CONCLUSIONS OF THE FIRST MEETING, 18.12.2018

The EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) was launched on 18th December during the EU-Africa High Level Forum "Taking cooperation to the digital age".

The Task Force, composed of 20 African and EU decision makers, private sector international financial sector and Civil Society representatives, is presided by EU Vice President Andrus ANSIP, EU Commissioner Mariya GABRIEL, EU Commissioner Neven MIMICA and AU Commissioner Amani Abou-Zeid.

Over the next 6 months, the work will be coordinated by two co-chairs Ms Ursula OWUSU-EKUFUL, Minister of Communications, Ghana and Mr Pierre GUISLAIN, Vice-President of the African Development Bank.

An EU-Africa Partnership of Digital Economy

The digital economy has become one of the pillars of the global economy.

The last decade has witnessed a digital revolution in Africa. Pushed by the youngest population on the planet, Africa has more than 82% mobile penetration and has become a global leader in mobile payments. Mobile in Africa represents more than 9% of GDP.

In the EU, the Digital Single Market is creating a space of competitiveness and innovation and a common market for more than 500 million people. It is based on a comprehensive set of regulations and policies to remove national barriers, promote connectivity, digital skills, research, innovation and entrepreneurship. It includes measures to support digital trade and e-Commerce and the interoperability of e-Government Services. At the same time, the protection of citizen's rights, including privacy, was on the top of the agenda.

The EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force (DETF) will examine how Europe and Africa can build a partnership to draw mutual benefits from the digital transformation of economy and society. The objective is to identify concrete projects under the Africa-Europe Investment and Jobs Alliance in the area of digital economy.

The task force will provide recommendations based on four areas ("pillars") identified at the sixth EU-Africa Business Forum in Abidjan in November 2017, namely

  i.   Access to affordable broadband connectivity and digital infrastructure
  ii.   Digital skills
  iii. Digital entrepreneurship and
  iv.   e-Services (e-Government, Smart Cities, e-Commerce and eHealth).

Particular attention will be paid to actions that benefit women and young people as well as to populations from rural and remote areas.

The recommendations will also provide support in better directing the implementation of the proposed "Jobs & Growth Compacts" between the EU & various individual African countries.

Working plan

The Task Force will provide a report by June 2019, with an interim report by April. The adoption of the report should take place during the EU Digital Assembly to be organised in June in Bucharest during the Romanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

During the first meeting, the DETF agreed on the proposed work programme and began detailed discussions about the first area on Digital Connectivity.

They agreed that all recommendations should be clear, brief and build on the work done in other fora*, such as the D4D Coalition Workshops.* They agreed to focus on a limited number of specific concrete projects within each of the four pillars, but all noted the need to look at issues that are relevant to all, including the work needed to take down barriers and address fragmentation between the numerous national digital markets in Africa. The experience of the EU's Digital Single Market could be useful here, particularly in articulating a journey towards a single African digital market, but also in specific areas such as development of common standards and data protection, where the General Data Protection Regulation is becoming a global standard.

It was agreed that the task force would focus on areas of particular relevance to the Europe-Africa partnership, with a view to contribute to the establishment of priorities for deepening this partnership in the digital area.

For efficiency purpose, the DETF will explore the feasibility of establishing sub-working groups.

The EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force agrees to develop a set of values-based principles for supporting the digital transformation, including issues such as inclusiveness, (taking into account physical access, affordability and digital literacy), market integration, fair market competition, involvement of all relevant stakeholders and the empowerment of women & girls, as well as digital security.

Access to affordable broadband connectivity and digital infrastructure

The task force discussed the first of the four pillars, namely connectivity.

Rapid development of the ICT sector in Africa offers great opportunities. To exploit its full potential, widespread challenges have to be tackled. 700 million people in Africa have limited or no access to broadband internet as well as no access to reliable and affordable electricity – more than half of the African population. 470 million people lack reliable mobile broadband access (3G+), and nearly 300 million live more than 50 km from a fibre or cable broadband connection – the further away the connection, the lower the quality of the broadband connection. This lack of access widens the digital gap and inequality. At the same time, low or unreliable internet connectivity, prohibitively high costs and lack of basic digital skills lead to only low quality internet access for another 230 million Africans. They live within reach of a broadband network, but do not use the internet, despite increasing coverage and faster technologies.

There is a need for continuous investment to improve end-to-end connectivity infrastructure for citizens as well as businesses, to realize the potential of digital development and to keep up with global digital transformation. Connectivity to facilitate access to digital solutions is essential for the transformation of sectors like industry, health, education, finance and agriculture – vital to any economy. It strengthens relations between rural and urban areas and national and international communities, including the African diaspora. If no action is taken, Africans risk being left behind as an era of connected devices and artificial intelligence begins to define the modern economy.

Accelerating the digitalisation of African economies will also be critical to successful implementation of the continent's regional integration agenda by bringing all the economies closer and accelerating the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement.

In the area of connectivity, the EU-AU Digital Economy Task Force agrees on:

1. the importance of setting clear and measurable targets for interventions in the digital economy. This could include measurable targets for broadband connectivity in remote and rural areas;
2. the need for a supportive, stable and coherent regulatory and policy environment that encourages innovation and private investment through reform in areas such as spectrum licensing, end-user equipment, protecting local African intellectual property rights (IPR), taxation infrastructure sharing, and so on, also in support of small innovative business models;
3. the need for a comprehensive approach for more efficient broadband coverage: developing lighter technological solutions, more affordable access in line with demand; new business models with increasing use of a mix of technologies (like MNOs, Wi-Fi, Satellites, fibre optic, alternative networks, etc.); and ensuring coverage for all through a combination of strong public engagement and innovative and tailored funding mechanisms (universal access funds, PPP, credit/risk guarantees, etc.);
4. the importance of creation of local content and eServices by local MSMEs / by local stakeholders and the increase of e-literacy and digital skills initiatives, especially for women and girls, which will in turn increase demand for Internet connectivity.