This changes everything

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This changes everything
The AfCFTA holds out great possibilities for Africa’s private sector. Samba Bathily, Chairman of ADS Group and a founding partner of the AfroChampions Initiative talks to Dounia Ben Mohamed about the ways his company and the Initiative are working to help bring about economic transformation on the continent.

“The AfCFTA is an opportunity for companies that want to change Africa”

You are one of the founding partners of AfroChampions. Its mission is to drive regional integration. What’s the role of the private sector and civil society in the AfCFTA?

It is our role, and more importantly, our responsibility. There are a number of African companies from which we can draw inspiration, the likes of Ecobank, MTN, Dangote. The African private sector needs to be the driver of the continent’s development, it cannot happen any other way. When I look at my team, it becomes evident that a truly African company transcends borders. We have Rwandans, Beninese, Malians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Senegalese, Guineans, Ivorians, South Africans, Cape Verdeans… It makes for a formidable team, with continental if not global ambitions. You’ve been working closely with the African Union, putting forward proposals in terms of the AfCFTA. It seems that your voice is being heard…

The partnership with the African Union has been extremely fruitful since it was officially concluded in March 2018 at the Extraordinary Summit for the signing of the AfCFTA in Kigali. Our proposals have been well received, both with its Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat, and within the different departments, including the Commission for Trade and Industry headed by Ambassador Albert Muchanga.

We have been working with the AU teams on various practical initiatives. The road shows to explain the AfCFTA to the private sector, launching the Pan-African Fashion Initiative, creating mechanisms to support our craftsmen, developing new approaches for vocational training, giving advice to help countries frame their economic development plans within the AfCFTA framework. The objective is to make sure that this agreement translates into real opportunities for the private sector, from the SMEs and startups to larger businesses.

And in February we saw the heads of state endorse our ‘Trillion Dollar Investment Framework’, which will trigger $1 trillion of investments by 2030, to help the implementation of the AfCFTA. Through this mechanism countries will be able to receive funding for AfCFTA-enabling projects. A fund will also be created to invest in high growth and high potential companies, the champions of tomorrow.

Given what we’re currently going through, it is also hoped that this investment framework can be a vehicle for strengthening our health infrastructure – physical infrastructure, hospitals, drug and equipment manufacturing plants, of course, but also human infrastructure – by increasing the number of skilled health workers and practitioners in Africa.

From what you’re saying, you have committed to mobilising $1 trillion for the AfCFTA, and to promoting the “AfroChampions” companies. This is an important moment…

Yes, the AfroChampions of tomorrow are companies with great potential. But these companies need to be able to lead and project of significant scale and they will need financing to achieve this. We need African companies to be more involved in the development of major projects on the continent even if we recognise the expertise that foreign players bring to the table.

I’m all for partnerships, and we collaborate with international partners, such as what we have done with IDEMIA, the global leader in ID and authentication. We’ve seen this also in the Golf where they’ve brought in international expertise but developed their own world-class organisations.

Today, when you look at the life of an African, he wakes up and consumes imported soap, drives an imported car, drinks imported water. An African who earns $100 spends $95 to buy goods imported from outside Africa. We are told that our industry is not competitive and that the unit cost is high, because the basic inputs – water, energy, transports – are high. So it becomes a chicken and egg problem. My response to this is that it is up to Africans to create the conditions for the industrial development of the continent.

There are some simple, easily implementable solutions. In fashion, buy African for example. We need to create 20m jobs a year over the next 10 years to avoid crises, unrest, and popular uprisings. The fashion and creative sector is just one of many sectors where these jobs can be created. Imagine having to dress 1.3bn people. Such demand naturally brings down production costs and you develop a whole ecosystem around this.

If you want, you can say that AfroChampions is a project that aims to achieve greater economic justice, where we capture wealth on the continent, as well as the establishment of (truly?) mutually beneficial, win-win partnerships with external counterparts. We’ve shown that it can work. Africa Digital...
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In the face of the multiple challenges of the early 21st century, regional integration in Africa has the potential to unlock the continent’s human capital and enhance its competitiveness on the global stage. In line with this vision, the Africa Development Solutions Group (ADS Group) is positioning itself today as a key player in this change, through its seven areas of activity: project-financing and consulting; new technologies, telecommunications, media; industrial development; renewables and access to water; retail and franchising; infrastructures, construction, real estate and hotels; automobile, maritime transport and logistics. Hereinafter is a special focus on ADS Group’s ICT, transportation and logistics as well as clean tech projects.

**Information and Communication Technologies**

In the field of ICT, ADS Group has been active for more than 15 years on the continent, where it deploys its expertise in the development of fibre optic networks and innovative IT solutions. ADS Group is firmly committed to the Single Africa Digital Market project led by the Smart Africa Alliance, which aims to accelerate the advent of cross-border interconnectivity. To this end, since May 2019, ADS Group’s subsidiary Africa Development Digital Solutions has partnered with Tata Communications Transformation Services Limited (TCTS), a subsidiary specialising in logistics services for the transport of large equipment and consumer goods. This creates an offer based on the differentiation levers that make up the major port platforms: international maritime transport, port operations and multimodal logistics for goods and dredging. The improvement of intra-African connectivity also involves the development of waterways, which is essential to improve links between the continent’s interior and its coasts. STML therefore also explores innovative models for the transport of populations to develop in the future tailor-made solutions adapted to the needs of African countries.

**Transportation and Logistics**

Transportation and Logistics is another key element for the success of African economic integration. ADS Group has therefore recently set up the Société de Transport Maritime et Logistique (STML), a subsidiary specialising in logistics services for the transport of large equipment and consumer goods. This long-term objective being to master the entire production process in Africa.

*Solektra* is also pursuing this energy integration approach by providing water and electricity, via solar technologies to African communities in rural and off-grid areas. The company, which operates throughout Africa, is already responsible for the electrification of 1.8 million people, more than 7 million people benefiting from its solutions. Furthermore, a Smart Solar Ecosystem is currently being developed to facilitate internet connectivity in rural communities, like the very encouraging pilot project in Tumba, Rwanda, which offers new job opportunities and a range of innovative services (mobile clinic, business centre, etc.).

These positive developments can only encourage wider deployment on the continent, and justify the launch in Ramako of the Solektra Solar Academy, Africa’s first academy for solar professions, which will train workers, technicians and engineers from all over West Africa, particularly in the care and maintenance of the company’s mini-grids.

**Clean tech**

Finally, ADS Group is a committed player leveraging energy solutions to support manufacturing projects across Africa and integration through industrialisation. Key ADS Group subsidiaries include MIG, which has a manufacturing facility located in the new city of Diamniadio, Senegal, the aim is the optimisation of solar technologies, to be used to power innovative solutions such as solar streetlights (35,000 units targeted at full capacity) and electric vehicles (bicycles, scooters, tricycles 15,000 at full capacity) that are then exported across West Africa and throughout the continent. Moreover, thanks to a strategic partnership with Haier, a world leader in home appliances and consumer electronics, the company plans to assemble computers and tablets (200,000 units targeted at full capacity), the long-term objective being to master the entire production process in Africa.

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