rwanda emphasised the importance of private investments in transformation of the digital space.

The panellists agreed that 'policy harmonisation' is a key factor for the success of DPI, particularly in Africa. Denny highlighted that even though Kenya has various policies to push the agenda of digital transformation further, it is not a straightforward task, even at a country level. Successfully driving this agenda requires bringing all stakeholders together.

Denny highlighted the risks associated with payments, especially cross-border payments, around data and cybersecurity issues, which can be best mitigated through a harmonised approach. Denny also mentioned that before the focus on interoperability, efforts were centred on replacing existing systems, which hindered progress. However, with interoperability now at the forefront, it has become "possible to hook up on what is existing"



Sopnendu Mohanty, Chief Executive Officer, Global Finance & Technology Network *GFTN)

> *“DPI is essentially a combination of digital identity, payment systems and data systems.”*

John Rwangombwa, Governor, National Bank of Rwanda

> *“Everything from the government, in payments, from cash and cheques has gone digital, thus, the government is acting towards digital transformation.”*

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Denny Kalyalya, Governor, Bank of Zambia

> *"If we are not well co-ordinated in introducing stabilities, no matter how good the system looks like, it will collapse."*

Cornelius Karlens Dekop, Governor, Bank of Botswana

> *"It is very important that we need to harmonise policies across the continent."*

Cornelius emphasised that the issue of egalitarian disparities and different settlement payments have caused inefficiencies. He highlighted the vital role that the Pan-African Payments Settlement System (PAPSS) plays in advancing policy harmonisation on the continent. He also mentioned that African governments must look at policies that allow fintechs to expand to other countries. He highlighted the issue of data exchange across the continent, and that African countries need to manage data flow better.

Lacina from Smart Africa said, "The issue is disruption, as we are living in a disruptive world." He suggested that policymakers need to act quickly to avoid disruption from alterna-tive financial systems (e.g., telcos). He also shared that in 2022, Africa generated US$822 billion in *transactional value* which was bigger than any bank. He highlighted that the central banks are primarily focused on risk management rather than managing money; a process which involves identification, payments, data sharing and infrastructure. Each of these layers of DPI have unique challenges and opportunities, he mentioned. He further stated that "The idea is not that one size fits all, rather each side should fit together in technology and technology does not have a limit", acknowledging that countries lack speed and remain behind in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), as deadlines approach.

The panel in essence emphasised an urgent need for African nations to harmonise policies, embrace interoperability, and foster innovation in the digital financial space, with central banks playing a crucial role in guiding and regulating this transformation while ensuring financial stability. The discussion reinforced that the time for action is now, as the continent risks being disrupted by alternative financial systems if it fails to adapt quickly enough.

Lacina Koné, Director General / Chief Executive Officer, Smart Africa Secretariat

> *"Let not our single success factor be seen in a policy and regulatory environment but rather than innovation."*

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Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) is the Foundation, but What's Missing?

A panel comprising Israel Bimpe, CEO, Irembo, Blaise Pascal Gasabira, Chief Executive Officer, Rswitch Ltd, Muriuki Njagi Eric, Chief Executive Officer, LOOP DFS, and Chek-Tchung Foo, Executive Director, Public Policy, Global Finance & Technology Network (GFTN), and Mike Ogbalu III, Chief Executive Officer, Pan African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) discussed the future of DPI and payments for an inclusive and more efficient financial ecosystem for the continent.

The panel emphasised the critical need for interoperability, security, and stakeholder engagement in building sustainable digital ecosystems. Panellists highlighted the importance of establishing robust governance frameworks that address data privacy and security risks, while fostering trust and confidence in the digital infrastructure. The discussion underscored the **urgency of creating accessible and inclusive DPI that leaves no one behind**, leveraging digital identities to facilitate access to finance and government services. **Ultimately, the discussion highlighted that successful DPI implementation requires a collaborative, adaptable, and security-conscious approach that is tailored to the specific contexts and priorities of African nations.**

Israel shared the journey of Irembo, highlighting its role in Rwanda's digital transformation. Irembo has digitised over 100 government services, making it easier for citizens to access them. The platform's impact extends beyond convenience, as it has also addressed government inefficiencies by providing a transparent payment gateway. This has improved visibility into non-fiscal revenue collection, enhancing policy-making and programmatic actions. Irembo's approach ensures inclusivity by offering services through multiple channels, including smartphones, Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) for feature phones, and a network of agents, thereby ensuring that no one is left behind in the digitalisation agenda. The platform's success serves as a model for building digital public infrastructure that is both citizen-centric and scalable.

Israel Bimpe, CEO, Irembo

> *"It's what we call non-fiscal revenue from government, and there's usually no visibility on when, how, and where the money was collected, what it was paid for, when it was paid. We ended up building the first of its kind, we believe, payment gateway that was primarily rooted in helping governments collaborate better with citizens."*

Blaise Pascal Gasabira, Chief Executive Officer, Rswitch Ltd.

> *"Making sense is not enough because there is a behaviour that is established. It's easy when such behavior is not yet established, then everyone sees interest. But if someone at the whole ecosystem is already used to a certain way of working, it becomes quite difficult to convince people to look at things differently as much as they see the benefit."*

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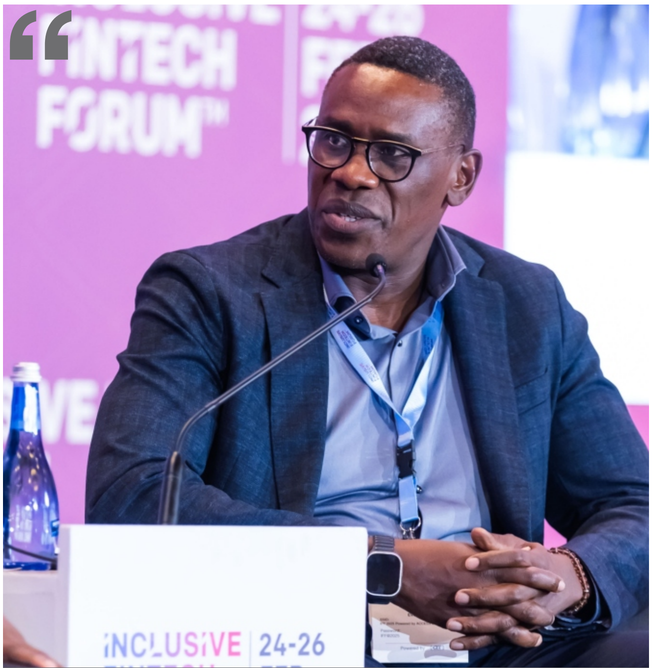
Blaise discussed the journey of implementing DPI, particularly in terms of payment interoperability. He highlighted the challenge of connecting the entire ecosystem to a single platform, which simplified the complex "spaghetti of integrations" that was prevalent at the time. Blaise emphasised that while interoperability made sense, it was not enough; established behaviours and interests had hindered adoption. To overcome this, he suggested increasing awareness, making the onboarding process affordable for existing players, leveraging open-source technology to avoid vendor lock-in, and securing support from governments and regulators. He also underscored the importance of having skilled teams that could effectively communicate the product's value to stakeholders, ensuring rapid adoption when all parties were aligned and engaged.



Muriuki Njagi Eric, Chief Executive Officer, LOOP DFS

> *“The investments in digitised economies are necessary value creators."*

Muriuki further iterated the importance of interoperable, safe, reliable, accessible, and inclusive DPI in Africa. He highlighted the three pillars of DPI: technology, robust elements, and governance frameworks as integral to the LOOP DFS strategy. As a market participant, Loop DFS has leveraged government frameworks and technical infrastructure to create value. Specifically, the company has made a conscious effort to digitalise agriculture and commerce, using digital identities to organise farmer groups and improve agricultural productivity. For example, they enhanced rice production by digitally credentialing farms and assets, enabling lenders to finance farmers in Kenya more effectively. This approach aligned with national priorities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as food security, and demonstrated how DPI could drive economic value creation.

Chek Tchung from GFTN highlighted the importance of embedding **trust and confidence** into the design and implementation of DPI. He emphasised that DPI, much like physical infrastructure, is crucial for spurring growth in the digital economy. However, DPI's reliance on digital data makes it vulnerable to cybersecurity threats and data breaches, which can erode public trust. To mitigate these risks, Chek Tchung advocated for a dual-level governance approach: regulatory frameworks that ensure data privacy and security, and technical standards such as strong authentication and encryption. He noted that these measures must evolve alongside emerging threats to maintain confidence in DPI systems.

Furthering the discussion on building trust into DPI, Mike discussed the need to avoid silos and ensure seamless integration across ecosystems. He emphasised that building systems in isolation can lead to inefficiencies and higher costs, highlighting the need for holistic governance, organised protocols, and stakeholder collaboration to create a robust ecosystem. He also stressed the critical role of data management and cybersecurity, noting that a single compromised node can jeopardise the entire network. Mike's vision for DPI is not limited to central banks but is a national effort that requires high-level support to remove bureaucratic hurdles and scale effectively. He suggested leveraging existing infrastructure, such as Rwanda's e-government successes, to extend DPI across Africa, enabling more countries to benefit from shared digital infrastructure.

Chek-Tchung Foo, Executive Director, Public Policy, Global Finance & Technology Network (GFTN)

> *“For digital public infrastructure, it is even more important for trust and confidence to be embedded into the design and the implementation of such infrastructure, especially because we are dealing with data right now.”*

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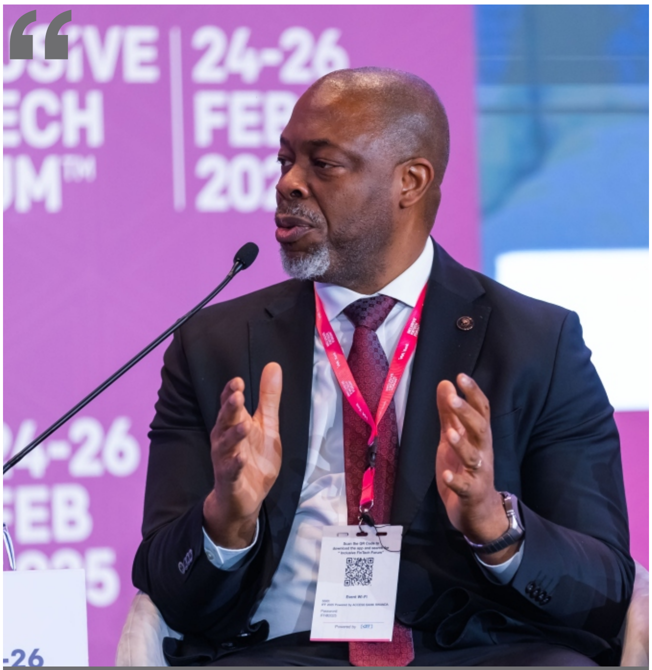


Mike Ogbalu III, Chief Executive Officer, Pan African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS)

> *“Anything you build in a silos, you are going to spend another two, three times in the future trying to bring them back together.”*

How Micro Pensions and Microinsurance Are Driving Economic Growth

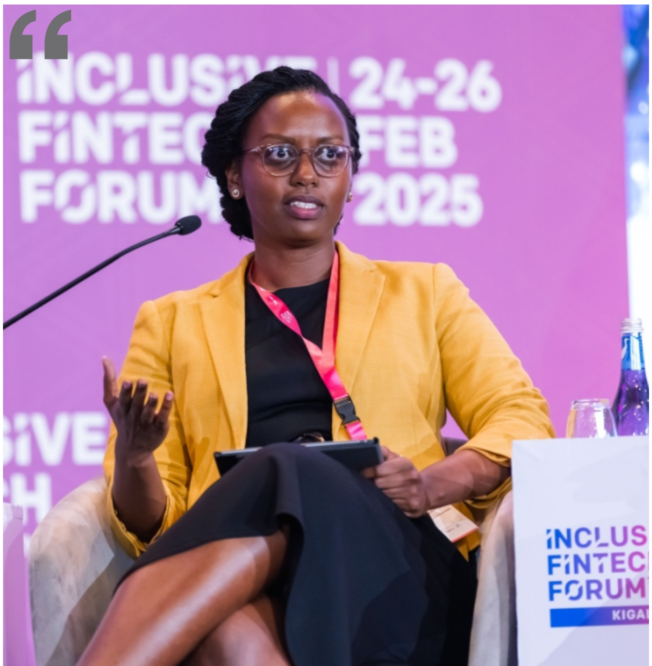
The microinsurance market is a promising source of economic growth for developing countries, especially Africa. On average, microinsurance products in Africa reached a median of 6,000 policy holders and generated a median of USD $79,500 in premiums in 2020. The three most popular types of microinsurance products from 2014 to 2020 were credit life, funeral, and health. Approximately between 17 million and 37 million individuals were covered by micro-insurance in 13 of 52 countries in Africa.

A similar condition persists for Africa's pension landscape. Pension assets are very small with only 20% of people above statutory retirement age receiving a pension in sub-Saharan Africa.

The panel on microinsurance and micro pensions, comprising Corneille Karekezi, Group MD/Chief Executive Officer, African Reinsurance Corporation, Ayandev Saha, Lead Climate Risk Adaptation and Insurance, K. M. Dastur & Company Limited, Rita F. Nansasi Wasswa, Acting Chief Executive Officer & Chief Manager Legal Services, highlighted how these products are powerful tools for advancing financial inclusion in the continent.

Tesi emphasised unlocking domestic and African capital hinges on the development of the pension and insurance industries. She highlighted Rwanda's DNA of embracing innovation and putting in place the right policy, regulatory, and legal frameworks to encourage the growth of the financial services industry. Key actions included ensuring access to financial services at the local level through circles in every sector and implementing government contributions to match savings and encourage life insurance uptake. She stressed the importance of marrying policy with action and using government resources to catalyse growth in risky areas like agricultural insurance.

Rita shared Uganda's approach to expanding pension coverage to informal sector workers, which includes



Tesi Rusagara, Minister of State Public Investments and Resource Mobilization, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning

> *"When we talk about domestic and African capital and unlocking it, we won't get to that if pension and insurance industries remain underdeveloped and remain where they are today."*

conducting a deep study of the market to understand their needs and characteristics. The study conducted revealed that informal sector workers are looking for schemes tailored to their needs and income levels. Uganda intends to leverage digital solutions to reach informal sector

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workers and utilise existing infrastructure, such as established banks and the National Identity Registration Authority (NIRA), to streamline Know Your Customer (KYC) processes. She emphasised the need for sensitisation campaigns and incentives, such as co-funding and tax incentives, to encourage informal sector workers to save for retirement, as well as including minimal health insurance.

Rita F. Nansasi Wasswa, Acting Chief Executive Officer & Chief Manager Legal Services, URBRA

> *"Indeed, majority of the Ugandans are in the informal sector, and many of them are not covered by any form of pension scheme."*

The discussion on the importance of retirement savings continued with Ejo Heza, Rwanda's long-term savings scheme, which means "a bright tomorrow" in the local language. Introduced in December 2018 under the Long-Term Saving Scheme (LTSS) Law, it is administered by the Rwandan Social Security Board (RSSB). The scheme aims to provide all Rwandan citizens with an opportunity to save for their future, leveraging the country's digital financial inclusion infrastructure. Participation is voluntary and open to all Rwandans, including those in the informal sector and the diaspora. Subscribers can manage their digital accounts linked to their national IDs, allowing for flexible contributions that can be made daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually. The scheme offers incentives such as matching co-contributions and free term insurance for the first three years to encourage participation. Additionally, subscribers can access up to 40% of their savings for specific purposes like housing or education.

DD Regis identified five key factors contributing to the success of Ejo Heza:

- a well-calibrated value proposition that is relevant, attractive, and easy to understand
- strong government support through aligned policies and direct incentives
- a digital-first and mobile-first experience that is zero-paper and zero-trip
- innovative distribution channels through cooperatives, informal sector groups, and especially women's cooperatives
- continuous learning and evolution

He highlighted the importance of integrating with mobile telcos, banks, and fintechs to achieve accessibility everywhere and anytime and the ability to offer members a consistent 12% annual ROI. Overall, Ejo Heza seeks to bridge the pension coverage gap and ensure a secure retirement for Rwandans, reinforcing retirement savings as crucial in building financial inclusion.

Regis Rugemanshuro, Chief Executive Officer, Rwanda Social Security Board

> *"We are fully integrated with all the mobile telcos, all the banks, and many fintechs, allowing literally to achieve zero pay per trip, you have to be available everywhere, anytime, as much as possible. And we can do that alone as an organization."*

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Shifting Regulatory Focus Away From Financial Stability

A panel comprising Hon. Soraya Hakuziyaremye, Governor, National Bank of Rwanda, Dr Alfred Hannig, Chief Executive Officer, Alliance for Financial Inclusion, Fares Alsaleh, General Director of Fintech Development, Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) and Haocong Ren, Lead - Policy and Investment, CGAP, explored the evolving role of regulators, particularly central banks, in fostering a thriving fintech and startup ecosystem. Traditionally, regulators focused on financial stability and supervision, but the development of fintech and emerging market needs have prompted a shift towards facilitation and enablement. Key strategies discussed included establishing regulatory sandboxes to allow FinTechs to test their products in a controlled environment, hiring teams with entrepreneu-rial experience to better understand the challenges faced by startups, and adopting an open mindset that recognises regulators don't have all the answers. Panelists emphasised the importance of activity-based regulation, which focuses on the specific services provided rather than the type of institution, and the need for regulators to adapt their procedures to keep pace with innovation. They also highlighted the importance of maintaining regulatory independence while using existing mandates to promote financial inclusion and stability. Overall, the discussion conveyed optimism about the increasing engagement of regulators with the FinTech ecosystem and their commit-ment to fostering innovation while ensuring consumer protection and financial stability. The new emphasis is the transition from stewards to facilitators and enablers of innovation, recognising the importance of FinTech in achieving financial inclusion goals.

Soraya discussed the National Bank of Rwanda's evolution in engaging with the fintech ecosystem. Over the years, NBR has recognised the importance of fostering a supportive environment for Fintechs. To reinforce this commitment, they established a financial sector development and inclusion department, separate from financial stability and supervisory teams. Soraya highlighted the regulatory sandbox, which provides fintechs 12 months to test their services and navigate the licensing process under a lighter regulatory framework. Soraya emphasised the need for central bank staff to understand the challenges faced by fintech founders and to communicate effectively with them.

Soraya Hakuziyaremye, Deputy Governor, The National Bank of Rwanda

> *“This is exactly what we see in the network, which is driving the regulatory approaches these days, the understanding that all what we are doing in this is not only helping the three that I just mentioned, but also a cornerstone of actually achieving and maintaining stability."*

Haocong from CGAP, emphasised the need for regulators to adapt to rapid market developments in the financial services sector. She discussed the increasing embedding of financial services within commercial activities and the challenges this poses for traditional regulatory frameworks. She suggested that licensing frameworks should be flexible and activity-based, focusing on the services provided rather than the type of institution. She highlighted the importance of streamlining regulatory procedures to avoid hindering innovation and emphasised the need for responsible compliance and conduct supervision in the digital age.

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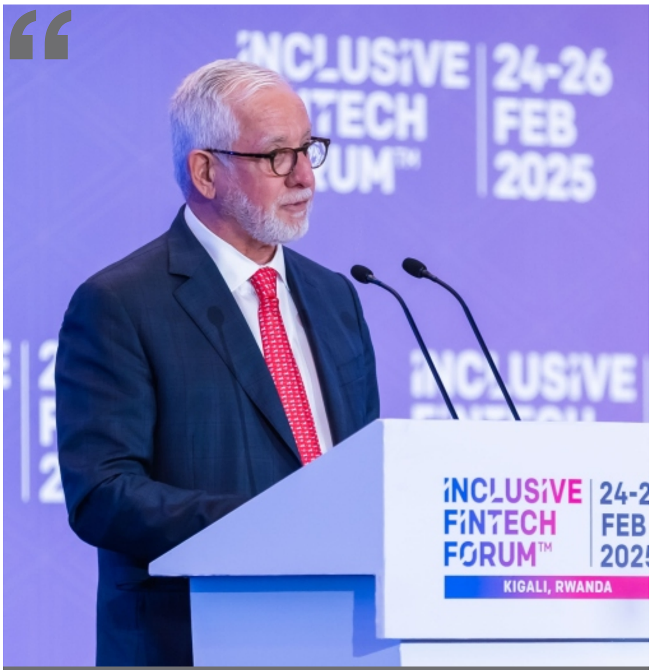
Haocong Ren, Lead - Policy and Investment, CGA



Haim Taib, Founder & President, Mitrelli and JETA Africa Holding

> *"The regulator naturally needs to follow market development. We've seen market evolving over the past...mostly past seven, eight years...some of the dramatic innovations happening in the market."*

> *"Fintech offers a pathway to economic growth and financial increases. By leveraging Fintech, we can transform the life of millions across the continent, providing access to financial services that were until now, out of reach.*
>
> *Fintech is the bridge that will connect the farmer to the market, the businessman to capital and the family to opportunity.*
>
> *In Swahili, there is a word I respect harambee. Altogether, this spirit of unity must guide us forward together."*

Haim Taib's Take on Fintech and Economic Growth

Hiam Taib, Founder & President, Mitrelli and JETA Africa Holding, underscored the transformative potential of FinTech in Africa, highlighting its role in driving economic growth and financial inclusion. He emphasised that FinTech can provide universal access to financial services, benefitting not just urban residents or large businesses, but also farmers in remote villages and small shop owners. Haib shared his experience of working on large-scale national projects across Africa, noting that ensuring access to basic human needs like housing, water, food, and energy is crucial. He also highlighted the impact of mega projects, such as the corridor from Angola to Zambia, which can transform lives by providing access to education, healthcare, and markets. Haim announced the establishment of JETA Africa Holding, a venture committed to leveraging Fintech to accelerate impactful solutions and empower young entrepreneurs. He stressed that collaboration and unity, encapsulated by the Swahili word "harambee," are essential for realising Africa's potential and making financial inclusion a reality.

Making Remittances Affordable in Africa

The transfer cost of remittances remains high in Africa, the average cost of sending $200 to Africa was 8.5% but sending to some countries in South Africa, reaches as high as 20%. One of the SDG goals is to reduce the cost of remittances to less than 3% by 2030, but progress is yet to be seen.

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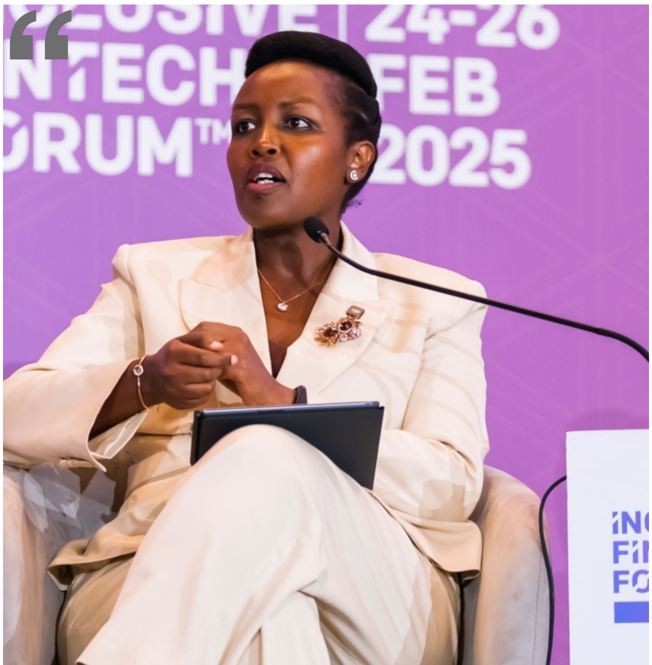
The panel comprising Paula Ingabire, Minister of ICT and Innovation, Rwanda and Mike Ogbalu III, Chief Executive Officer, Pan African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS) shared their insights on bringing remittance costs down in Africa.

Paula emphasised the critical role of mobile money in driving remittances and financial inclusion across Africa. She noted that in Rwanda, mobile money was a key driver for remittances and financial inclusion, with over 70% of the population accessing financial services through mobile platforms.

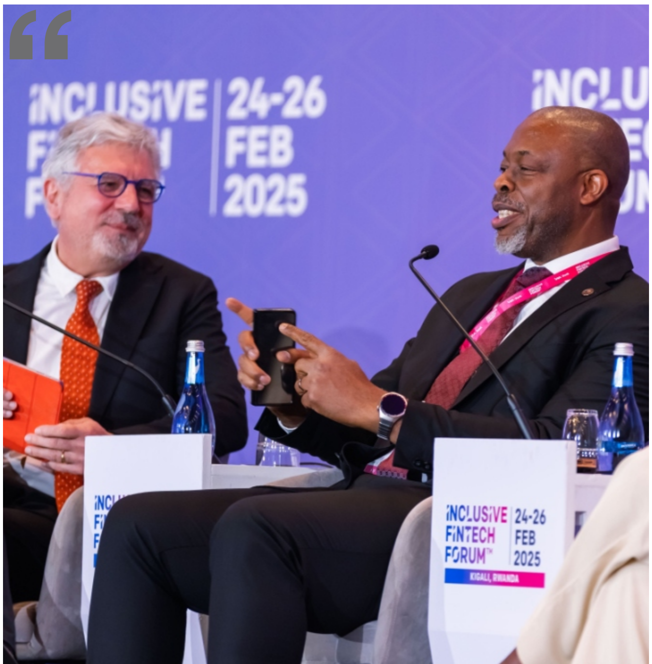
Paula highlighted the importance of investments in digital infrastructure to support remittances, while acknowledging the need to address affordability, particularly for micro-businesses. She discussed Rwanda's efforts to develop instant payment systems, such as Rswitch, which have reduced transaction times significantly. Paula stressed the importance of collaboration between banks, microfinance institutions, telecom operators, and mobile money operators to enhance access to financial services and increase remittances. She also touched on the challenges of harmonising regulations within regional blocs like the East African Community and COMESA to facilitate cross-border payments. Paula mentioned Rwanda's initiatives to create a "switch of switches" to connect national payment systems and support FinTech innovation through regulatory sandboxes. Additionally, she highlighted Rwanda's involvement in shaping the digital trade protocol and the launch of the licensing passporting program, which aims to reduce regulatory barriers for fintechs and accelerate their market access.

Mike Ogbalu discussed the role of PAPSS, a financial market infrastructure designed to enhance cross-border payments across Africa. He explained that PAPSS is built on international principles and was developed by Afreximbank in partnership with the African Union Commission and AfCFTA Secretariat. This platform connects various ecosystems, including central banks, commercial banks, and FinTechs, allowing them to leverage a primary payment rail to scale operations continent-wide. Mike highlighted that PAPSS facilitates transactions in local currencies, reducing the need for intermediaries and lowering costs. He further highlighted that PAPSS keeps African payments within Africa, leading to lower costs. Additionally, Ogbalu mentioned the use of shared services and technology, such as anti-money laundering and fraud management, to enable participants to leverage existing infrastructure without needing to make significant individual investments. He shared that transactions on PAPSS can be completed in no more than 120 seconds, making it an efficient solution for cross-border payments.



Hon. Paula Ingabire, Minister of ICT and Innovation, Rwanda

> *"The continent, particularly for Rwanda, we've seen that the 96% financial inclusion that have been projected in the country, more than 70% of that is given by mobile money transfers or access to mobile money services."*



Mike Ogbalu III, Chief Executive Officer, Pan African Payment and Settlement System (PAPSS)

> *"Anything that makes payments efficient will actually have an accelerated effect on that exchange of value."*

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Outcomes

The discussions at the Inclusive FinTech Forum underscores the critical need for tailored approaches to enhancing financial inclusion.

As a result of collaborative discussions and forums, an initiative to optimise Africa's Next-Generation Digital Public Infrastructure Framework was announced. This initiative was conceptualised following the 3i Africa Summit in 2024, where central bank governors and key stakeholders emphasised the urgent need for a standardised payment system to strengthen Africa's financial ecosystem.

Rather than building new infrastructure, the initiative will focus on the entire African financial ecosystem through a policy-driven approach, ensuring seamless interconnectivity among countries. It aims to review existing policies, processes, and infrastructure, and identify opportunities for innovation and efficiency in cross-border transactions. By modernising and harmonising payment systems, this programme seeks to connect local payment gateways to increase cross-border payment efficiency.

The pilot phase of this initiative, a collaborative effort between the National Bank of Rwanda, the Bank of Ghana, and the Global Finance and Technology Network (GFTN), was officially announced on 25 February 2025 at the Inclusive FinTech Forum. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed, demonstrating a shared commitment to tackling the challenges in cross-border payments and marking a critical step towards a more connected, inclusive, and efficient African financial ecosystem.

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