

DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

Press Release

**In Wake of COVID-19, African Union to Keep AfCFTA on Track with Digital Technology**

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020:** Since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the AU Commission, like most intergovernmental organisations around the world, has shifted most of its activities online.

In this context, the Commission believes that for the current AfCFTA operationalisation timeline of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021 to be met, and the decision of African Leaders on the fast-tracking of processes leading to the commencement of trading to be implemented, outstanding AfCFTA negotiations must move online too. AU member states have outlined a number of concerns regarding the use of virtual systems, especially regarding infrastructure reliability, security and confidentiality.

In this regards, the African Union Commission has received with open hands many offers of support to help address these concerns that have come from the continental private sector, notably the African Virtual Trade-Diplomacy Platform (AVDP), itself a part of the broader AVRIVA (African Virtual Resilient-Integration for a Vibrant Africa) framework being developed as a public-private initiative between the African Union Commission and the over two dozen major multinational African corporations and pan-African institutions operating under the umbrella of the AfroChampions Initiative.

The AVDP and the AVRIVA concept aim to rally support towards a campaign to keep the AfCFTA on track using technology by enabling Member States to participate effectively and securely in the outstanding negotiations of the AfCFTA. This will help to ensure that African countries are able to meet the new date for the start of trading under the AfCFTA of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021 as set by African Heads of State and Government, who are strongly committed to getting the AfCFTA agenda back on track after the postponement of the start of trading initially set for 1 July 2020. This is also bearing in mind that all analyses and studies confirm that the AfCFTA represents Africa's best insurance policy and strategy to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

To ensure that Member States' outstanding concerns about the security and reliability of the pro-integration digital platforms are addressed through the AVDP initiative, the Commission constituted a high-level committee of experts, including representatives from Member States, relevant Departments and Directorates of the AU Commission

and security and Information technology specialists from the African private sector, to examine all aspects of the matter and present comprehensive guidance and advice to the Senior Trade Officials of Member States tasked with the AfCFTA program.

The concerns about the timely commencement of AfCFTA trading come at a time when countries all over Africa are getting ready to reopen their borders and economies, and a coordinated and harmonised effort is therefore urgently required to prevent confusion in the integration agenda. Here too, the Commission is hopeful that digital technologies can play a very powerful role in driving positive cooperation among Member States for a safe, smart and harmonised reopening process. In this regard, the mandate of the High-level Expert Committee is being broadened to include a review of the various options available to Member States, including digital solutions, which could be used to roll out trade under the AfCFTA on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021.

Critical amongst these emerging digital solutions are:

- The establishment of a Pan-African technology platform to enable citizens of African countries to travel across borders (based on technical input from Koldchain BioCordon, the draft DABBIT protocol, and the latter's reference archetype, PanaBIOS), as well as digitisation of the biosurveillance and bioscreening protocols of the Africa Centres for Disease Control & Prevention (Africa CDC), which are being developed as part of the AU Open Corridor Initiative;
- The design and deployment of a technology framework for aligning e-commerce and e-trading platforms, such as African Medical Supplies Platform (AMSP) developed by the Africa CDC, the "AfCFTA number" concept based on the draft TribelD protocol, and the African e-commerce platform Sokokuu promoted by AeTrade Group, with the needs of AfCFTA; and
- A broad initiative to enhance cybersecurity in multilateral affairs on the continent.

The recommendations of the High-level Expert Committee, which is being expanded to include other key stakeholders with in-depth expertise in digital solutions and wide knowledge of the African technology terrain will be submitted to Senior Trade Officials for consideration when they meet on 15 September 2020 ahead of full endorsement by the AU Member States during the upcoming meeting of African Ministers of Trade on 30 September 2020 to sustain the political commitment to the use of these solutions trans-continently.

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