

TRADEMARK AFRICA

POLICY BRIEF

FROM CONVERSATION TO CHANGE.

Enhancing community of practice coordination for inclusive trade.

The Bottom Line

Access to trade is not the same as empowerment. The Inclusive Trade Community of Practice (CoP) exists to turn evidence and lived experience into joint pilots, practical tools, policy reform, and accountable investment, so that collaboration delivers stronger businesses, more responsive institutions, and better trade outcomes.

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SIX PRIORITIES FROM THE INAUGURAL ROUNDTABLE

1. **User-centred trade systems**
   Rules, fees, and infrastructure designed around real traders
2. **Enterprise growth**
   From participation to profit and value capture
3. **Safe, accessible participation**
   Safety and inclusion built in as design requirements
4. **Trusted digital trade**
   Protection against fraud, non-delivery, and payment disputes
5. **Stronger trader organisation**
   Collective voice that is inclusive and accountable
6. **Measuring empowerment**
   Evidence of who benefits and whether gains last

WHAT THIS BRIEF ASKS OF LEADERS

01 Back the CoP as an evidence-to-action mechanism, not a discussion forum.

02 Support time-bound learning groups, joint pilots, and peer review on the six priorities.

03 Commit to using CoP evidence in programme designs, policy positions, and budget decisions.

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1. Why a community of practice for inclusive trade

Africa's trade landscape is changing fast. Regional integration, digitalisation, and new markets can widen participation and cut transaction costs, but they do not remove the structural barriers that decide who can trade, on what terms and with what returns. TradeMark Africa's (TMA) own experience has moved through three stages, and the third demands a different kind of evidence.

Widening access
Getting more traders into the system

Strengthening systems
Fixing the institutions that enable participation

Lasting empowerment
Asking whether participation changes agency, earnings, and resilience

That shift means looking beyond the number of traders reached or the speed of clearance, to changes in agency, earnings, resilience, business growth, and institutional responsiveness.

The problem: knowledge is fragmented.
Knowledge on inclusive trade is spread across countries, projects, and institutions, so good lessons rarely travel.

Researchers generate evidence without a clear route into programme design.

Implementers solve practical problems without documenting or comparing their approaches.

Governments receive recommendations that are not grounded in traders' daily realities.

Businesses and trader organisations lack sustained channels to influence policy.

A continental learning platform can connect these actors, identify common problems, test responses in different settings and translate lessons into decisions on policy, budgets, and investment.



The inaugural roundtable: 30 September 2026

Who was in the room?
CoP technical teams, development partners, researchers, policy specialists, gender and economic-justice practitioners, regional and value-chain experts, and Inclusive Trade CoP members, alongside practitioners in women's economic empowerment, cross-border trade, digital market access, enterprise development, and regional integration.

Moderator and panellists
Victor Ong'ele (moderator); Hellen Oriaro, Global Affairs Canada; Nadia Hasham, Vanguard Economics; Echessah Protase, AGRA; Lina Asiimwe, EASSI.

Why the mix matters: no single programme team or institution holds all the relevant knowledge. The CoP gives policy, implementation, research and lived experience one space to be examined together.

2. Six issues critical to advancing inclusive trade

01 **Design trade systems around actual users.** Fees, rules, and procedures can look neutral yet impose disproportionate costs on small-scale traders, women, and persons with disabilities. At Holili, women traders repeatedly paid TZS 20,000 for a cross-border pass when travelling beyond the permitted radius. After engagement with Tanzanian authorities, payment reportedly moved to once every six months.

What must change: structured trader–government dialogue that logs barriers, assigns them to responsible agencies, and follows through to resolution.

02 **Connect participation to enterprise growth and value capture.** Access to markets or information does not by itself build profitable, resilient businesses. Traders and SMEs still lack affordable finance, standards and SPS support, market intelligence, digital skills, aggregation, processing, packaging, mentoring, and dependable buyers.

What must change: help women and young people move from low-margin roles into aggregation, logistics, processing, supply and leadership, and judge success by margins, reliable sales, value addition, jobs, and business survival, not enrolment.

03 **Make safety, accessibility, and social context core design requirements.** Women with disabilities were pushed off main routes onto informal ones, where they faced harassment, theft, and loss of mobility equipment. Gender-based violence, unpaid care and household tensions also shape who can trade and who stays in business.

What must change: assess accessibility and safeguarding risks, consult affected groups, provide accessible grievance channels, and engage community actors for safe, rights-based change.

04 **Build trust and protection into digital trade.** Remote transactions bring risks of non-delivery, payment disputes, and fraud. The proposed iSOKO 2.0 payment gateway would hold funds until receipt is confirmed, with seller validation through associations. Such features are testable design responses, not assumed solutions.

What must change: pair them with affordable connectivity, accessible interfaces, digital literacy, transparent fees, data protection, responsive support, and fair dispute resolution.

05 **Strengthen collective organisation and trader voice.** Associations, cooperatives, and business clusters help members share information, aggregate supply, meet buyer requirements, formalise, and negotiate. They can also validate platform users and carry border-level problems upward.

What must change: representation must be inclusive and accountable, giving women, youth, persons with disabilities and informal traders real influence over priorities, not just a place in the

06 **Measure empowerment, distribution, and resilience.** Trade volumes, jobs, exports, and clearance times still matter, but they cannot show who benefits, how much value groups keep, whether gains last or what caused change. The Women in Trade and Economic Empowerment Index (WITEI) examines agency, access to resources, decision-making, and resilience.

What must change: agree definitions and baselines, collect disaggregated data, measure repeatedly with ethical safeguards, and link findings explicitly to programme and policy decisions.

3. How the CoP will deliver

The CoP should work as an evidence-to-action mechanism. For each priority theme, members follow one cycle.

01 Pick a decision to influence

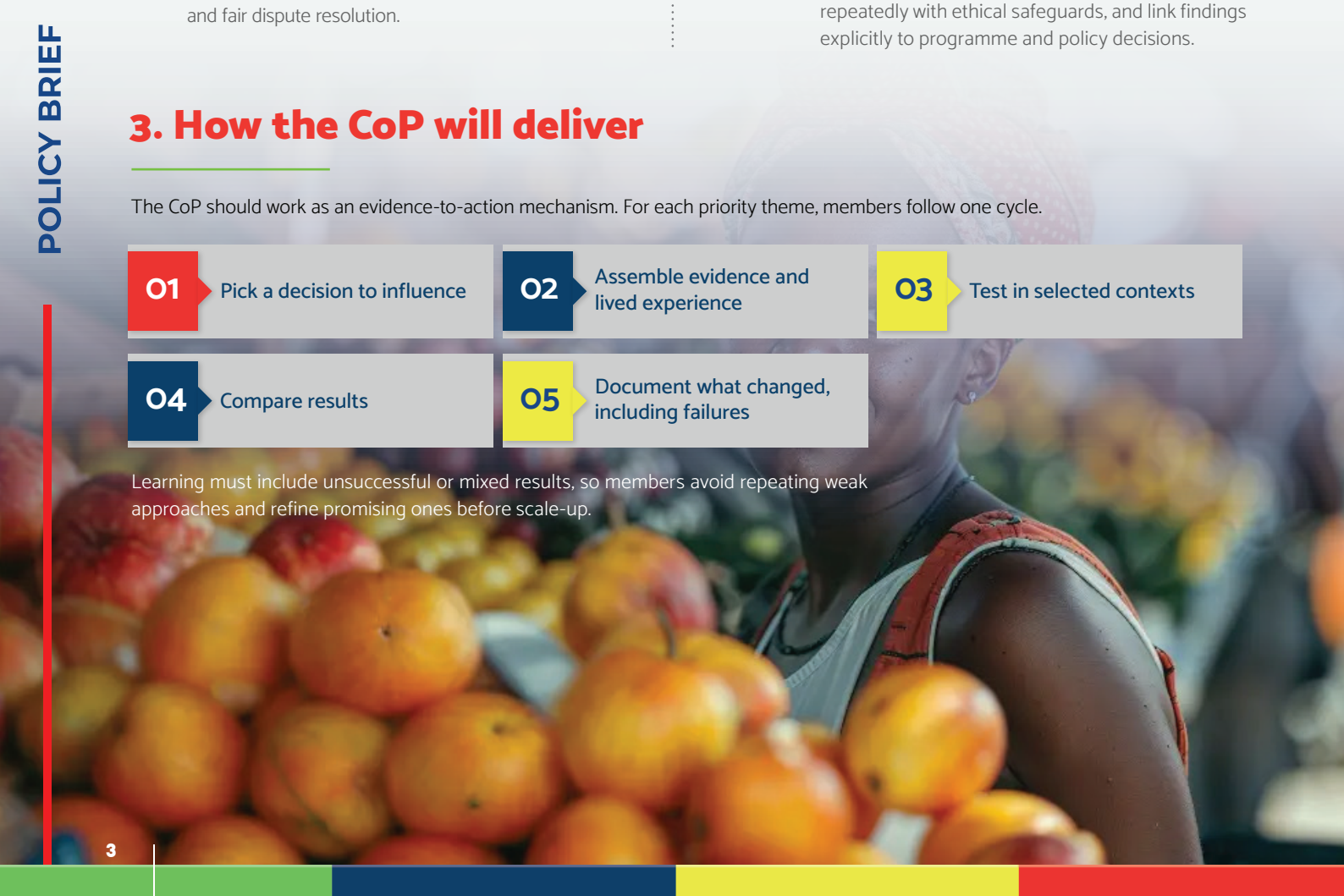
02 Assemble evidence and lived experience

03 Test in selected contexts

04 Compare results

05 Document what changed, including failures

Learning must include unsuccessful or mixed results, so members avoid repeating weak approaches and refine promising ones before scale-up.



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FIVE WAYS OF WORKING

Focused learning groups. Time-bound groups on inclusive border systems, enterprise upgrading, accessible infrastructure, digital trust, trader organisation and empowerment measurement, each mixing policy, practice, research, and user voices.

A shared evidence base. Concise case studies, comparable indicators and common templates capturing problem, intervention, context, cost, results, and constraints, disaggregated by gender, age, disability, location, and enterprise type.

Joint pilots and peer review. Practical tests such as an accessible border audit, a trader-feedback mechanism, a value-chain upgrading package or a digital dispute-resolution protocol, reviewed by peers and affected traders.

Local issues linked to policy. Border and market problems logged with responsible institutions, deadlines, and status, then escalated to national or regional reform where needed.

Tools and investment choices. Design standards, checklists, procurement requirements, measurement guidance, policy notes and investment cases, tracked for their effect on designs, budgets, regulations, and delivery.

GOVERNANCE THAT KEEPS IT ACCOUNTABLE

The secretariat maintains an annual learning agenda, convenes regular sessions, assigns theme leads, and publishes short progress updates. Members agree how evidence is quality-assured, how trader perspectives are represented, how sensitive data is protected and how conflicts of interest are managed. Membership carries an expectation to contribute (sharing evidence, hosting a pilot, reviewing a product, or supporting policy uptake), not attendance alone.

HOW THE COP WILL JUDGE ITS OWN PERFORMANCE

- Joint tests completed, and their quality
- Documented changes to programmes, policies, or budgets
- Trader-identified barriers resolved
- Adoption of inclusive design and measurement standards Evidence of safer participation, stronger agency, higher value capture, and greater resilience

Conclusion

Inclusive trade needs more than wider access. It needs trade systems that respond to the realities of people and enterprises facing structural barriers, pathways to higher-value activity, protection for users and evidence that improves decisions. The CoP's opportunity is to connect the six priorities rather than treat them in isolation. Its credibility will rest not on the number of meetings held, but on whether collaboration produces safer participation, stronger businesses, more responsive institutions, and trade systems that are competitive, resilient, and inclusive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TradeMark Africa gratefully acknowledges all participants, speakers, panellists, and members of the Inclusive Trade Community of Practice whose insights informed the roundtable and this brief. It was developed under the technical leadership of Benson Mutuku, PhD, with strategic guidance, technical review, and contributions from Veyrl Adell, Scholastica Haule, Elijah Munyi, Anataria Uwamariya, Emilly Okello-Juma, Gituma Kanyiri, Benedict Alubisia, George Wamae, Mathews Wanjala, Paveen Mbeda, Trizer Omugar and Allen Sophia Asiimwe. Special thanks to moderator Victor Ong'ele and panellists Hellen Oriaro (Global Affairs Canada), Nadia Hasham (Vanguard Economics), Echessah Protase (AGRA) and Lina Asiimwe (EASSI).