**AfCFTA Conference on Women and Youth in Trade**

12 – 14 September 2022

Dar es Salaam, United Republic of Tanzania

 **Opening Remarks**

**H.E. Wamkele Mene**

 **Secretary-General**

 **AfCFTA Secretariat**

**AfCFTA Secretariat**

**Africa Trade House**

**Ambassadorial Enclave**

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* Your Excellency, Samia Suluhu Hassan, President of the United Republic of Tanzania and Champion of Women and Youth in Trade under the AfCFTA
* Your Excellency, Jessica Rose Epel Alupo, Vice President of the Republic of Uganda
* Your Excellency, Dr. Joyce Hilda Banda, Former President of the Republic of Malawi
* Honourable Amb. Liberata Mulamula, Minister of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation, United Republic of Tanzania
* Honourable Dr. Ashatu K. Kijaji, Minister of Investment, Industry and Trade, United Republic of Tanzania
* Your Excellency, Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC)
* Honourable Ministers
* Excellencies, Heads of African Regional Organisations
* Excellencies, Heads of Regional Economic Communities (RECs)
* Representatives of Women and Youth CSOs
* Representatives of Private Sector Organisations
* Distinguished Delegates
* Ladies and Gentlemen

Greetings.

1. It is my great honour and privilege to extend a warm welcome to you allto the AfCFTA Conference on Women and Youth in Trade convened by the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania and the Secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area.
2. I take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to H.E. Samia Suluhu Hassan, President of the United Republic of Tanzania for hosting the AfCFTA Conference on Women and Youth in Trade and for accepting the important role of Champion of Women in Trade under the AfCFTA. Your role as Champion, Mama Samia, is not only critical to achieving the objectives of the AfCFTA but also in achieving the broader agenda of ensuring the prosperity of Africa’s people.
3. Your Excellency, thank you again for your commitment to empowering women leaders in Tanzania as well as your efforts in support of human rights. Indeed, you are an excellent example of how strong a country grows when women are empowered and placed in positions of influence and decision making.
4. Your Excellencies, current and past Heads of State and Government, your presence and contributions to Africa’s efforts to advance peace, democracy, governance, and gender equality is well appreciated.
5. I am also aware of your efforts in embracing the young leaders and women in your countries through various initiatives –- through, for example, the improvement of girls’ education, and supporting their access to finance.  Your tireless efforts continue to inspire millions across the continent, and I thank you.
6. Permit me to thank all the eminent speakers, panelists, and participants for accepting our invitation, and we look forward to your contributions during the sessions.
7. I also pay special tribute to our colleagues from the African Union Commission, Afreximbank, AfDB, and UNECA, whose presence here is a testimony to the strong partnership between our regional organisations in the pursuit of accelerated development of our continent, leaving no African behind.
8. We are equally indebted to our external partner organisations, namely the UNDP, and UN Women, for their support and participation in this Conference.
9. To all the stakeholders here present, including the private sector, and CSO’s, we acknowledge and salute your contributions to our ongoing drive to urgently and extensively unlock the full potential of Africa’s women and youth in trade for the transformation of the continent.

Excellencies*,* Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

1. As you may recall, the AU Assembly of Heads of State and at its 35th Ordinary Session held in February 2022 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, adopted the decision to include a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade in the scope of the AfCFTA Agreement.
2. The Protocol seeks to provide a legal framework that guides AfCFTA State Parties to effectively address the constraints women and youth in trade face and create an environment that allows women and young Africans to utilise the agreement by accessing wider markets, improving their competitiveness and participating in regional value chains.
3. Consequently, to ensure inclusiveness, the Secretariat, in collaboration with UNDP and UN Women conducted national consultations of women in trade and online surveys to capture the voices of as many women as possible regarding the challenges they face when trading across borders and solicit their expectations regarding the AfCFTA.
4. The consultations and surveys gave a comprehensive insight into the structural, economic, social, procedural, and financial difficulties women and youth involved in cross border trade face and will, therefore, serve as a guide for the negotiations of the AfCFTA Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade.
5. The consultations provided interesting insights into the challenges women and youth face. These included, albeit not limited to, access to finance and trade-related information, compliance with standards and procedures at borders, discrimination and sexual harassment and social norms.
6. It was also revealed that women and youth are not a homogeneous group and that the development of coherent and inclusiveness-oriented policies should differentiate interventions and be accompanied by a sound and robust implementation plan building on existing policies, initiatives, and programmes in national and regional economic communities to ensure that the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade truly delivers for women and youth in trade.
7. The purpose of this Conference is, therefore, to provide a platform to interrogate how the findings of the consultations and surveys can be transformed into a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade that facilitates the engagement and participation of Africa’s women and youth in trade.
8. The discussions should therefore not dwell on challenges but should be solution oriented. This entails assessing existing policies and programmes to benchmark best practices; identify gaps and design appropriate policies, and initiatives for an action-oriented implementation plan.
9. Your valuable insights would assist in the preparation and adoption of the Conference communique on Continental Declaration and Call to Action to stakeholders and policy makers highlighting key areas identified for intervention within the AfCFTA around the theme: “***Women and Youth: The engine of AfCFTA Trade in Africa****"*.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

1. Women and youth are truly the engine of trade in Africa. They are essential to the impactful implementation of the AfCFTA. The ultimate measure of success of the AfCFTA therefore does not reside solely on the volume of intra-African trade but also on the utilization of opportunities offered by the AfCFTA in a way that improves access to factors of production, improves efficiency and scales up businesses, generates actual revenues which in turn improves the standards of life and lifts African people out of poverty.
2. The AfCFTA embodies the hopes and aspirations of the founding fathers of the African Union, aspirations to build a prosperous Africa for the African people by African people. The AfCFTA must succeed, we cannot afford to fail. The success of the AfCFTA depends on the concerted and coherent efforts of every single actor - women and youth entrepreneurs, women and youth associations and networks, policy makers, regulators, financial institutions, development partners and any other relevant actor.
3. It is important to reiterate that our continent needs a human-centered development, a development that is not only assessed based on the gross domestic product of a country but that is anchored on the improvement of the standard and quality of life of Africa’s people.
4. Inclusive growth and development are therefore critical. Inclusiveness is one of the cornerstones of Agenda 2063 of the African Union and is at the heart of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a flagship project of Agenda 2063.
5. Inclusiveness, in the context of the AfCFTA, means that benefits from opportunities offered by the AfCFTA are widely shared across all segments of the population including women and youth, thus achieving less inequality, equal opportunities and equitable distribution of Africa’s wealth across classes, cultures, communities and genders in AfCFTA State Parties.
6. In this regard, the Agreement establishing the AfCFTA recognizes the importance of gender equality for the development of international trade and economic cooperation and underscores the need to promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development and the structural transformation of AfCFTA State Parties.
7. The AfCFTA Secretariat remains committed to work with all stakeholders to fulfil its mandate of ensuring that the AfCFTA delivers its promise of sustainable and inclusive development.
8. I thank you for your kind attention.