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Introduction

The AfCFTA Business Forum 2023 was a three-day event that took place from April 16th to 18th at the Cape Town International Convention Centre, South Africa. The forum was convened by the AfCFTA Secretariat under the patronage of President Cyril Ramaphosa, under the theme of "Acceleration of Implementation of the AfCFTA". One of the pertinent questions the forum sought to address was: *How do we increase intra – Africa trade to accelerate economic growth through industrialization and job creation?* The forum brought together more than 1,200 participants from across Africa and beyond, including a former head of state, government ministers, commissioners, ambassadors, business executives, entrepreneurs, investors, civil society leaders, academics, media practitioners and youth representatives.

The forum aimed to provide a platform for public-private engagements among businesses and governments to unlock trade and investment opportunities in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which is expected to create a market of 1.3 billion people and a combined GDP of \$3.4 trillion.

1. Pre-AfCFTA Business Forum 2023 Master Class Training on Export Readiness

Before the Forum, and with support from the International Trade Centre, our Country Champions underwent a three-day masterclass training on export readiness under the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA). This was a Pre-AfCFTA Business Forum event organized by the AfCFTA Secretariat, International Trade Centre, and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and Organisation for Women in International Trade (OWIT). It was largely funded by Commercial Law Development Programme (CLDP) under the US Department of Commerce.



Our Country Champions from Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Congo Brazzaville, Morocco, Namibia, Malawi, Cameroon, Burundi, Uganda, Ghana and South Africa, took part of the masterclass training under the theme: Activating Trade & Investments. Topics covered in the Master Class include:

- Getting ready to take advantage of AfCFTA Opportunities.
- Market research & development.
- Attracting investment in the context of intra-African trade &
- Practical solutions: accelerating women and youth-led businesses under the AfCFTA.



The objective was to equip our Champions with practical skills to trade under the AfCFTA regime and make them trainers so that they can train other Champions, making them export ready. They proceeded to take part in the three day AfCFTA Business Forum that started on 16th to 18th April 2023 and were joined by other Country Champions from across the Continent.



2. AfCFTA Business Forum: Noteworthy takeaways from some of the Panel Sessions over the three-day forum

2.1 Boosting Agriculture and Agro-processing value chain under the AfCFTA

The session aimed to gather key stakeholders and provide them with an opportunity to learn and discuss the opportunities for agricultural trade within the context of the AfCFTA. The goal was to find solutions to the barriers that hinder agricultural value chain development for trade and market access.

The panellists unanimously agreed that agriculture and agro-processing form the backbone of the AfCFTA, with at least 60% of Africa's population, mainly women and youth, engaged in the sector. However, the current scenario is worrisome as Africa is on the verge of importing more than what it exports. The panelists shared that the sustainability of many farmers is threatened due to non-tariff barriers that hinder their engagement in cross-border trade; non-tariff barriers such as excessive paperwork and visa requirements prevent farmers from selling their produce to other countries. Additionally, infrastructure poses a major challenge for the growth of small-scale to commercial farmers.

Mr. Rex Marfo, Managing Director, Abaso Cocoa Processing stated that Ghana currently processes only 20% of its cocoa locally, the remaining 80% is exported and returned in the form of chocolates, cocoa butter, and cocoa powder. Despite Ghana's production capacity, policies aimed at promoting local processing have not been fully implemented.

In order to enable Africa to thrive and adequately provide food for its population, member states must establish favorable policies and create a conducive environment, including ensuring availability of energy and water and facilitating smoother border crossings.

2.2 Spotlight on the AfCFTA Hub

The AfCFTA Hub has been created to serve as a reliable and comprehensive directory of services that Small and medium-sized enterprises can use to navigate the AfCFTA. Its ultimate goal is to promote inclusivity and make the AfCFTA the most inclusive Free Trade Area in the world.

During the session, attendees were presented with an overview of the AfCFTA Hub and its role in expediting the implementation of the AfCFTA. Additionally, the session highlighted the current progress of implementing different aspects of the Hub and discussed opportunities for collaboration with government and private sector entities interested in joining and utilizing the benefits of the AfCFTA Hub Network.

The AfCFTA hub relies on trust as it authenticates traders and transactions. The platform ensures that only legitimate and compliant businesses are given access to the AfCFTA marketplace.

2.3 HERAfCFTA: Women Driving Intra-Africa Trade in partnership with the UNDP

This panel served as a means of forging partnerships to drive tangible outcomes. UNDP, Auda Nepad, the AfCFTA Secretariat and key partners pledged to collaborate on projects to ensure women reap the rewards of the AfCFTA. The HERAfCFTA panel marked the beginning of a journey and set the groundwork for future progress where a significant amount of work needs to be done.

This is timely as the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade is forthcoming and is expected to address the specific constraints and barriers women face when trading on the continent. HERAfCFTA aims to enhance export competitiveness for women across Africa.

2.4 Expanding Digital Trade and interoperable payments systems in the AfCFTA

The primary objective of the panel session was to create a forum for African businesses and non-State actors in the digital economy to recognize obstacles to digital trade and explore diverse approaches to boost digital trade in Africa. The Digital Trade Protocol is also forthcoming and is envisaged to unlock value in cross-border trade and investment. Meaningful digital trade under the AfCFTA will depend significantly on inclusive payment systems that cater to all, including small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) traders at land borders.

2.5 Financing AfCFTA Value-Chain Development

The main objective of this panel session was to provide a platform for African commercial banks, financial institutions and private sector stakeholders to identify and highlight specific initiatives that will finance the development of Regional Value Chains (RVCs) under the AfCFTA. Specifically, the panel identified key impediments to integrating into RVCs and encouraged dialogue between the financial institutions and all relevant stakeholders in the public and private sectors.

During the panel, Afreximbank discussed their leading efforts in financing the growth of Regional Value Chains, especially for SMEs. Afreximbank further emphasized the Bank's diverse range of inventive products aimed at encouraging and aiding intra-African Trade.

2.6 Doing Business in Africa: Investment Protection and Facilitation Under the AfCFTA

This session was moderated by Professor E. Kofi Abotsi of UPSA Law School in Ghana; he and the panelists delved into a comprehensive analysis of the challenges affecting investment facilitation and protection in Africa. They engaged in discussions and debates and suggested policy solutions aimed at overcoming these challenges to realize the objectives of the AfCFTA Agreement. The panel gave an opportunity to hear what investors are looking for, their challenges and opportunities. The panel further highlighted the challenge of Investor/State Dispute Settlement and heard concerns regarding the level of certainty and investment protection provided by African governments.

The session also provided a platform for participants to make recommendations aimed at targeted strategic actions to increase the participation of African investors on the continent and increase intra-African as well as quality and sustainable investment in-flows into the continent. Participants also voiced opinions about global foreign investors receiving better reception compared to intra-African investors in many African countries.

2.7 Transports and logistics to unlock the “One African Market”

The main objective of this panel session on transport and logistics was to provide a platform for African businesses in the air and maritime transport industries to showcase developments in their sector and to share their knowledge about their industries with other private and public sector stakeholders. The panel discussion aimed to explore the essential challenges facing the air and maritime transportation industries in Africa, and propose practical solutions from both public and private sectors, with a focus on enhancing intra-African trade.

This insightful conversation facilitated a dialogue among stakeholders in the air and maritime transport sectors. The African Airlines Association (AFRAA) shared that the Single African Air Transport Market (SAATM) is crucial in ensuring that air transport connects and develops intra-African trade. However, while 35 states have pledged to the SAATM, 11 reportedly refuse to grant 5th freedom traffic rights, and in some instances 3rd and 4th freedoms to African airlines. AFRAA says that government commitment is imperative for the successful implementation of this initiative.

The Maritime Organization of West and Central Africa (MOWCA) highlighted that only 1% of the vessels in the sea are African owned called on the AfCFTA to lead a voice on the demand for indigenous vessels ownership. The Secretary General of MOWCA stated that the continent's maritime industry is grossly under-utilized, and for it to achieve the AfCFTA aspirations, governments of member states must create enabling environments for movement of goods and persons through tax rebate incentives and lower interest rates to African Shipowners for acquisition of ships. Afrexim bank, which was moderating the panel, pledged support to MOWCA to fund its growth and reach.

The attendees gained valuable insight from the panel regarding the current status of Africa's air and maritime industries and their interconnectedness with other sectors of the African economy.

2.8 Making Technical Regulations Work for African Businesses

This discussion aimed to facilitate interactions between Quality Infrastructure (QI) and Regulatory Institutions with the private sector, in order to create opportunities. Throughout the event, "Harmonization of standards" emerged as a widely used term. Several panels and keynote speakers highlighted the crucial need to align national laws and regulations across the continent to ensure the same level of protection and quality of goods across all AfCFTA member states.

The panellists in this particular parallel session stressed that many global standards already exist under international bodies which most African countries already are a part of; the creation new standards under AfCFTA would take time and money. Enforcing existing standards that promote intra-African trade and also encourage global trade is crucial.

Ms. Florence Tomazja Cossou, founder and CEO of a Ghanaian SME, was part of the expert-panel discussion; she expressed the frustration that traders experience when confronted with various standards and requirements for each country when attempting to export their goods. She stated that conforming to different product standards for different countries is both burdensome and costly. Adopting and adhering to a single continental standard would significantly alleviate the burden on traders.



The ICOYACA Team led by the Chairperson also had a meeting with the AfCFTA Secretariat top leadership i.e., Mr Silver Ojakol and the Director Finance. We updated them

on the implementation of our AfCFTA Youth Engagement Strategy and also requested for technical and financial assistance so that we can effectively deliver on our mandate. They promised to work closely with us in their projects and support the implementation of our projects. Most importantly, they committed to introducing us to AfCFTA implementing partners who will help us implement our projects, a commitment they delivered during the Forum as highlighted below.



L-R: Emolot Allan David, Mr Prudence Sebahizi, Mr Silver Ojakol & Director Finance

3. Meeting with the AfCFTA Secretariat, UNECA (Dr. Melaku Geboye Desta) & Prof. E. Kofi Abotsi - Dean at UPSA Law School, Ghana.

The AfCFTA Secretariat facilitated a meeting between ICOYACA and Prof Melaku Geboye Desta-African Trade Policy Centre under United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). We are working on a project targeting young international trade lawyers dubbed the *AfCFTA Moot Court Competition*; the aim of the meeting was to ensure we work closely together to make the competitions a success. ICOYACA will be communicating the next steps in the near future.



Relatedly, the Secretariat also facilitated a meeting with Prof. E. Kofi Abotsi who is the Dean at the UPSA Law School in Ghana. The university in partnership with UNECA successfully organised the African regional rounds of the John. H. Jackson – World Trade Organisation (WTO) Moots. Our meeting with him was to seek his collaboration in delivering the inaugural AfCFTA Moot Court Competition. He pledged collaboration and the institution's support.



4. Meeting with AfCFTA Secretariat and the African Union Youth Envoy

The AfCFTA Secretariat also facilitated a meeting between Emolot Allan David Chairperson of ICOYACA and Ms Chido Cleopatra Mpemba, the African Union Youth Envoy. The objective of the meeting was to foster a collaborative effort between the two entities to empower and mobilize African youth in leveraging the economic opportunities brought about by the AfCFTA.



L-R: Emolot Allan David, Anele Simon, Professor Landry Signe

5. Key Outcomes and Recommendations that emerged from the Forum

- 5.1 The need to enhance awareness and education on the AfCFTA among the youth, especially on their rights and obligations as traders, investors, consumers, and workers under the agreement.
- 5.2 The need to facilitate access to finance, markets, information, technology, and infrastructure for young entrepreneurs and innovators who want to tap into the opportunities offered by the AfCFTA.
- 5.3 The need to foster collaboration and partnership among youth organizations, networks, platforms, and movements across Africa to amplify their voice and influence in the AfCFTA process.
- 5.4 The need to mainstream youth issues and concerns in the design and implementation of policies and projects related to the AfCFTA at national, regional, and continental levels.
- 5.5 The need to monitor and evaluate the impact of the AfCFTA on youth development indicators, such as employment, income, education, health, and well-being.

6. Closing Remarks

While addressing the audience during the forum, H.E Wamkele Mene, the Secretary-General of the AfCFTA Secretariat highlighted some of the initiatives that are being undertaken by his office to support women and youth in trade under the AfCFTA. He mentioned that:

The AfCFTA Secretariat is working on the development of a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade, which will provide a legal framework to address the specific challenges and needs of these groups in the context of the AfCFTA. The protocol will also include provisions on gender mainstreaming, affirmative action, capacity building, and data collection and analysis. It is expected to be concluded in May this year.

H.E Wamkele Mene, Secretary General – AfCFTA Secretariat

We applaud the efforts of the AfCFTA Secretariat in advancing the interests of women and youth in trade and we look forward to contributing to the formulation and implementation of the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade.

The Deputy President of the Republic of South Africa, Paul Mashatile expressed his government's honor to host this important and esteemed event. Mr Mashatile highlighted some of the challenges the continent faces including poor road infrastructure which accounts for 80% of goods and 90% of passenger transportation. He also pointed out the need for infrastructure development in the maritime and rail sectors to enhance cross-border trade and regional integration. Mr Mashatile further emphasized that inefficiencies at border posts pose a huge impediment to African trade.

We commend the AfCFTA Secretariat and the Government of South Africa for organizing this AfCFTA Business Forum and for recognizing the importance of engaging with the youth as key stakeholders in the AfCFTA. We also appreciate the support and guidance that we have received from our partners i.e., AfCFTA Secretariat, International Trade Centre (ITC), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), Commercial Law Development Programme (CLDP) and ICOYACA Advisors.

We look forward to continuing our engagement and collaboration with all relevant actors in advancing the vision and objectives of the AfCFTA. We believe that by working together, we can create a prosperous, integrated, and inclusive Africa that benefits all its people, especially its youth.

Finally, we urge all African countries to ratify and implement the AfCFTA agreement without delay and to support the efforts of the AfCFTA Secretariat in ensuring its effective operation. We also call on the international community to respect and support Africa's aspirations for continental integration and economic transformation.

ICOYACA SECRETARIAT

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ANNEX 1: PICTURE MOMENTS



L-R: Ms Aforla Jennifer Eweonam (ICOYACA GHANA), Mr Emolot Allan David (Chairperson ICOYACA), H.E Nardos Bekele-Thomas (Chief Executive Officer of African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)), Ms Regina Hammond (International Trade Centre).



L-R: Mr Emolot Allan David (Chairperson, ICOYACA) and Mr Solomon Quaynor-Vice President, Private Sector, Infrastructure and Industrialization, African Development Bank.





L-R: Mr John Bosco Kaliisa, Executive Director of the East African Business Council (EABC) and Emolot Allan David (Chairperson, ICOYACA).

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