

There are no translations available.

To boost free trade in Africa, infrastructure plays a key role. A [report](#) from the International Trade Council submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly (the legislative branch of the State Government of Connecticut) noted a few years ago that

*"International trade cannot happen without roads, bridges, railroads, harbors, airports, and fiber optic cables"*

, concluding that for this reason, infrastructure should be regarded (by States) not only as financial burdens, but as economic assets where to attract strategic investments. In Africa, a continent that is typically characterized by long distances between urban centers and production areas, railway transport is key, being this mode of transport the most economically viable over long distances and for the transportation of high cargo volumes (as the load capacity of trains is much higher than lorries or trucks). Yet, this mode of transport is also the most underdeveloped in Africa. This is mostly due to the

[colonial legacy](#)

of the African transport system. Indeed, most of the railways and interstate roads that currently exist in Africa were built during the colonization era by European nations to connect mining areas and agricultural production centers in the interior of the continent to the coast, so as to enable the export of raw materials needed to feed the production processes of European manufacturing companies. The same nations had no economic interest in building railroads and roads connecting African states to each other.

In September 2023, a [paper](#) published from Tralac highlighted this problem (the study is also mentioned by a [recent article](#) by the Ecofin Agency), noting how most railways, except in a few Southern and Northern African countries, are simple links penetrating inland from coastal seaports, offering very little interconnection among African States. The paper also notes that 16 countries in Africa still today do not have railways. But building new railways is costly and takes time, the paper notes. It therefore

proposes, as an alternative to a costly rebuild, to interconnect the railway lines with road and maritime networks so as to compensate for the limited coverage in Africa of each transport mode - considered individually - through interoperability between these systems.

Moreover, the paper notes that in Africa there are nine types of different gauges in use. While some countries have chosen the Cape gauge of 1.067 m, which is the most common and represents 61.3% of the continental network, others use the metric gauge of 1.000 m (19.2% of the network) or the standard gauge of 1.435 m (estimated at 14.5% of the network).

The paper suggests using modern engineering techniques to convert railways based on models that allow for near-uniform widths, facilitating the movement of trains from one African State to another.

The implementation of these relatively simple solutions would allow to quickly foster trade, avoiding the long waiting time required for reconstruction of roads and railways. This could accelerate the implementation of the AfCFTA, which, according to a [study from UNECA](#) is expected to increase exponentially the demand for intra-African freight and means of transport, noting that at present, only 0.3% of total intra-African freight is carried by rail, compared with 76.6 percent that moves by road.