Reflections on African International Economic Law Network's (AfIELN) 6th Biennial Conference (Day 1)

By:

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Day 1

21 June, 2023

The green and luscious Greenhill campus of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) was bustling with scores of academics, researchers, legal practitioners and policymakers all gathered to collaborate and meaningfully contribute to the realisation of Africa's economic progress. Mr. Kevin Kipchirchir and Dr. Suzzie Oyakhire (from the AfIELN team) hosted the opening ceremony. They introduced the opening remarks party and effectively set the tone for what promised to be an exciting four days.

To get the conference going, the Rector of GIMPA, Prof Samuel K. Bonsu, welcomed all participants to the beauty that is Greenhill. In his remarks, he stressed the need to study and monitor the intersections of Law and Economics – the two hold the answer to Africa's economic emancipation. He maintained

that as academics and practitioners, we must continuously collaborate and hold dialogues, such as this conference, to hasten the pace of liberating Africa from its crises. The GIMPA Faculty of Law Dean, represented by Clement Kojo Akapame, echoed the sentiments of the Rector.

On behalf of the Society of International Economic Law, Prof Olabisi Akinkugbe thanked AfIELN for taking up the challenge to revolutionalise International Economic Law and give it an African perspective. In this rapidly growing world, Africans need African-tailored solutions to their African challenges, and AfIELN is here to ensure this comes to be. He also noted that as we move to carve our own international economic law landscape, we would be well served to look to how the international community interacts in this arena, hence AfIELN members were encouraged to partake in the conversations taking place at the global level in conferences/meetings organised by the Society of International Law.

Rounding up the opening remarks, AfIELN President, Dr Titilayo Adebola, challenged participants to push for a prosperous Africa and let the conference catalyse new solutions to Africa’s economic problems. She encouraged participants to actively participate in all conference events and deliberations so that by the end of the conference, we would have explored opportunities, devised solutions and made progress toward formulating proposals to rid Africa of dependency on outside forces. Dr Adebola announced that at the end of the conference, an outcome document titled the Accra Declaration 2023 will be published. The Accra Declaration will serve as an official record of the key discussions, agreements and proposals that have emerged from the conference. The Declaration will encapsulate African-centred proposals and give prominence to the importance of inclusive dialogue.

The Conference Chair, Dr Regis Simo, closed the opening session of the conference by thanking all participants for attending. Our host, GIMPA, was also acknowledged for its generous hospitality in hosting the conference. Dr Simo then introduced the two keynote speakers who would be delivering the keynote address.

The first keynote address was delivered by H.E Ahunna Eziakonwa (United Nations Development Programme - UNDP Assistant Secretary General and Director of the Regional Bureau for Africa). Her talking points were on the need

to embrace the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and that we should let it mould our own body of international economic law. This is an opportunity for Africa to establish itself economically; economic development will certainly be a direct outcome of the AfCFTA. As we welcome and launch the AfCFTA, we should be intentional about speeding up implementation and insist on inclusion. In conclusion, she posed this question: “How do we revisit our extant laws to ensure small and medium businesses are integrated into the AfCFTA?” This question seeks to promote the inclusion aspect she said we should not leave lagging behind as we welcome the AfCFTA.

Prof Richard Oppong (Professor of Law, California Western School of Law, Fellow, Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences) delivered the second Keynote address. He spoke of academic freedom as the bedrock for our learning and development. Academic freedom, in his view, ties in with the mandate of academics working with practitioners to reform the economic landscape through comprehensive measures. He advocated for economic integration that will decrease dependency on foreign goods and services. He outlined the challenges and opportunities the AfCFTA is bringing to Africa, noting the strides currently being made and efforts to lessen cross-border trade barriers by stopping using the US dollar as the standard currency for trade between African countries. This is effectively carried out through the Pan-African Payment and Settlement Systems (PAPSS) that address the currency diversity on the continent and cuts the costs related to financial transactions among businesses. With the AfCFTA, we hope to have more African countries trade with each other – regional economic integration is the promise of the AfCFTA. Africa stands to rewrite the rules of the international economic order, and scholars and academics should help reform the legal framework for this to happen seamlessly. Professor Oppong closed off by challenging participants to ensure all parties benefit from the AfCFTA and that we do not promote economic inequality.

The Opening Roundtable reflected on the theme of the keynote addresses and the conference. Dr Regis Simo (Queens University Belfast), Prof Caroline Ncube (University of Cape Town) and Prof Obiora Okafor (Johns Hopkins University) were key discussants in the roundtable. Prof Ncube commented that the theme is very timely and that it accurately ties in with the legal crises currently unfolding all around Africa. Prof Okafor posited that the theme calls on us to

reflect on our history and build solidarity as we endeavour to provide local solutions. The panel concluded that to ensure everyone benefits from the AfCFTA, we must push for trade that is much more material to ordinary everyday life, there should be inclusion on all sides, the implementation must be intentional and sustainable development should take centre stage.

In response to the roundtable discussion, Prof Oppong reiterated that we must cut dependency; outside solutions will not save us in the long run. He advocated that we invest in education to build human capital; this will ensure all parties can effectively and meaningfully benefit from the AfCFTA.

Welcome Cocktails

Our fireside chat sponsor, Pedro's Premium Ogogoro introduced us to their impressive drink. The Co-founders, Lola Pedro and Chibu Akukwe sat down with Kevin to narrate their origin story. The company's vision is the production and trade of an authentic, boldly African brand that can compete with other global brands. It is the hope of the promoters of the drink that soon it can trade and distribute widely amongst African countries as the brand reflects African heritage and embraces its excellence. With the dawn of the AfCFTA, one wonders whether this could be realised as flexible intra-African trade will become a reality.

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