

SPEECH BY GEA PRESIDENT AT THE 60TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, OCTOBER 21, 2020

Hon. Ken Ofori-Atta, Minister of Finance,

Hon. Ignatius Baffour-Awuah, Minister of Employment and Labour Relations,

Council and Members of GEA, Distinguished Invited Guests

Friends from the Media,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the 60th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of our cherished Association. Our meeting this year coincides with the time where all nations are working assiduously to recover from a pandemic that has not only caused widespread health challenges, but business and economic disruptions around the globe with spillover effects to our national economy. It is regrettable therefore that we are unable to meet face-to-face this year to review the affairs of our dear Association, due to the need to observe social distancing protocols for the safety of all. It is my hope that we will continue to work together to defeat this deadly virus and overcome its devastating effects sooner rather than later. Hopefully, with Ghana's globally acclaimed effective management of the pandemic, and the easing of restrictions, in-person meetings should be possible soon.

Let me take this opportunity to express my appreciation to all the Executive Committee and Council Members of the Association for their cooperation, unrelenting support and collaboration towards the effective oversight and steering of the affairs of our great Association in these trying times. It is my hope that we shall continue to work together towards the achievement of our common objectives of improving the environment for doing business in Ghana during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the same spirit, I would like to thank each member of GEA for your support and commitment towards the activities of the Association, especially in relation to the construction of our new Office Complex which began in October 2017. Three years down the line, the building is about 65 percent complete, thanks to the contributions by members through the payment of the annual special levy in the past years. Despite the difficulties that greeted employers and businesses in this COVID-19 period, some members still paid their special levies with some even going the extra-mile to make special donations beyond the special levy to put the Association on course to achieving its grand objective of owning for the first time, its modern office complex in its sixty years of existence. God willing, this should become a reality by the end of the year.

It is refreshing to note that owing to the quantum of work done, this virtual 60th AGM is being transmitted live from the premises of the new office building. The GEA Secretariat has also relocated to the new building from its old office in the State Interest and Governance Authority (SIGA) building since July this year.

Let me hasten to add, however, that there is still significant finishing works that need to be carried out to make the structure fully operational at all levels. For this reason, I sincerely urge those who are yet to pay the Special Levy to promptly pay up to enable us meet our target completion date of December 2020. It is worthy to note that when the building is completed, it will increase our visibility, grow our membership and enhance our influence in the business and national policy community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghana had made significant progress towards macroeconomic management, economic growth, business investments and employment creation. The implementation of the various economic and social policies, and solid foundation laid by Government would have put the economy on the path of sustained growth for the realization of the “Ghana Beyond Aid Agenda” in the foreseeable future.

Ghana’s economic growth rate over the last two decades averages between 5 and 6 percent. In 2019, the country attained an improved growth rate of 6.8 percent, one of the highest growth rates for any Sub-Saharan African country at the time. The outbreak of COVID-19 has however derailed the economy off this positive growth trajectory to a path of significant decline as indicated by Government projections in the 2020 Budget Statement that revealed that the growth of Ghana’s GDP may decline from 6.8 percent to 2.6 percent by end of year 2020. Encouragingly, the latest Bank of Ghana Composite Index of Economic Activity (CIEA) recorded a recovery in real terms, of 3.6 percent for July 2020, compared with a contraction of 10.6 percent recorded in May 2020. Ghana will certainly work again!

The challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic is a signal to Employers and the Business Community that challenging times still lie ahead, as the spread of the pandemic has induced contraction of international trade, disruption of global supply chains, slowed local production and productivity, and created uncertainties in every aspect of life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There is therefore, the need for the formulation and implementation of an all-inclusive Economic Recovery Strategy that will restore the economy to its pre-COVID-19 path in a speedy manner and keep it on an even faster growth path. The GEA has, and continues to stand ready to work with Government and all other Stakeholders, especially Organised Labour, to accomplish what we see as a major national development Agenda. This background informed the theme for this years' AGM: "*Revitalizing Ghana's Economy Post Covid-19 Pandemic*".

I would like to point out that all stakeholders (i.e. Government, Employers and Workers) have a role to play in this strategy. As employers, one of our major roles will be to continue to enforce in an uncompromising manner in our respective organisations, the observance by our employees, of all the COVID-19 protocols that have been outlined by Government. One would like to stress the strict enforcement of the wearing of nose masks by all in public places. A very useful piece of information lies in the Communique' published on April 21, 2020, by the National Tripartite Committee (NTC) on guidelines for the fight against the Coronavirus at all workplaces. Another detailed and useful document for employers is the "*COVID-19 EMPLOYERS GUIDE*" developed by GEA to help all employers and businesses defeat

the pandemic. All these pieces of information are open access resources downloadable from the Association's website.

You will bear with me that Ghana has reached a critical point in the fight against the pandemic. It is therefore not only dangerous, but economically not prudent to relax on the basic COVID-19 policies and protocols at our disposal. It is important to say that if we let our guard down on this, the employer community, and indeed, our country Ghana, stand to lose all the health and economic gains made thus far in our fight against the spread of the virus.

As part of contributing to a rapid recovery of Ghana's economy, employers also owe it a heavy duty to adopt alternative production measures that have demonstrated the potency of shoring up the much required productivity that the economy needs to move onto the path of recovery and positive stability. The new normal occasioned by the pandemic will require new sets of skills and technology to remain productive and competitive. I am aware that the pandemic has disrupted budgets for activities in the ensuing years, so training of staff for new skills may not appear to be of utmost priority. I however believe that this is the time to prioritise training budgets to train a lot more of our staff for the cause of a rapid productivity growth.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The Leadership of Unions and Workers also have a critical role to play in this economic recovery efforts to make for a quick restoration of our economic and business glories, pre-COVID-19. Employers need the cooperation of workers and unions to ensure that the COVID-19 protocols, such as wearing of face masks, observing of social distancing, washing and sanitizing of hands,

and avoiding crowded places, among others, are strictly observed. Local Unions should endeavour to continue to educate workers on the shared responsibility of promoting personal safety to avoid a second wave of COVID-19 in the country.

In our judgment, the instrument of Social Dialogue has become more important in this COVID-19 era than one could have imagined. The leadership of all unions should therefore make it a point to continue to collaborate with employers to negotiate and reach agreement on pertinent issues that have the tendency of enhancing the business for a sustained win-win outcome for all stakeholders involved.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please permit me at this juncture to commend the Government of Ghana for the proactive measures taken to control the pandemic since its outbreak in Ghana in March, 2020. Employers appreciate the well thought through health policies and protocols implemented to enable the country reach this far in its fight against the pandemic to the admiration of even powerful countries around the globe.

The economy did not oscillate to the worse point, thanks to the fiscal and monetary policy measures that have been implemented to cushion employers, workers and the citizenry from the shocks of the pandemic. The stimulus packages have been beneficial to citizens and businesses that qualified to access them. We also welcome the flagship "*GH¢100 billion Ghana COVID-19 Alleviation and Revitalisation of Enterprises Support (Ghana CARES) programme*" which is earmarked for the Stabilization and Revitalization of the economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

An enabling environment for doing business is critical in the context of the pandemic to stimulate economic recovery and expansion, stimulate productivity, growth, attract scarce investment, and maintain and increase decent jobs. Therefore, we urge Government, to do everything within its means to ensure that the comprehensive economic recovery plan it has in place is effectively implemented with the involvement of all key stakeholders to enable employers and businesses to recover rapidly from the vagaries of the pandemic.

Employers are pleased to note that a lot has been done in the very recent past to bring down the cost of borrowing from the Banks. We commend the Government, and related Policy Makers and Institutions for making this happen. Employers continue to look forward with hope for further reductions in the cost of capital, hopefully to a single digit, to stimulate greater investment to aid rapid economic recovery and growth.

It is our firm conviction that the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of Ghana, shall undertake further diagnostic studies of the economy to enable it facilitate quick interest rate reduction measures to inject the needed liquidity into the economy to enhance investment and business activities in these challenging times.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please permit me to talk about Information Communication and Technology (ICT) and the new normal created by the COVID-19 pandemic. ICT has emerged as a key tool to enhance productivity for a quick recovery of the economy. Our review indicates that

the Ghanaian economy would have declined much more but for the availability and use of ICT. You will bear with me that but for ICT this year's AGM could not have been organized.

However, the cost of ICT products remain high in Ghana. There is also low access to this productivity augmenting tool by most Ghanaians in general and businesses in particular. A recent research conducted by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) to obtain the views of internet users revealed that 58% of the internet users indicated that the price of internet in Ghana was among the highest on the African Continent. This represents a significant barrier for Ghana to leverage on internet and ICT to recover from the disruptions of the pandemic.

In this regard, we urge Government to make the development of Ghana's ICT infrastructure a top priority to provide access to competitively-priced, high-speed internet to businesses, workers and the citizenry, one's location notwithstanding.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Permit me once again to touch on technology and the future of work. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the future of work seemed remote from our economy and labour market. The world of work has experienced profound changes as a result of the need for business continuity and keeping safe from the pandemic. The use of all forms of industry friendly technologies have brought in their wake, major changes in the organization of work, new ways of producing goods and rendering services, and the skills-set required. There is no doubt that current trends in technology to augment production have critical implications for skills acquisition, upskilling and reskilling of the Ghanaian workforce. Hence, the need for partnership between industry and training providing institutions to jointly train existing

workers, as well as prospective employees into the labour market.

May I now turn attention to the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) which was adopted for use by the African Union last year. GEA wishes to commend Government for expediting action and handing over of the AfCFTA Secretariat to the African Union as part of preparations to enable the Agreement become fully operational. The role of AfCFTA in Africa's economic development has become more important in this challenging times of COVID-19. It is projected that the AfCFTA will help unlock Africa's long-hindered economic progress by boosting intra-regional trade and strengthening supply chains among participating economies. This stands to increase intra-African trade by 52% in the year 2022.

As such, GEA will work in partnership with Government and other stakeholders to identify and support high employment and growth industries to produce in large volumes for export. The identification of such industries and targeting them with specialized support will enable Ghana to get the most out of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me reiterate the point that for Ghana to rapidly bounce back from the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is the urgent need to effectively implement an all-inclusive Economic Recovery Strategy, which will tackle among others, macroeconomic stability, attainment of a significantly reduced (if not single-digit) cost of borrowing, development of an efficient and effective national Information Communication and Technology infrastructure as well as maximizing the benefits of the AfCFTA.

In conclusion, please allow me once again to thank all of our invited guests, especially, the Guest Speaker, as well as the Hon. Minister of Employment and Labour Relations, for making time to be with us in this virtual meeting. My gratitude also goes to GEA members and indeed, everyone who has joined us virtually today on the occasion of our 60th AGM. As we move back to our various activities, please remember to observe every necessary COVID-19 protocol to stay safe.

May God bless us all and bless our Homeland Ghana!