Conference on "Digital Trade in Africa: Implications for Inclusion and Human Rights"
Addis Ababa, 31 May-1 June 2018

Co-organized by the African Trade Policy Centre (ATPC) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) East Africa Regional Office and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) Geneva Office

CONCEPT NOTE

1. Background

The ATPC, OHCHR and FES Geneva initiated a partnership to analyse the human rights implications of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The final joint report "The Continental Free Trade Area in Africa: A Human Rights Perspective" was launched in July 2017 focusing on specific case studies, stakeholders and human rights.

The three partnering organisations have agreed to focus the next phase of the triangular partnership on assessing the inclusion and human rights implications of digital trade in the context of Africa's trade policy underpinned by the AfCFTA.

The digital economy and the dynamism generated by digital trade solutions presents significant opportunities but also challenges that need to be addressed in a way that is consistent with inclusion, transparency, people-centred governance and the attainment of human rights.

The ATPC-OHCHR-FES conference on "The Digital Economy in Africa: Implications for Inclusion and Human Rights" will take place on 31 May – 1 June 2018 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The purpose of the conference is to brainstorm preliminarily on the scope of the organisations' joint research work on human rights and digital trade in the context of the AfCFTA.

2. Why digital trade?

This concept note defines digital trade as the "use of digital technologies to facilitate businesses". Digital trade is growing rapidly in Africa, implying significant changes for the way African countries trade and industrialize. The digital economy, which thrives on communication and human networks is being embraced across the continent; by entrepreneurs, businesses and governments. Governments increasingly rely on digital platforms for the delivery of services, and the provision of public information. Digital trade has created opportunities for the integration of African firms into global value chains (GVCs) through facilitating widespread marketing and distribution of goods and services within Africa, and between the African continent and the rest of the world.

3. Why inclusion and human rights?

While digital trade can have a transformative effect on African economies, a human rights approach is crucial to look at larger issues of connectivity across the continent and within countries, access to and use of technology platforms, tools and services; privacy and data protection and; the impact of digital trade on a range of human rights in terms of its realisation, promotion and protection, including right to work and education.

Digital trade can provide many opportunities that promote or realise human rights within the international and regional human rights framework. This includes pushing overall demand for closing digital divides, creating improved ICT infrastructure and overall better infrastructure to promote development solutions and through creation of jobs and employment. In terms of human rights risks, however, technology must generally be made available, affordable and accessible, with equality and non-discrimination underpinning these rights of access and use, to enable participation in development and more generally in political, social and economic spheres. Digital trade can also have gendered impacts, which need to be assessed and dealt with.

Article 3 of the African Union Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want provides a legal underpinning for considering human rights in Africa's digital economy agenda – it expresses the continental aspiration of an Africa of good governance, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law.

Achieving inclusive and human rights consistent digital development in Africa impacts several policy areas. However, for the purposes of the collaborative work between ATPC, OHCHR and FES, the following five important areas are prioritized: - Employment, MSMEs, Agriculture, Industry and Services; Women; and Youth.

4. Format

The conference will be organised in sessions, each dedicated to a selected topic to allow for in-depth discussion based on different experiences shared by participants. The topics of the eight thematic sessions are:

1. Digital futures: new challenges and opportunities
2. Human rights in an age of digital revolution
3. Digital trade landscape in Africa I: trends in business and policy
4. Digital trade landscape in Africa II: special focus on informal, micro, small and medium enterprises in digital trade
5. Digital trade and the right to work
6. Digital trade and gender equality
7. Digital trade and youth
8. Global, regional and national governance of digital trade to foster human rights

Following the conference, the three partnering organisations will prepare a short meeting report outlining the key messages and next steps for the triangular partnership, which may include preparing a human rights analysis of digital trade, with policy recommendations for the next round of AfCFTA negotiations and for policy-makers and entrepreneurs in this area.