

14TH CONTINENTAL ESSAY COMPETITION

CONCEPT NOTE

Theme - **"Advancing Intra-African Trade through Conformity Assessment and Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) — Unlocking the Full Potential of the Cotton-to-Clothing Value Chain under the AfCFTA"**



Dr Hermogene Nsengimana, SG, ARSO

THE ORGANISER OF THE COMPETITION

BACKGROUND

The **African Organisation for Standardisation (ARSO)** formed in **January 1977** by the African Union (AU) and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) mandated to develop and harmonise African Standards and Conformity Assessment Procedures, in order to reduce Technical Barriers to Trade and therefore promote Intra African and International Trade as well as enhance the industrialisation of Africa.

As part of its mandate to build a culture of standardisation and quality among Africa's youth, ARSO established the **Continental Essay Competition** to engage tertiary students across AU Member States on issues central to Africa's standardisation, quality infrastructure, and trade agenda.



National Standards Bureaus Appreciation for COORDINATION OF THE 13TH CEC during the 32nd ARSO General Assembly Events

INTRODUCTION

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the **14th Continental Essay Competition**. This year, we delve into the crucial theme: **"Advancing Intra-African Trade through Conformity Assessment and Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) – Unlocking the Full Potential of the Cotton-to-Clothing Value Chain under the AfCFTA"**

This initiative is coordinated by the ARSO Central Secretariat alongside National Standards Bodies.

This **Abridged Concept Note** explains how to organise and participate in the competition.





The **cotton-to-clothing value chain** — spanning cotton cultivation, ginning, spinning, weaving/knitting, garment manufacturing, and finished apparel.

Africa is a **significant producer of raw cotton**, yet the continent exports the majority of its cotton unprocessed, capturing only a fraction of the value added downstream in yarn, textile, and garment production.

The **14th Continental Essay Competition theme invites tertiary students** to critically examine how strengthened conformity assessment systems and MRAs can unlock the full potential of the cotton-to-clothing value chain in direct support of the AfCFTA's objectives

RATIONAL

Intra-African trade remains constrained by non-tariff barriers, foremost among them the lack of harmonised standards, weak conformity assessment infrastructure, and the absence of trust mechanisms — such as **Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs)** — that allow goods tested, inspected, or certified in one Member State to be accepted in another without duplicate testing.

The AfCFTA, as **Africa's flagship instrument for deepening market integration**, can only realise its full promise if products can move across borders efficiently, safely, and with confidence in their quality — **a confidence built through robust conformity assessment systems and mutually recognised certification** including the ARSO Mark.

Fragmented standards, inconsistent quality requirements, and limited conformity assessment and mutual recognition arrangements between Member States remain key obstacles preventing African cotton, textile, and apparel producers from trading seamlessly with one another and competing effectively in regional and global markets.

TARGET PARTICIPANTS

Eligible Students

- Enrolled in **an accredited tertiary institution** in an African Union Member State at the time of submission.
- Aged 35 years or below as at the essay submission deadline
- Open to students of all disciplines
- May submit only one essay for consideration; group or co-authored submissions are not eligible.
- Comply with Copyright Rules and AI Ethical Use Practice listed herein



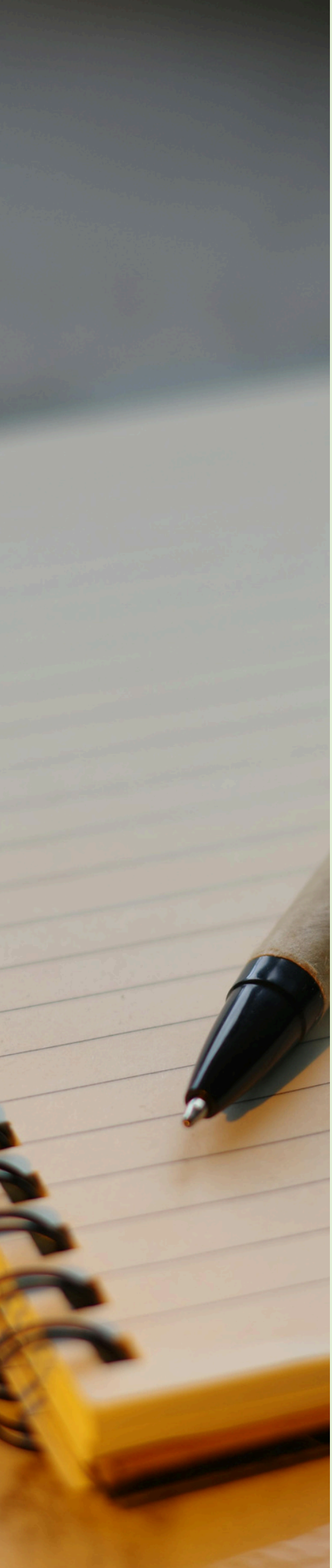
Top Three Winners (5 Countries - Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe) of the 13th Continental Essay Competition during the 32nd ARSO General Assembly Events in August 2026

NATIONAL COORDINATION

- **Promote** and **disseminate** the Competition to tertiary institutions within the country, including through *media*, *institutional partnerships*, and *social platforms*.
- **Receive essay submissions at the national level and verify eligibility** (age, enrolment status, originality).
- Constitute a **National Judging Panel to score submissions**
- Shortlist and submit the **top five (5) national entries** to the ARSO **on or before 23rd April 2027**
- Organise national-level recognition for participating and shortlisted students, where feasible.
- Submit a national participation report to ARSO



Illustrative Brochures for Respective Countries...



PROCESS FLOW

ESSAY GUIDELINES

- Length: **1,000 – 1,200 words**, excluding references, cover page, and appendices.
- Language: **English** or **French**
- Essays must be original, unpublished works.

Plagiarised or substantially AI-generated submissions will be disqualified upon detection; sources must be properly referenced using a consistent citation style (e.g., APA).

- Submitted as a word (.docx) document, size 12 font, 1.5 line spacing, **with a separate cover page bearing the student's name, institution, country, and contact details.** The essay body itself should not bear the author's name or institution, to support blind judging.
- ***Essays must be submitted through the National Coordinator in the student's country of study***; direct submissions to the ARSO Secretariat will be referred to the relevant National Coordinator.
- Kindly attach a copy of the Identity Card or Passport and a completely filled Registration Form (*ARSO/CACO/EC/Form 1/2026*)

JUDGING CRITERIA

National and Continental Judging Panels will apply the following weighted rubric:

Criterion	Weight
Relevance and responsiveness to the competition theme	**25%**
Depth of understanding of standardisation, conformity assessment, and MRAs	**25%**
Originality, creativity, and independent critical thinking	**20%**
Practical relevance and quality of policy/implementation recommendations	**20%**
Structure, clarity, language, and adherence to submission guidelines	**10%**

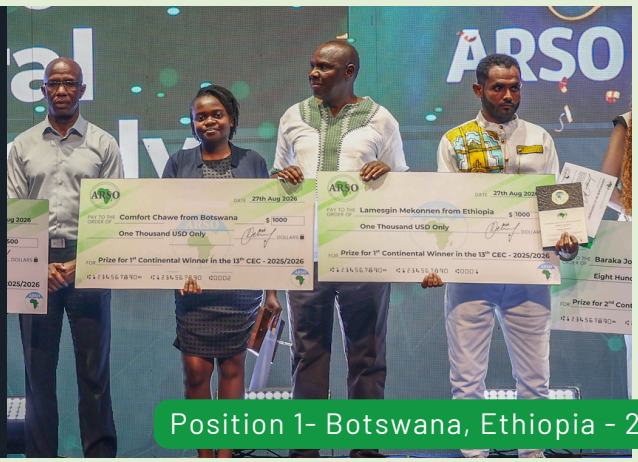
CONTINENTAL PRIZES

PRIZES AND RECOGNITION

$1000

1st Place

Cash award, certificate of excellence, and public recognition at the ARSO Awards Ceremony.



Position 1- Botswana, Ethiopia - 2026

$800

2nd Place

Cash award and certificate of excellence.

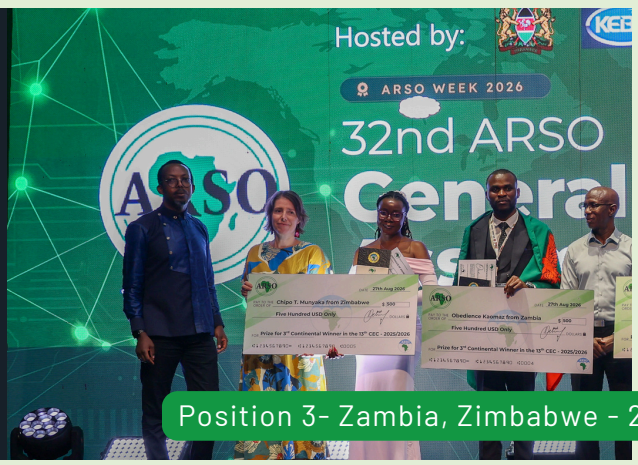


Position 2- Kenya - 2026

$500

3rd Place

Cash award and certificate of excellence.



Position 3- Zambia, Zimbabwe - 2026

For More Information Visit Our Website

WWW.ARSO-ORAN.ORG



ARSO MARK