

EXPERT COMMENTARY

Harnessing the Potential of Standards for Africa

ARSO, the African Organisation for Standardisation, is an intergovernmental body formed in 1977 by the African Union (formerly Organization of African Unity (OAU)) and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) to promote standardization in Africa for boosting intra-Africa and global trade for economic development.

ARSO recognizes that (with due consideration of on the strategic goals of Agenda 2063, and its flagship project of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA); the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/293, which proclaims 2016-2025 as the Third Industrial Development Decade for Africa (IDDA III)) Africa stands in a unique position to reap the benefits of economic growth as a dynamic, diversified and competitive economic zone, a new economic frontier, and important growth pole.

Agenda 2063 and vision 2030 are highly aligned and strongly linked; in January 2018, the African Union (AU) and the United Nations agreed on a harmonized framework for implementation, with the structural transformation, economic diversification, manufacturing, industrialization for Africa's sustainable development and the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) topping the Agenda.

Having entered into force in May 2019, the AfCFTA Agreement prioritizes the production of value-added goods and services that are 'Made in Africa'. With the commencement of real trade among State parties set for January 2021, the Agreement will accelerate intra-African trade (analysts predict an increase of 52.3%, through the elimination of import duties) and increase economic activity in manufacturing and industrial processes, which can translate into Africa's 2020 GDP growth to 4.1% (AfDB 2019). Further, the rise in intra-African trade may double if non-tariff barriers, especially the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBTs) are also reduced (UNECA 2018).

For this, and given Africa's demographic challenges (e.g., projected to be 2.1 billion by 2050), the stakes are high for Africa. The African Union has called on African institutions, including ARSO, to put in place policies and infrastructural frameworks that facilitate the implementation of Agenda 2063, the AfCFTA, and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); in these, Standards remain the invisible architecture and essential pillar through the interplay of economies of scale, efficiency in production, cost reduction and risk management.

Due to different regulatory systems in Africa, the requirement for the harmonized regulatory framework (conformity assessment, mutual recognition arrangements (MRA)) to facilitate the free flow of goods and greater intra-African trade remains crucial. Currently, ARSO has a projection for harmonized Africa standards, under the AfCFTA, being comparable to the AfCFTA 4,547 HS6 Tariff lines.

Related to this is the application of standards and conformity assessment (Quality Management Systems-ISO 9000-2015) for ensuring the competitiveness of (i) the 'Made in Africa' products; and (ii) Africa's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which represent more than 90 % of businesses.



EXPERT COMMENTARY

SMEs employ about 60 % of workers in Africa, many of whom are women and youth, and are strategic in the transition of African economies from informal to industrial ones. Certified firms are typically more productive and supply better-quality products with greater market access opportunities. The ARSO Made in Africa Expo, the African Day of Standardization and SMEs standardization and Certification (Maturity Model Eco Mark Certification Scheme) programmes are underlined.

The African agricultural sector remains crucial for promoting trade and industrialization (backward - forward) and the deployment of harmonized African standards to facilitate agricultural trade, management of food value chains and increasing agricultural productivity remains desirable. The ARSO THC 02 on Agriculture and food products focuses on agricultural productivity (precision farming, biotechnology), good agricultural practices, trade and food safety. Additionally, with increasing consumer demand for quality, safe and environmentally safe products, ecolabeling mechanisms are becoming integral parts of value chains.

The ARSO Eco Mark Africa Certification Programme effectively integrates the concepts of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The Programme is geared towards the promotion of Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) in Africa and the production of eco-friendly African products, while mitigating the climate change effects in Africa and increased market access of African goods. The certification is currently based on the ARSO Sustainability and Eco-labelling standards: ARS/AES 02: Fisheries — Sustainability and Eco-labelling — Requirements; ARS/AES 03: Forestry — Sustainability and Eco-labelling— Requirements; and ARS/AES 04: Tourism — Sustainability and Eco-labelling — Requirements.

Health (Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good health and well-being) remains a key pillar of sustainable development in Africa. For the health sector (and in reference to Africa's pharmaceutical industry), the strategic implementation of standards for safe and quality African Traditional Medicine (ATM) remains crucial as 80% - 90 % of the population depend on traditional medicine for their primary healthcare. The ARSO ATM Standardization initiatives, under ARSO THC 13 (ARSO Technical Harmonization Committee on African traditional medicine), are aligned to the African Union Pharmaceutical Strategy and the WHO 2014-2023 African Traditional Medicine strategy focusing on recognition and mainstreaming ATM in the national health care systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need for safe and quality personal protective equipment (PPE), and for which the ARSO standardization initiatives under ARSO/TC 78 - Medical devices and equipment and ARSO/TC 80 - Pharmaceuticals and medicinal products, are highlighted. Associated with health is the issue of urbanization in Africa, especially with regards to the associated challenges of air pollution, water safety and sanitation. An estimated 712,000 deaths are reported annually from air pollution.

In collaboration with the African Export-Import Bank (Afreximbank), AROS has initiated - through Technical Working Group 08-4 - a standardization program that targets the adoption of clean mobility solutions (clean fuels and vehicle technologies) for Africa's automotive sector. The ARSO Standardization programs for Building and Construction, under ARSO THC 3, aim to promote safe and smart cities offering basic infrastructure, security and basic social amenities.

On a continent where 564 million and 326 million people lack access to sanitation and safe drinking water respectively, affordable and sustainable sanitation services based on new technologies and standards



EXPERT COMMENTARY

(e.g., ISO 30500:2018 (Non-sewered sanitation systems — Prefabricated integrated treatment units — General safety and performance requirements for design and testing); ISO 24521:2016 (Activities relating to drinking water and wastewater services — Guidelines for the management of basic on-site domestic wastewater services); ISO 24510:2007 (Activities relating to drinking water and wastewater services — Guidelines for the assessment and for the improvement of the service to users); and ISO 24511:2007 (Activities relating to drinking water and wastewater services — Guidelines for the management of wastewater utilities and for the assessment of wastewater services) are pivotal.

ARSO has taken the initiative for the harmonization and recognition of these international standards as African standards for adoption and implementation by ARSO members. Overall and cutting across sectors, information, and communication technologies (ICTs) are becoming pillars of sustainable development. With aligned policies and procedures, Africa stands to benefit from the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) that is characterized by the fusion of the digital (artificial intelligence, cloud computing, robotics, 3D printing, the Internet of Things (IoT), block chain), biological, and physical worlds, and presented as a dynamic new combination between technology, the market and society. The ARSO - African 4th IR Standardization Strategy initiative with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) are meant to position African economies strategically to benefit from the 4IR.

To enable Africa to strategically reap the benefits of standardization, ARSO's role is focused on influencing policy re-orientation towards embracing standardization as a key pillar for sustainable development. Further, ARSO works to position standards as integral part of Africa's industrial, economic and trade policies by engaging with the African Union, regional economic communities (RECs), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), policymakers, government officials, academia, private sector (the AfroChampions Initiative, Afreximbank, AfDB), regulatory bodies, consumers and the youth.

In addition, the organization raises public awareness of standards through programs and events, such as: the ARSO African Standards Education, Training Seminars and Workshop Programme, the African Day of Standardization, the Made in Africa Expos; the SMEs standardization program (Maturity model certification) and the African Youth Standards Essay Competitions.

ARSO focuses on the promotion of education about standardization, being implemented at African universities to ensure African experts and professionals with wider knowledge and interest in standardization and who will continue to influence public policy and legislation in favour of standardization. All these efforts need quality policy and for which ARSO, under the Pan African Quality Infrastructure (PAQI) platform, has developed the African Quality Policy to guide the development of Quality Infrastructure in Africa.

In all these endeavours the ARSO - UNECE Cooperation remains a key factor in promoting sustainable development in Africa, including the empowerment of women and girls (SDG 5, Gender Equality), for which ARSO is a signatory of the UNECE Declaration on Gender Responsive Standards and Standards Development.

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