Interview with Lola Aworanti-Ekugo

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Liam von der Wiede



Lola Aworanti-Ekugo is a pan-African digital technology and innovation expert, industry practitioner, and researcher with two decades of international experience spanning financial services, fintech, and global trade. She is the CEO of AfriBorder Ltd and a recognised specialist in Digital Trade and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Her work bridges research and practice, combining evidence- based analysis with practical implementation to inform trade policy, design digital solutions, and advance cross-border innovation.

Lola has delivered digital platforms, contributed to research, and advised both policymakers and the private sector. She has also engaged in high-level bilateral dialogues with heads of state, ambassadors, and international organisations like the World Trade Organisation and ODI Global, drawing on her extensive experience in Europe and multiple African markets. Her professional background includes senior leadership roles at Dresdner Kleinwort, Commerzbank, BNP Paribas, and First Bank of Nigeria including Chief Digital Officer, where she spearheaded the creation of Digital Innovation Labs and led large-scale digital projects, such as repositioning FirstBank's African subsidiaries in Ghana, Sengal and DRC into digitally-led retail banks.

Liam von der Wiede is a Master Student in Business Administration and holds a Bachelor degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Society. His interests lie within Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence, and their impact on both the public and private sectors. He is an active member of United Netherlands

Thank you for taking the time to discuss with me here at the WTO Public Forum 2025 on Digital Trade, some of the major issues the Global South has to deal with when it comes to digitalization, AI, trade, and much more. Please feel free to introduce yourself shortly.

I am Lola Aworanti-Ekugo, Founder and CEO of Afriborder. Afriborder is focused on advancing digital trade for the private and public sectors in Africa and the rest of the world.

What is your perspective on the WTO's recent report on AI and its potential impact on global trade?

First of all, I'm pleased to see that the WTO has published its recent report on AI. I think this is very timely and much needed. As I mentioned during the panel discussion, the WTO should be seen as a beacon of hope and a reference point for what is possible. AI is already transforming entire industries and reshaping how the global economy functions. The report highlights that, if AI is used effectively over the next 15 years, global trade could increase by around 40%, which would be a significant boost. In practical terms, especially in areas such as cross border trade and customs, AI has the potential to enhance productivity, streamline administrative processes, and improve efficiency. The use cases are almost endless, and this is why it is so important that the WTO continues to engage on this topic and help guide how AI can be used responsibly and inclusively in global trade.

How does the WTO promote more inclusivity so that also developing countries in the Global South can effectively strengthen their advancements with regard to digital trade?

recognise that the Global South, especially Africa, is already deeply engaged in technological innovation. I believe that the challenge is not a lack of ideas

or creativity; rather, it lies in implementation and scale. African entrepreneurs are developing solutions that respond to real market needs and have the potential to deliver global value if properly supported. A good example is the success of fintech partnerships such as Nigeria's LemFi and Visa Partnership to facilitate cross-border transactions in Asia. This demonstrates that African digital solutions can compete globally and integrate into international value chains when the right policy environment and support structures are in place. Therefore, the role of institutions like the WTO is critical in ensuring that digital trade policies are inclusive, reduce barriers to entry, and actively support digital businesses in Africa and the wider Global South.

How do you see public-private partnerships when it comes to the digital economy? Is it necessary, or are the businesses actually at the forefront of digitalization and innovation?

right infrastructure—things like reliable internet access and digital identity systems. In developed countries, internet access is often taken for granted. But in the Global South, internet infrastructure is not simply given; it has to be deliberately built and made accessible and affordable for the wider population. In Nigeria, for example, the Minister of Digital Economy is currently working on a 90-kilometre fibre-optic project aimed at connecting the entire country. That is another strong example of an ongoing public-private partnership that is directly supporting the development of digital infrastructure. If we want digital trade to truly thrive, the public and private sectors must work hand in hand.

I have talked with a handful of experts who are from Nigeria and work in the private sector, public sector, or are part of NGOs. They all told me that digital financial services in developing countries, such as Nigeria, have been more efficiently implemented many years ago already, while in many developed countries, such as Germany, digital financial services have only been rising in popularity in the last few years. Do you think there can be more collaboration between different parts of the world when it comes to innovations like these?

As I said, Africa is not lacking ideas or solutions. The real issue is that we need to work much better together at a global level. One of the key takeaways from the roundtables we had here at the WTO with international experts was that many fintechs in the Global South are ready to scale and enter new markets, but in practice, it is extremely difficult for them to do so. Some countries, such as the United Kingdom and Canada, have been quite intentional about attracting start-ups from the Global South. There is almost a flow of ideas, innovation, and talent into these markets, which allows companies— including African ones —to scale, grow, and operate on an international stage. Both countries have created ecosystems where foreign start-ups can realistically

expand and succeed. More countries need to take this approach and become far more open and attractive to entrepreneurs who are looking to scale globally. At the moment, the main destinations tend to be the UK, Canada, and the United States. Although, it is worth noting that increasing protectionism in the US has made market entry more challenging in recent years. That said, these countries still offer structured programmes, fellowships, and incentives that actively support young and innovative companies. In my view, if other developed countries—need to open up much more to foreign start-ups. Innovation today is global, and policies need to reflect that reality.

My last question deals with crisis management. We have experienced so many different crises in the last years: pandemic, tariffs, and geopolitical tensions. Do you see any possibility for the WTO to reform and become resilient for the next 30 years to come?

Honestly, this is not easy. That said, I remain hopeful that the WTO is up to the task. In my view, however, the WTO needs to move faster if it wants to effectively respond to these challenges, remain relevant, and strengthen its role in the global trading system. Given the level of uncertainty and unpredictability we are seeing today, the WTO must serve as a pillar of predictability —something I also emphasised earlier during the panel discussion. To do this, the organisation needs strong partnerships with institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, so that rules are not just agreed on, but can also be backed by real consequences. If countries—particularly economically powerful ones—violate international trade rules, there must be timely and meaningful consequences. For that to happen, the WTO needs to look ahead, continue evolving, think outside the box, and adapt its tools in more creative ways. Ultimately, it must become more effective and empowered if it is to remain fit for purpose in the decades ahead.

Thank you for this amazing interview. I am convinced it broadened the horizon of the readers, and I wish you the best for Afriborder and the rest of the day here at the WTO

You are welcome, and thank you for your interest.