

Director General's Speech to the African Union's First SME Annual Forum

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Your Excellency, Ambassador Albert Muchanga, Commissioner for Trade and Industry of the African Union,

Your Excellency, Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa, Deputy Chairperson of the Africa Union Commission,

My fellow distinguished speakers,

Excellences, Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Happy World MSME Day.

It is a great pleasure and honor to participate in the African Union's first SME Annual Forum.

At the outset, I would like to congratulate the AU not just on this important initiative, but also for being a strong and consistent champion of SME development in Africa.

From the steps you have taken to implement the AU SME Strategy, to the development of exciting new programs such as WYFEI 2030 and the Enterprise Africa Network, you are helping to drive business growth and nurture a more inclusive SME sector.

Dear Colleagues,

I would like to focus my remarks on two points:

First, the connection between SME growth and Africa's future growth.

And, second, how intellectual property can support more African SMEs to scale up and prosper.

Despite the current global economic headwinds, the future opportunities for Africa are vast.

Africa is the world's youngest continent, with a median age of just 19, compared to over 40 in Europe.

Africa is home to world's largest free trade area – a 1.2bn strong market that is projected to grow by another 500m by the end of the decade.

And African countries are rapidly maturing as investment hubs. Last year, venture capital funding grew by 250 percent to over 5bn USD. That's more than the previous 7 years combined.

These and other trends are giving rise to a more confident Africa. An Africa that is playing a bigger role in the global economy, in geopolitical affairs, and, also, in the popular consciousness – as African culture from Nollywood to Afrobeats grows in influence around the world.

SME development has a critical role to play in sustaining this positive momentum and delivering on the ambitions of Agenda 2063.

Why?

Because SMEs are key drivers of regional development.

6 in 10 Africans work for an SME, with the sector responsible for 8 in 10 new jobs.

SMEs are engines of opportunity.

A growing and connected small business can help deliver financial inclusion for an entire community. When an SME grows, everyone connected to it grows as well.

And SMEs can increase intra-regional trade.

The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area is a huge opportunity to boost pan-African trade, as well as strengthen regional value chains.

For example, in Egypt – where you are meeting this week – SMEs employ more than 75 percent of the workforce, but contribute less than 20 percent of exports.

SME development can help to narrow this gap, as well as support a growing middle-class, which in turn fuels greater demand for goods and services.

Connecting more SMEs and entrepreneurs to the IP ecosystem is a key priority for the new administration at WIPO.

We believe in a new vision of IP – where IP is not only a legal right but a powerful catalyst for job creation, investments, business growth and, ultimately, economic and social development in all regions across the globe.

Where IP is not just for the advanced industrialized countries, but for the Global South.

Where IP is not just of concern for IP specialists and experts, but for those who have been underserved, such as women, youth and SMEs.

And we want to do this in concrete ways that create impact, and not just as a strategy promulgated in distant Geneva.

That's why we are taking forward a range of practical measures to support SMEs to harness their IP rights more effectively.

In November, we launched a new IP Diagnostics tool that allows small business owners to understand IP in a way that is simple, down to earth and that speaks the language of business.

In its first six months, the tool has reached over 3,000 users around the world, generating over 800 personalized reports.

At the same time, the WIPO Academy remains the world's largest provider of IP education – training over a quarter of a million people last year with an emphasis not just on technical IP knowledge, but on imparting practical IP skills through courses on “IP for exporters”, “IP for start-ups” and “IP4Youth&Teachers”.

However, of the more than 250,000 WIPO Academy participants in 2021, only 16,000 were from Africa. We stand ready to work with partners to grow this number and encourage greater participation from African nations in the Academy's work.

We are also pursuing new initiatives to connect more African SMEs, youth and female entrepreneurs to IP.

We are developing a regional youth entrepreneurship forum which, through mentorship and IP skills development programs, aims to support young African entrepreneurs to use the IP system to boost their businesses.

Our project on women entrepreneurs and IP in developing and the least developed countries has supported six groups of female entrepreneurs in Uganda take their ideas to market, with more countries, including Sudan, in the pipeline.

And we are moving forward the global conversation around intangible asset financing, in partnership with Development Banks and other relevant institutions, so that SMEs can use the strength of their ideas and intangible assets to unlock the funds they need to grow.

Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by thanking everyone who has played their part in establishing this important and timely Forum.

SME development offers a pathway to Africa's future prosperity.

WIPO stands ready to work with the African Union and our partners across the continent to allow SMEs to use IP as a powerful tool to bring their ideas to the market – and to use IP to support innovators, creators and entrepreneurs in Africa and beyond to climb together, scale together and win together!

Thank you very much and warm wishes for a successful week ahead.