

**ADDRESS BY
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**AT THE YOUTHCONNEKT AFRICA ANNUAL SUMMIT
THEMED: “AFRICA BEYOND AID: POSITIONING THE YOUTH FOR THE POST
COVID ECONOMY AND AfCFTA OPPORTUNITIES”**

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Excellences

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

1. It gives me great pleasure and indeed, quite an honour to have been invited to make some remarks at this YouthConnekt Africa annual Summit. Let me from the onset express appreciation to the Government of the Republic of Ghana, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for hosting this important event, bringing together young entrepreneurs with government and business leaders, influencers, and funders under the theme “Africa beyond Aid: Positioning the Youth for the post Covid Economy and AfCFTA opportunities.”
2. This summit comes against the backdrop of increased attention for the need to provide opportunities for Africa’s youth. One of the critical challenges that we must grapple with and for which our collective synergies is paramount is on enhancing youth employment in Africa.
3. Unemployment among the youth is undesirably high and the current demographic trends on the continent means that many young people are transitioning from school to the labour market with limited employment options.
4. As it is well known, the youth represent the future of a society and its economy. This is, especially so in Africa where almost 60 percent of the population is under age 25 and Africa also has 19 of the world’s 20 youngest countries. The socio-economic integration of the youth in Africa is, therefore, crucial for the future of the continent.

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5. While some progress was achieved in key development outcomes for young people over the 2010 – 2018 period, as indicated by the 2020 Youth

Development Index (YDI), the significant effects and disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic would likely reverse some of the gains made.

6. Of the 181 countries included on the 2020 YDI, 156 or 86 per cent, recorded improvements in the eight-year period, with two African countries, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, among the top five risers.
7. Despite an improvement in youth development of 5%, Sub-Saharan Africa continued to be the lowest-ranking region on the 2020 YDI. The region ranked lowest in five out of the six domains – Education, Health and Wellbeing, Employment and Opportunity, Equality and Inclusion and Peace and Security. It did, however, rank second in Political and Civic Participation.
8. The Covid-19 pandemic has proven difficult, particularly for young people, with government-enforced lockdowns leading to sharp increases in youth unemployment, and increased reports of mental distress among young people, compared with other age groups, even in the most developed countries.
9. As highlighted by the International Labour Organization (ILO), “Covid-19 does not discriminate against its victims but the economic impact of the pandemic does” and young people are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in the economy, during the pandemic as well as through the long-term impact it will have on the economy, health and education systems and opportunities, such as travelling.
10. Africa’s youth, thus, face major challenges that greatly affect their current and future livelihoods. And, we have an opportunity to change the narrative and harness the potential of the youthful population to achieve Africa’s sustainable development. It is time to implement policy and institutional actions that will remove the encumbrances and unlock opportunities for Africa’s youth. It is in this context that the AfCFTA is pertinent.

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11. The AfCFTA will contribute to improving the ease of doing business in the continent, creating an environment conducive to starting a business for young entrepreneurs. Most youth entrepreneurs do not make it beyond registering a small business because the process is cumbersome and costly. As an unintended consequence, most youth startups operate in the informal sector and this hinders their sustainability because without a proper registered

company, it becomes difficult to benefit from policy interventions such as incentives and other support programmes.

12. One of the critical areas for youth entrepreneurship when it comes to the AfCFTA is movement of business persons. Once the borders are open and the tariffs have been lowered or removed, entrepreneurs should be able to move freely to do business on the continent. Equally important is the Trade in Services protocol which includes regulations related to payment gateways for goods and services on the continent. We all know that goods need services to move – goods and services trade are closely intertwined.
13. As I have said on a number of occasions, the AfCFTA Agreement is not one for the youth to explore and find some benefit in. The point is that the youth are the foundation upon which the AfCFTA must find its relevance and success. Therefore, the youth (and women) must claim ownership of the AfCFTA and seek to shape and maximise it for their businesses and careers.
14. And I am happy to note that many young entrepreneurs and SMEs across Africa are already taking steps and positioning themselves to benefit from the free trade area and scale up their businesses, as captured by a recent report commissioned by the UNDP and the AfCFTA Secretariat titled “The Futures Report: Making the AfCFTA Work for Women and Youth”. Some SME owners interviewed indicated that they are increasing their production lines and sourcing for inter-continental partnership ahead of the progressive implementation of the various phases of the trade regime.

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15. We have learnt from other trade agreements in the world. And the lesson to draw is that if a trade agreement neglects the most vulnerable segment of the society; if a trade agreement is perceived to benefit only the multi-national corporations, or only the elite, it shall not succeed and it shall not have legitimacy as far as the citizens are concerned. It is our firm commitment to ensure a youth-sensitive and gender-balanced AfCFTA.
16. Our priority in the implementation of the Agreement is that there should be shared benefits and as such, we are looking at concrete ways in which the benefits can be expanded for young people and for women in trade. We don't have all the answers. We want to hear from young Africans. We know that if you go to Kigali, you will find young African software engineers at the forefront of innovation. These are the people that we want to bring into the fold of the agreement. We can create the appropriate environment for young Africans to benefit. Our role will be to establish the conducive environment for young

Africans to leverage their ideas. This is especially important. We don't have all the answers to innovation, but we can create and establish regulatory frameworks within the context of the AfCFTA.

17. I am also happy to say that, as tasked by the AU Authority of Heads of State and Government, we are developing a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade to place women and youth at the center of the AfCFTA and ensure that women and youth have access and derive the intended benefits from the continental trade arrangements.

18. In this regard, it is important for the youth, and youth associations, such as YouthConnekt, to increase their participation in the national strategies and AfCFTA negotiation processes to promote youth-inclusive measures and effective implementation of the agreement. You will need a united collective voice to ensure strong representation of the interests of the youth during critical discussions on continental trade issues.

19. Africa's large and fast-growing youth population has a central role to play in shaping the development of the continent, however, they face numerous challenges that affect their livelihoods and make it difficult for them to thrive.

20. The AfCFTA has what it takes to tackle these challenges by creating more jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities for young men and women in key sectors, including manufacturing, agriculture and services. The youth can also take advantage of an AfCFTA protocol on e-commerce, which underscores the importance of the digital economy.

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21. As I end my intervention, let me reiterate that the Secretariat has a mission to make sure the benefits of the continental trade hub cascades into all segments of the society across the African Continent, and we will work with all the stakeholders, including youth groups, to successfully implement the agreement.

22. We have an opportunity to change the narrative and to harness the potential of the youthful population to achieve Africa's sustainable development. It is time to make efforts to assist the youth to participate in regional and global value chains and cross-border trade.

23. However, for the youth to exploit the benefits of the AfCFTA, it is important to emphasise that formal education is critical. Education, as you may well know, is one of the most powerful weapons in the fight against extreme poverty, particularly for girls, who are the hardest affected by poverty.

24. On this note, I wish you a successful summit.

25. Thank you