**The UPU Ecom@Africa initiative – Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

**1 Background**

Both the UPU Doha (2013–2016) and Istanbul (2017–2020) **world postal strategies** identified and recog­nized the importance of e-commerce to the development of postal services. The Union member countries, particularly through their designated operators (DOs), must contribute to the development of e-commerce through their pervasive network and multi-dimensional services. The 26th Universal Postal Congress instructed the UPU International Bureau to develop projects and programmes which support and enhance the capacity of the Union member countries and their DOs to provide e-commerce services in an integrated fashion.

**2 What is Ecom@Africa?**

It is an initiative whose objective is to position the postal network in Africa as a key facilitator of e-commerce. It aims at establishing an integrated, inclusive and innovative e-commerce ecosystem provided by DOs through   
e-commerce (online) platforms using the postal network and products for cross‑border logistics, deliveries, returns and payments. The Union member country governments and their DOs are the two main stakehold­ers in the initiative. Other public or private stakeholders can join the initiative by forming partnerships with the government or the DO, depending on their area of activity. The initiative is **funded by each interested Union member country**.

**3 What is the goal of the initiative?**

The goal is to enhance the role and capacity of the postal network as an enabler of e-commerce, notably by establishing DOs as partners to the government, citizens and enterprises that are excluded from   
e-commerce, and especially small and medium enterprises, young people and women who are marginalized and lack affordable access to e-commerce platforms, payment and delivery possibilities, especially for cross-border e-commerce.

Ecom@Africa promotes openness in that it encourages public-private partnerships and positions the DO as an important infrastructure partner for implementing the **UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and achieving the related Sustainable Development Goals**. E-commerce inclusion, especially for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), will support national objectives for inclusive development and job creation due to increased exports and imports (trade flows) resulting from the activities of MSMEs in global e-commerce.

**4 What are the values and principles of Ecom@Africa?**

* **Universality**: the concept has national, regional and global dimensions.
* **Inclusion**: targets broader, inclusive access to e-commerce for buyers and sellers (SMEs).
* **Openness**: the initiative accommodates public-private partnerships.
* **Sustainability**: UN Sustainable Development Goals as a reference framework.

**5 What are the specific objectives of the initiative?**

* To strengthen the universal service obligation (USO) placed on DOs to ensure that standard postal services are reasonably accessible to all people in a country to enable them to buy and sell online on an equitable basis, wherever they reside or carry on business.
* To enable rural and underserved communities to sell online and have their products efficiently deliv­ered to domestic and overseas consumers.
* To enable rural and underserved communities to buy online from local and overseas merchants.
* To establish hubs for regional development of e-commerce via the UPU international postal network.
* To facilitate sharing and integration of innovative solutions and capabilities by Union member coun­tries.

**6 What is the first step in being part of the Ecom@Africa initiative?**

The first step for a Union member country that wishes to be part of the Ecom@Africa initiative is to **write a letter of intent**, signed by the ministry responsible for the postal sector, outlining the objectives and interest of the country to implement the initiative. The government drives the initiative, and the DO is the main entity responsible for operationalization. As the initiative is funded by each interested Union member country, the letter must state the **government's commitment to fund** the implementation of the Ecom@Africa initiative in the country.

For the 2017/2018 period, the initiative will be implemented in **six pilot countries** to test and validate the initiative's approach, methodology and tools. From 2019 onwards, the initiative will be opened up to other Union member countries based on the results of the pilot projects.

**7 What are the subsequent steps after the letter of intent is sent to the UPU?**

The initiative has a series of steps, as follows:

i The government has to **create a national project team**, comprising the government department lead­ing the initiative (the ministry responsible for postal services is generally the key driver of this initia­tive), as well as ministries responsible for issues such as digital economy or information and commu­nication technology, finance, Customs and trade, as well as related institutions such as chambers of com­merce, trade promotion and e-commerce associations or similar. The government will appoint a **national project manager** whose responsibility will be to coordinate the development and implementation of the project at the national level and to liaise and follow-up with the project manager from the UPU International Bureau.

ii In order to assess the e-commerce situation in each country and the readiness of the DO to implement the initiative, an **information-gathering questionnaire** for country condition assessment and gap analysis has to be completed. This will help determine the feasibility and viability of deploying the initi­ative in the interested country. A country that wishes to implement the Ecom@Africa initiative has to meet a set of minimum conditions that would guarantee a successful outcome.

iii Then the DO is assigned the main **operational implementation** of the initiative, as distribution net­work, provider of payment services and, possibly, host of the e-commerce platform (online mer­chant sites for MSMEs).

iv An **operational audit** (project scoping and operational readiness assessment for e-commerce) of the postal operator is then done to assess the postal network's level of e-commerce readiness and to make recommendations in any areas requiring improvement. This audit is conducted by the UPU International Bureau but funded by the participating country.

v Based on the results of the operational audit, **the government and the DO formalize their commit­ments** (e.g. contract) as part of the development plan describing the concrete projects to be imple­mented under the initiative to seize the identified opportunities and fill any identified gaps.

All the above steps can be broadly grouped into four project phases: 1) *assessment*, which establishes the country's readiness in terms of minimum requirements to successfully implement the initiative and whose outcome is the **situation analysis and project identification report**; 2) *formulation*, during which the roadmap for the implementation of the identified projects is drafted, the outcome of which is the **implemen­tation plan**; 3) *implementation*, during which the implementation plan is executed. This phase leads to an **e‑commerce–capable or e-commerce–ready DO**; and 4) *monitoring and evaluation*, whose outcome is a regular **monitoring and evaluation report**.

**8 Implementation stages**

As part of the implementation phase (phase 3), the initiative can be implemented in the following stages:

*a Stage 1: National deployment*

The initiative is implemented at country level. The government and the DO undertake to work together to meet UPU requirements in the area of e-commerce; this involves putting in place the **national Ecom@Africa platform** and taking steps to ensure that the postal network fulfils all the criteria for the initia­tive. The Ecom@Africa national platform is an e-commerce marketplace for the online sale of products and services using the UPU postal network and its services for logistics and payments. The implementation of the initiative at country level enables the DO to obtain the UPU e-commerce label.

*b Stage 2: Regional integration*

In this phase, the national Ecom@Africa platform is connected to the other platforms in the region, with a view to promoting cross border e-commerce among countries of Africa. For example, a Tunisian e-shopper could purchase Ethiopian coffee online, while an Ethiopian could order Tunisian dates and have them deliv­ered via the network of DOs.

*c Stage 3: International or interregional development*

At this point, the conditions are in place to develop internationally, in particular to facilitate online exporting for local MSMEs. The UPU will help participating countries to form partnerships with DOs in other regions and with other major global e-commerce players.

**9 Commitment of the national government**

Under this initiative, the government of the Union member country will be expected to:

* Set up a national project team and appoint a lead institution to manage and oversee the implementa­tion of the initiative, including the drafting of the implementation plan in consultation with the UPU International Bureau;
* Ensure appropriate policy and regulatory alignment of Ecom@Africa with national e-commerce development and postal strategies;
* Provide all the necessary resources (including any necessary procurement initiatives) to ensure the successful implementation of the initiative. In this regard, the government of the Union member coun­try will **pay in advance** all expenses to be incurred by the UPU International Bureau in the implemen­ta­tion of the project, including administrative and operational services;
* Provide incentives to simplify procedures and make e-commerce more accessible to populations and MSMEs;
* Provide targeted communication campaigns and appropriate incentive programmes to encourage MSMEs and e-commerce stakeholders to participate in Ecom@Africa;
* Ensure the collaborative participation of the key stakeholders in Ecom@Africa throughout the project phases;
* Integrate the key objectives and targets of Ecom@Africa into the performance indicators of the respective institutions involved;
* Supervise, monitor and evaluate the progress of Ecom@Africa in consultation with the UPU International Bureau.

Following completion of the project, the UPU International Bureau will draw up a final statement and refund any unused sum.

**10 What happens if a country has not met the criteria to go forward with the initiative?**

Countries need to have a basic legal and regulatory framework in place to support e-commerce, as well as national policies and strategies to promote e-commerce. The supply chain and quality of service of the postal operator also have to meet the basic UPU quality of service standards. Without these basic fundamentals as well as reliable postal delivery, logistics and e-commerce payment capabilities, it is impossible for the DO to be a reliable e-commerce provider.

Additionally, the DO has to have a minimum set of information technology (IT) tools and elec­tronic data interchange capabilities to support UPU cross-border data flows.

For countries that may not meet all the necessary conditions to implement the initiative today (at the onset), the results of the information analysis and on-site operational e-commerce readiness assessment will be used to design and develop a tailored plan, approach and technical assistance to enhance the country's capacity to implement the initiative in the future. It is in the UPU's interest for all its members to be able to support e-commerce and facilitate trade for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises by strengthening the capacity of the entire postal network.

Any inquiries regarding Ecom@Africa should be sent to [ecomafrica@upu.int](mailto:ecomafrica@upu.int).