



United Nations  
Economic Commission for Africa



**SOUTHERN AFRICA  
YOUTH FORUM  
(SAYoF)**

**Unlocking Regional Value Chains:  
Empowering Youth-Led Enterprises in Africa  
to thrive Under AfCFTA**

Organized by the ECA Sub Regional office for Southern Africa (SRO-SA)

In collaboration with the Southern Africa Youth Forum

Virtual Pre-ADIF Forum Webinar

Tuesday April 14, 2025

Time: 14:00-15:30 Southern African Time (GMT+2),

15:00-16:30 Addis Time

**Statement by Ms Eunice G. Kamwendo**

**Setting the Stage**

*An Africa Development Impact Forum (ADIF) Action-Oriented Engagement  
Series*

## Salutations

**Mr. Khulekhani Mathe**, Chairperson, SADC Business Council

**Mr. Mischek Gondo**, Regional Coordinator, Southern Africa Youth Forum

**Distinguished panelists** (Namibia Investment Promotion & Development Board; Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies (TIPS), and distinguished young entrepreneurs

My esteemed colleague, **Ms. Karima Bounemra Ben Soltane**

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good afternoon from Lusaka, Zambia.

It is a pleasure to join you this afternoon—and I must say, my hopes are high, which is always a good place to begin.

### **Let me start with a simple but powerful proposition:**

Africa will not transform itself without its youth.

And Africa's youth will not transform this continent without opportunity.

### **What we want to do today is to close the gap between Opportunity and transformation.**

We gather here as part of a journey toward ECA's flagship solutions platform - the **African Development Impact Forum (ADIF)** which is scheduled to take place in Addis Ababa in June, 2026.

Not just to talk, but to co-create solutions to one of the most urgent challenges of our time - creating meaningful jobs for Africa's youth.

I am glad to note that Today's discussion builds on an important conversation we have been advancing at ECA — on how to **innovatively create decent jobs for Africa's youth**, drawing on what works and scaling impact.

I am encouraged that this momentum is growing.

As we had a similar discussion at the recent United Nations World Summit for Social Development (Nov, 2025) where my office—together with the Southern African Youth Forum—convened a session on **leveraging inclusive industrialization, value addition, and trade to address youth unemployment in Southern Africa.**

Let me take this opportunity to thank **Mr. Misheck Gondo** for this continued partnership. It is through collaborations like these that we move from dialogue to **real impact**.

But today, we take this conversation a step further by focusing our attention on how to **Unlock real opportunities for youth-led enterprises to participate in regional value chains under the AfCFTA?**

How do we move from job seekers - to job creators? | From fragmented markets - to integrated national or regional value chains? | From potential to actual solutions?

Today therefore is about preparing the ground.

### **Our Demographics is Truly a Defining Moment for Africa. Here is Why -**

Africa is the youngest continent in the world. (Nearly 70% of Sub-Saharan Africa's population is under the age of 30) (UN DESA, 2022).

By 2050, **one in four** people globally will be African (UNFPA projections).

This is an **economic force** in waiting.

Handled well, it will drive - growth, innovation, and global competitiveness.

Handled poorly, it will deepen - unemployment, inequalities, and instability.

But the **urgency** is real when you look at the numbers.

In Southern Africa, youth unemployment remains among the highest in the world. In countries like South Africa, youth unemployment exceeds 60% (Statistics South Africa, 2024) and above 35% to 40% in Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho Eswatini etc.

Across the region, many young people are either unemployed or trapped in vulnerable, informal work (ILO, 2023).

**Will Africa's youth be a force for transformation—or a missed opportunity?** This is the Reality We Must Change

Today, entrepreneurship is **not a choice** that many young people make. Rather,

**They are pushed into it** — by lack of jobs, by lack of access, by lack of alternatives.

And even when they start businesses, the odds are stacked against them with 70 – 80% of businesses across Africa failing within the first 5 years because of lack of finance, support, and access to markets.

This is not transformation. This is survival. And Africa cannot build its future on survival strategies. Our development has to be by design not by luck.

### **A Story of Possibility**

Against the doom and gloom – let me share a story of possibilities to make this real.

The story I want to tell is a story of **Gugulethu Siso**, a young entrepreneur from Zimbabwe in the Logistics & Fintech Business.

Her journey did not begin with a business plan. It began with a personal frustration.

She was trying to send essential goods to her grandmother in a rural village — some distance away from Bulawayo. And she could not get them there reliably.

So she asked a simple but powerful question:

If I cannot move a small package like this — what happens to businesses that need to move tonnes of goods across cities or indeed borders?

That question led her to build **Thumeza** (*ukuThumeza* – *ask someone to carry something*) – her heart and soul of her business.

She started with a logistics platform (connecting clients to transporters at a fee) — only to face one of the biggest challenges confronting African entrepreneurs - cash flow constraints, delayed payments, and a high-risk operating environment.

Instead of failing, she pivoted - transforming her company into a fintech and logistics solution, helping small transporters access working capital and get paid faster.

In doing so, she was solving the very problem that nearly broke her business.

Her success was not accidental. It was built on learning and falling forward:

- skills and exposure, through platforms like the Google for Startups Accelerator labs, Youth Connect etc.
- financial discipline, which helped her build a viable business and crowd in financing; and
- strategic networks and partnerships, enabling her to expand across borders

She understood something fundamental - In Africa, markets do not work on platforms alone. They work on relationships, trust, and connectivity. She has managed to grow her **fintech logistics business** beyond Zimbabwe to South Africa, Botswana, Kenya and Uganda.

And today, she is already positioning her business to leverage opportunities under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

### **Her story reveals something deeper.**

In many parts of Africa, logistics can account for up to 70% of the cost of goods.

It determines whether products reach markets — or whether entire businesses and communities remain excluded. And this is where the AfCFTA will succeed or fail.

Her vision is not just about moving goods.

It is about ensuring that a grandmother in a rural village has access to medicine, food, and basic necessities — because value chains work for her too.

Opportunities for business lie in solving real-life problems. A message that should not be lost as we go into this conversation this afternoon and in June.

The key is to ask the right questions—and to build solutions that respond to those challenges.

**This is not just one story.** It is a potential story of millions of young Africans — **who are** ready to innovate, ready to build, but constrained by systems that do not yet work for them.

### **What we need is a shift: From Survival to Transformation**

This transformation will not be driven by large firms alone. It must also be driven by young entrepreneurs.

At ECA, we are convinced that industrialization, economic diversification, and **intra-African trade** are the pathways to creating jobs at scale.

### **The AfCFTA Pathway – by far Africa's Boldest and biggest Bet, yet for transformation.**

Not just a trade agreement, but Africa's most ambitious project for economic transformation. **A single market. A platform for industrialization. A foundation for regional value chains.**

But the AfCFTA will not implement itself.

*Policies do not trade. People do.* Our **economic-force-in-waiting** – should drive this market if – we can find solutions to the constraints that young people face in this regard.

As we know - young entrepreneurs face real constraints.

- Access to finance remains one of the biggest.
- weak market linkages
- limited trade experience;
- high barriers to cross-border trade

Yet, new opportunities are emerging in:

- digital trade and e-commerce
- AI and technology-driven innovation
- new service sectors linked to value chains

So, the AfCFTA opportunity is clear. But opportunity without access, support and needed skills — is not a real opportunity.

### **A Call to Action**

If we are serious about unlocking regional value chains for youth, then we must act decisively each playing a role in creating solutions to unleash this potential:

- **Governments** must implement smart, inclusive macroeconomic, industrial and trade policies;
- **Financial institutions** must expand access to capital and rethink risk;
- **The private sector** must open value chains to young enterprises;
- **Development partners** must invest in, amplify and scale what works.

And most importantly: We must listen to young people — not as beneficiaries, but as partners. Because Africa's future **will not be built for youth — it must be built with them and by them.**

### **In Closing**

As mentioned before, today's discussion is not just about identifying challenges.

It is about **unlocking solutions.**

It is about ensuring that when we meet at ADIF in June, we are not just exchanging ideas around challenges — but advancing **actionable pathways** that place youth at the center of Africa's transformation.

We need to move forward with clarity, urgency, and ambition because the stakes are high—and the opportunity is even greater.

I therefore look forward to a rich and solution-driven discussion – where we can look into possibilities for our youth that are **productive, innovative, transformative and connected through trade.**

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Thank you for your attention.