

## VINCENT BIRUTA

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You have just heard the “Draghi report for Africa”. I think it gives you some sense of the scale both of the challenge and of the way in which it is being addressed. You are talking about 55 countries. 54 of them have already signed up to the African Continental Free Trade Agreement – only Eritrea has not yet – and 48 have already ratified it. It will be, by an order of magnitude, the largest free trade organization in the world when the agreement is implemented. Nardos has both set out the ambition and defined the challenges. She has spoken, in addition to that, to one of the instruments within this overall framework, the Regional Economic Commissions, and we are privileged, this afternoon, to have representatives of two. Firstly, the East African Commission, and secondly, ECOWAS on the west. Therefore, I am going to turn, if I may, to Vincent Biruta, first, to speak both from a Rwandan and from an East African Regional Economic Commission perspective.

### Vincent Biruta

Thank you. It is my first time participating in this World Policy Conference. I wish to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Thierry de Montbrial for inviting me and also to appreciate the high quality of the panels which have discussed various important topics. As mentioned before, regional integration is not an option for African countries but a must if we want to achieve economic development and peace. We have the tools in place, the African Continental Free Trade Area, which has been signed by 54 countries and ratified by 48 member states. Some of them have started trading under that agreement. We also have eight regional economic communities, one of them being the East African Community. These regional economic communities facilitate the integration process, and I focus only on the East African Community, though Rwanda is also a member of the Economic Community of Central African States and a member of COMESA as well.

The East African Community was revived in 2000. It was first created in 1967, but it was dissolved in 1977 due to differences among founding countries, which were Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. In 2000, the treaty establishing the East African Community was signed again, and other members joined the three founding members, with Rwanda and Burundi joining on July 1, 2007. Thereafter, South Sudan on April 16, 2016, the Democratic Republic of Congo in March 2022, and then Somalia recently in March 2024. With these eight members, these countries cover an area of 5.4 million square kilometers, with a population of around 350 million and GDP of USD 350 billion.

This East African Community was established with the ultimate goal to achieve political federation, which will be the last step after the single-custom territory, the common market and the monetary union. Rwanda is a landlocked country. The benefit from this integration, as far as Rwanda is concerned, is to have access to a bigger market but also to ease our access to the seaports of Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, which are 1,400 kilometers from our capital, Kigali. Integration into the East African Community expanded Rwanda's economic and diplomatic opportunities, and the adoption of the East African Community Customs Union and Common Market Protocol granted Rwandan businesses access to a larger regional market, fostering trade, economic growth and investment.

The implementation of the Customs Union and the Common Market Protocols has reduced the cost of doing business, reducing transport costs from USD 6,000 to USD 4,000, if we consider the Northern Corridor linking us to Mombasa port, and from USD 5,300 to USD 3,500 if we use the Central Corridor to Dar es Salaam. The time for shipping cargo has reduced from 21 days to four or five days, if we use the port of Mombasa, and from 18 days to three to four days, if we use the port of Dar es Salaam. This was also facilitated by the establishment of a one-stop border post policy. We have established a one-stop border post where civil servants of both sides work in the same buildings, and the procedures to clear the goods which are being imported or exported to or from Rwanda are cleared there, which really reduced the number of days needed to clear these goods.

We have put in place other instruments to facilitate the free movement of people, where Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya and South Sudan are using national IDs or student IDs for people to be able to move from one country to another in our region. Some East African Community partner states, namely Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya, are implementing the East Africa Community single tourist visa, allowing tourists to have multiple entry within those countries. This visa only costs USD 100. We also have one area network in Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda. You do not need to change your SIM card when you cross to these countries. You can continue using the same SIM card, and this facilitates the movement of people within our area.

Rwanda has therefore benefited a lot from joining the East African Community, but we have also brought to the East African Community some of our good experiences. We have contributed to the integration agenda of the East African Community. We have this one-stop border post policy that I mentioned. It is one of the policies spearheaded by Rwanda, and our neighbors accepted it. This has reduced the delays in the movement of goods by 84%. Rwanda also has a visa openness policy that facilitates people coming to Rwanda. Members of the African Union do not need to have a visa to come to Rwanda. They receive a free visa for 30 days, and it is the same for citizens from Commonwealth countries and for the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*. They can come to Rwanda without applying for a visa. They get it for free for 30 days. For other citizens of the world, they can get a 30 day visa upon arrival and are requested to pay a visa fee.

Of course, there are challenges to the integration agenda of our continent and our region. One of them is the low pace of integration by some member states. We mentioned the Africa Continental Free Trade Area. It has been largely adopted, but there are other protocols which should be ratified to facilitate the free movement of goods and people. One of them is the



protocol related to the free movement of people, which has been ratified by only four member states of the African Union. Of course, there are these interstate tensions from time to time. We have mentioned conflicts in some of our regions. There are still internal armed conflicts. There is also the need to invest in infrastructure because goods cannot move without proper infrastructure: airports, ports, railways and so on.

Rwanda has achieved a lot in the last 30 years, and we believe that we will achieve even more in the coming years. We have adopted our Vision 2050, and we aim to become a country with an upper middle-income status by 2035, with a GDP per capita of over USD 4,000 from the current per capita GDP of USD 1,040. In 2050, we aim to be among the high-income countries with a GDP per capita of over USD 12,476. I wish to conclude with a quote from my president, His Excellency Paul Kagame, who said, 'We do not want to be a status quo country or a status quo people. Vision 2020 was about what we had to do in order to survive and regain our dignity, but Vision 2050 has to be about the future we choose because we can and because we deserve it'. Rwanda believes that planning, good governance, accountability, transparency, security and long-term political and economic stability, supported by regional integration, can lead us to the Africa we want. Thank you.