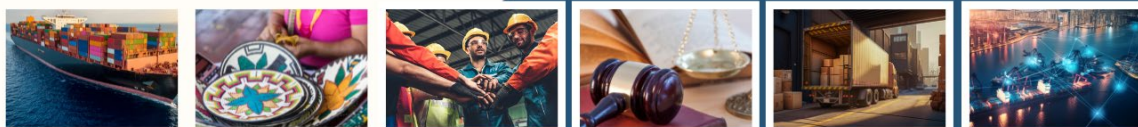


tralac Annual Conference

18 & 19 May 2023

Kigali, Rwanda



Opening Speech by the Chairperson of the tralac Board, Dr George Lipimile

Honourable Minister of Trade and Industry of Rwanda, Dr Jean Chrysostome NGABITSINZE, Secretary General of the African Continental Free Trade Area, H.E Wamkele Mene, Honourable Judges of Regional Courts, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is my great pleasure as Chair of the tralac Board to welcome you all at the 2023 tralac Annual Conference here in Kigali. It is not the first time that we are hosting this annual event here. In 2018 we also had our Annual Conference in Kigali, and in the very same hotel. We planned that conference date to coincide with the adoption and signing of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement at an Extraordinary Summit of the African Union Assembly.

It is important to recall that date, the significance of that occasion, and the challenges identified at the time. When I prepared my opening remarks, I went back and consulted the original press reports. I quote from the official African Union Press Release:

On 21 March 2018, close to 50 African Union Member States have signed the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement, the Kigali Declaration and the Free Movement Protocol ... during the 10th Extraordinary Summit of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government held on 21 March 2018, in Kigali, Republic of Rwanda.

The Summit dedicated to the AfCFTA, was described by the African Union leaders as a historic moment in the life of the continent. The signing ceremony of the legal documents was a solemn event that marked a millstone in the realisation of the “Africa We Want” ...

The Chairperson of the African Union (AU), H.E Paul Kagame, was quoted as saying: “I wish to acknowledge all the leaders, past and present, involved in bringing us to this point. We are reaping the rewards, of their foresight”.

H.E Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC) said: “We have come here driven by the conviction that integration is not an option, but an imperative. The world is changing and changing at a great speed. International competition is fierce. It leaves no room for the weak...These last few months have, indeed, demonstrated the urgency of hastening the pace.... For Africa, after decades of independence, marked by persistent underdevelopment and a marginal place in the international system, the terms of the debate are laid

down in almost Manichean¹ terms: Unite or Perish, as Kwame Nkrumah said at the Addis Ababa founding Summit”. He added that “Economic integration thus responds not only to aspirations born out of Pan-Africanism, but also to a practical imperative linked to the economic viability of the continent” We need to summon the required political will for the African Continental Free Trade Area to finally become a reality”.

The agenda of this year’s Annual Conference echoes the same sentiment. This year the theme of our conference is “A Practical and Realistic Agenda for the AfCFTA”. We aim to centre our conversation on framing the AfCFTA as a practical continent-wide preferential trade arrangement, investigating a realistic agenda to make the AfCFTA work for Africa’s development. We have also noted the adoption by the African Union of the theme of the Year 2023 as the “Year of the AfCFTA: Acceleration of the African Continental Free Trade Area Implementation”.

We look forward to discussions today and tomorrow about exactly what the implementation of the AfCFTA, as a member-driven arrangement, actually means, which areas need to be prioritised, and how the technical capacity trade governance needs in the State Parties and existing regional trade arrangements will be addressed. The AfCFTA Agreement contains several provisions where the Secretariat is tasked with the responsibility to attend to technical capacity needs. We are aware of the fact that it has launched several initiatives of this kind, and that the African Export-Import Bank and several donors are supporting these efforts and the initiatives to implement the AfCFTA. This constitutes evidence of the dedication by which the task ahead of us is tackled on different fronts. They should be supported by additional effort, more resources, and a resolute political agenda.

The AfCFTA compact of legal instruments is not a self-executing; it needs to be implemented through domestic measures, institutions, and laws and through REC FTA initiatives. These endeavours must of course be coordinated in order to prevent fragmentation. This is of particular importance in respect of Trade in Services, where domestic Regulators will oversee implementation and coordination with national economic development policies.

The agenda for this Conference also recognise the fact that global trade is vital for African nations, and that the rules-based multilateral system which came about in 1995 when the World Trade Organisation was established, now faces very serious challenges. The global order is fractured, and trade is being weaponised. International peace has been shattered. African nations are confronted by rising debt levels and higher costs for imported food and fertiliser.

The tralac annual conference of last year was an occasion where we celebrated 20 years of tralac activities and recognised the support of our donors. Without their support the three pillars of tralac’s work and output, to inform, to capacitate and to empower our stakeholders cannot be achieved. This continues to be the case. The 2023 Conference has its own and focused theme. I look forward to the discussions in which I hope we all will participate.

¹ Manichean means relating to or following the philosophy of Manichaeism, an old religion that originated in Persia in the third century A.D. and taught a dualism of good and evil, light and dark, spirit and matter. Manichean can also mean seeing things in black and white or having a simplistic view of morality.