# The African International Economic Law Network at 11 – Reflecting on the Past and the Future

**By:**

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The objective of the African International Economic Law Network (AfIELN) is "to serve as a forum for the research, study and exchange of ideas in the field of international economic law in Africa and beyond". Established in 2008, the AfIELN (initially AfSIEL) is now in its 11th year, although it was not until 2011 when it had its first conference in South Africa. It was then that the name AfIELN was formally adopted. We are excited about our upcoming 4th biennial conference in Nairobi, Kenya. With the conference now just 14 days away, it is an appropriate juncture to reflect on the Network we all belong to and its future prospects.

The aim of my message is for us all to appreciate what a truly rich Network we belong to and get excited about the possibility of being part of the next decade. We stand tall on the shoulders of many scholars, and policy experts who were involved in one way or another in the early stages as well as those that have

actively nurtured the AfIELN. Huge thanks to Professors Tomer Broude and James Thuo Gathii for providing information of the events leading to the establishment of what has become the AfIELN today.

***AfIELN – A History to Protect***

The idea of establishing a global society of international economic law was floated in earnest in October 2006 at a conference at Bretton Woods. As part of the efforts towards organizing the SIEL, a mapping exercise was undertaken. In some regions, the exercise of mapping was straightforward because of the pre-existing regional organizations, e.g., in North America, Asia and Europe."

"Africa was, however, more challenging (also think back to the internet infrastructure available back then on the continent!). A central goal was of course to establish African leadership and ownership of a regional network, but in the interim, Tomer led the initiative together with Prof. Chantal Thomas. In parallel, the organizers tried establishing an educational network and successfully had law books delivered to law schools in Africa, but these initiatives lost steam."

At the Inaugural SIEL conference in Geneva in July 2008 the first African Group meeting was held at Villa Barton, …. At the second Biennial SIEL meeting in 2010 in Barcelona, the second group meeting was held, where it was again emphasized that there is a strong need for African leadership. At this point Laurence Boulle who then headed the Nelson Mandela Institute at Wits volunteered his organization and capacity, leading to the first AfIELN conference you refer to in 2011. This was followed by a second conference again at Wits,  and the third conference organized by Professor Jumoke Oduwole and Dr. Ashimizo Afamadeh in Lagos, in 2015." Miss Jill Jumah, led the network from 2016 to 2018 when the current executive team was constituted at the SIEL Conference in Washington DC.

Based on the helpful emails and conversations Tomer shared with the executive team of the AfIELN, two tasks were critical for them 11 years ago: *distribution of books (scholarship) to African law schools* and the *successful hosting of the AfIELN conferences*. While the later objective has been more successful, the

former was successful only in the early years of the Network. This brings me to an important point to reflect on some of the tasks ahead.

### *The Tasks Ahead*

Building on the commitment of the founders, *first*, we must retool the commitment to making scholarship available for the African scholars, students and policy experts; *second*, we must capitalize on the one hand, on the move in the rise in international economic law in Africa and, on the other hand, think of our roles in the implications for Africa, in terms of opportunity and challenges, of the disruption in the multilateral system and the WTO in particular.

Certainly, the tasks ahead are not easy, but they are achievable if we build on the collective sense of community and collegiality that we call AfIELN. If we can all imagine having a stake in AfIELN – which we all do! – the tasks can be achieved.

### *Re-Imagining the task of giving back and scholarship on International Economic Law and Africa*

Building on an important commitment of the founders, the task of making scholarship on international economic law broadly, and as they relate to Africa in particular, accessible to scholars, students, policy makers in this age is different. In this context, James Thuo Gathii's opening keynote lecture – Africa and the Disciplines of International Economic Law: Taking Stock and Moving Forward – at the 5th SIEL Biennial Conference in South Africa comes is highly relevant. Open access for materials is fundamental to the production of quality research. Unfortunately, the majority African universities are still poorly financed.

The implication of which is that vibrant scholars who are faculty members, cohort of inspiring graduate communities and undergraduate often lack access to the materials they require. While hard copy donation of books to the libraries should not stop – and we encourage scholars and professionals to think of individual ways they can meet this aspiration in their local institutions – we are truly excited about the open access opportunities to host scholarship on Africa and IEL. In this regard, our partnership with Afronomicslaw blog has been

refreshing. Its open access and share breadth of reflections from a good number of scholars on the continent is inspiring. Please share the links with your friends, colleagues, students (graduate and undergraduate). The Editors of Afronomicslaw hope that the open access nature of the blog will enhance, an aspect of the production of research on the continent as they present quick and sharp reflections on key issues on IEL and Africa as well as symposia on new books on IEL and Africa. AfIELN looks forward to, the next steps in our collaboration with Afronomicslaw blog. Stay tuned.

Second, we must also think of the next generation of leaders for the Network as well as our individual involvement, even if you do not occupy a substantive executive position. AfIELN thrives on the commitment and volunteer work of its members. I am blessed to have walked the past 10 months with a very committed executive committee that consists of Luwam Dirar, Ohio Omiunu, Sara Ghebremuse; with Amaka Vanni and Regis Simo acting as Conference Co-Chairs; and Patricia Ouma and Harrision Otieno have led the local organizing team.

But, to quote an apt statement from James Thuo Gathii, Tomer Broude, Laurence Boulle's introduction to the Law & Development Review Special Issue from the 2013 AfIELN Conference, the task ahead is to now capitalize on "network of international economic law scholars, practitioners and students in Africa that has links to a global network of colleagues that will continue to support the network's initiatives …"  The path for the future depends on a rich, grounded, and passionate commitment by scholars, practitioners and policy leaders in Africa to carry on the mantle of the AfIELN. I hope that as you plan for your trip to Nairobi, you will be inspired to think of ways you can be involved in moving this important network forward.

**Conference Update**:

We have continued populating the conference website. We encourage you to visit the website in order to have updated info.  In addition to Professor Makane Moïse Mbengue, our keynote speaker, we will have the President and Chairman of the Board of Afreximbank; Professor Benedict Okey Oramah; and Prof. Sylvia Kanga'ara as plenary keynote speakers. I hope you are excited as we are.

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