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**First (1<sup>st</sup>) African Union Youth Town Hall Meeting on the  
Margins of the 36<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the Assembly of  
Heads of State and Government of the African Union**

16 February 2023

African Union Headquarters, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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**Opening Remarks**

**H.E. Wamkele Mene**

**Secretary-General**

**AfCFTA Secretariat**

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**H.E. Evariste Ndayishimiye, President of the Republic of Burundi,**

**H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission**

**H.E. Ambassador Fathallah Sijilmassi, Director General of the African Union Commission,**

**Ms. Prudence Ngwenya, Director of Women, Gender, and Youth Directorate**

**Ms. Chido Pemba, AUC Chairperson's Youth Envoy,**

**Young People of the Continent,**

**Distinguished Guests,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Greetings,

***Your Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

It is an honour to participate in this very important event that seeks to explore ways in which African countries can harness the potential of youth for the realization of Agenda 2063.

African youth is one of the biggest resources of the continent and are the pillar of Africa's development. Indeed, Africa has the youngest population in the world with 22.7 per cent of the world's total youth population of which 454.5 million are between 15 and 34 years (ILO,2020). In 2020, young people aged 15 to 24 years comprised 34.2 per cent of Africa's working age population. The youth labour force is projected to grow by over 25 per cent (i.e. by nearly 30 million).

There is a firm conviction that the development of the continent can only be truly achieved by transforming the comparative advantage that is the youth bulge into a demographic dividend. This requires harnessing the potential of Africa's young

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people for their benefit, that of their families, their countries and ultimately of the entire continent. It further requires their active contribution and participation in the design and implementation of policies, programmes, and initiatives. In other words, it is an imperative to empower young people in all spheres of life as leaving young people unequipped and with no opportunity will jeopardize the inclusive and sustainable development of the continent.

***Your Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

Inclusiveness is one of the cornerstones of Agenda 2063 and of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), a flagship project of Agenda 2063. Under Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063, African Union (AU) Member States seek to build an Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth. One of the key objectives of the AfCFTA is to promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality and the structural transformation of AfCFTA State Parties. The Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union (AU Assembly), committed to broaden inclusiveness in the operation of the AfCFTA through interventions that support young Africans, women and small and medium size enterprises and subsequently included the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade within the scope of the AfCFTA Agreement.

The Protocol is a one-of-a kind legal instrument that seeks to address challenges that young people as entrepreneurs and traders face through legally binding commitments. The Secretariat has undertaken for the past two years and will continue to undertake extensive consultations of women and youth on the challenges

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they face when trading across the continent and on the key elements that need to be included in the Protocol and its implementation once negotiations are concluded.

It is important to keep in mind that the conversation around harnessing the potential of Africa's young people is not new. You will recall that the AU theme of the year of 2017 centred around '*harnessing the Demographic Dividend through investment in youth*'. A specific legal instrument, the Africa Youth Charter, also aims to ensure that the conditions of young people are improved by addressing the social, cultural, economic, and political challenges they face and availing opportunities to meaningfully contribute to the development of AU Member States in all aspects. There further exist strategies and action plans focused on youth within the African Union designed to guide AU Member States, African Union organs and specialized agencies, development partners and any other actor when implementing initiatives and programmes to empower young people.

***Your Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

As we are discussing ways to harness the potential of young people in accelerating the implementation of the AfCFTA in line with the theme of the year and ultimately in achieving the aspirations and goals of Agenda 2063, it is important to take stock and draw lessons from achievements made and challenges encountered in the implementation of the African Youth Charter and related strategies and action plans, to identify best practices to empower young people that can be replicated at all levels i.e. at the national, regional and continental level. This presents a precious opportunity for AU Member States and all stakeholders to be solution and result oriented. It is therefore critical to promote concrete and tangible results that can be built upon. Success stories should not be confined to a handful but to all young

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people. Thus, as the theme of the year is being implemented AU Member States, AU organs and specialised agencies, development partners and other stakeholders must empower youth by revisiting the engagement and involvement of young people for maximal results. It is further important to reflect on ways in which young people can be weaved in the implementation process of the AfCFTA and of any other flagship projects and initiatives under Agenda 2063.

***Your excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

Empowering youth, in the context of the AfCFTA, means providing an ecosystem in which young people can meaningfully trade and benefit from such trade. Recent studies show that women and young people make major contributions to trade in most African countries and are active in handicrafts, garments, and food, in the services sector, mostly as informal and casual workers, as managers and owners of firms involved in trade. They are involved in the production of tradable goods, as cross-border traders, small-scale producers, or home-based entrepreneurs. Moreover, small, and medium size enterprises (SMEs), which are the backbone of the African economy, represent more than 90 per cent of businesses and employ about 60 per cent of workers, many of whom are owned by women and youth. The African youth further demonstrated entrepreneurial capabilities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, through innovative entrepreneurial solutions to cope with the social and economic shocks arising from the implementation of COVID-19 measures.

This demonstrates that we are not starting from scratch. For the AfCFTA to deliver its promise from young people, it is therefore critical to equip young people with the right skillsets and expertise to be competitive in the job market and to create a vibrant

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entrepreneurship ecosystem, especially with the rise of the fourth industrial revolution and the reliance on digital tools and solutions. Young people should further be provided with the means to improve their capacity to produce and export products and services and to be integrated into regional and continental value chains. It is further important to address systemic, structural, and financial challenges that hinder young people from realizing their potential and utilising opportunities presented by the AfCFTA to achieve the aspirations and goals of Agenda 2063 That said, these interventions should be contextualised as young people are not a homogenous group. In other words, the needs, and challenges of a young person in the rural area will not be similar to those of a young person in urban areas. This applies when it comes to the level of education, amongst other factors.

***Your Excellences, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,***

The Youth Town Hall provides a unique opportunity to listen to what has already been done to empower Africa's young people, to provide information on the AfCFTA and more importantly to discuss the important role that young people in the implementation and in the acceleration of not only the Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade but of the AfCFTA Agreement and all its protocols.

The AfCFTA Secretariat remains committed to working with young people, with AU Member States, AU organs and specialised agencies to empowering young people and to promote the active and meaningful participation and contribution of young people in the implementation and acceleration of the AfCFTA.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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