

ECA and Africa's Development Agenda: A Briefing Note

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Introduction

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) was created in 1958 at the dawn of the decolonization of Africa, to help the newly independent countries and their governments make the transition from activities dominated by the struggle for independence to systematic identification and analysis of key socio-economic development issues, and setting goals for development policy and related investment and management tasks. Programs and modalities for their financing, as well as supporting policies, were usually expressed in the form of comprehensive multi-year development plans, covering all sectors of the economy. The plans were implemented largely by government and other public sector agencies. In those early years of independence, in-country policy analysis, program design and implementation capacity was nascent. ECA, through technical cooperation programs, assumed an early lead in defining the development agenda of member states and helping them build their capacities to map and pursue their chosen development courses. The Commission has also made other significant contributions to Africa's development; e.g. it proposed the African Development Bank and fostered sub-regional organizations. In recent years, it assumed fundamental responsibilities in regional integration, trade, monetary relations and informatics.

Forty years since its creation is a long enough interval for ECA to take stock of what has been done right by Africa and her development partners, including ECA itself, and what hasn't, and identify the critical elements for past successes or failures. Moreover, with globalization, and the major changes that have occurred in Africa's political, social, economic and financial environments, the recent review and recasting of ECA's strategy for future assistance was timely. This briefing note highlights what ECA sees as some of Africa's critical development challenges and opportunities, and how these translate into what should be the core elements of Africa's development agenda. The note also highlights ECA's response, so as to serve Africa better into the next century.

Development Opportunities and Challenges

After a period of unprecedented decline, Africa's development prospects now appear brighter than at any time since the decade of independence. A new generation of leaders has absorbed the lessons of the past and is boldly moving ahead with reforms, liberalization of economies, and discipline in management. In 1995, more than half the nations of Africa enjoyed real GDP growth in excess of their population growth. At least a third of these countries recorded growth rates of 6 percent and above in 1995, and only three countries experienced negative growth, compared to fourteen countries the year before. Sub-Saharan Africa's GDP growth in 1996, estimated at 3.8 percent, is more than double the performance in 1991-95, when it was estimated at 1.5 percent. Additionally, the African group of countries on the UN's list of "Least Developed Countries" recorded average growth in 1996 estimated at 4.6 percent, implying that their per capita output rose for the

second year in a row. Even Africa's terms of trade are showing modest improvement. Furthermore, most African states are more determined than ever to settle conflicts peaceably. It is reassuring also to know that intellectual and program strengths abound on the continent. These realities are the basis for the growing hope that Africa now has a distinct opportunity to meet basic human needs and sharply reduce poverty in an environment of economic growth. Thus, one can foresee a future in our children's lifetimes where, at the very least, universal basic education and health services are available and enterprises flourish. Already, the middle class is increasing, governance is more responsible and pluralistic, and cooperation among African nations is beginning to yield reciprocal gains. These are opportunities that could be tapped to further advance Africa' development.

The course towards such a new secure Africa is by no means certain. The challenges are formidable: delivering sound economic management, implementing equitable public policies, reducing pressures on the environment, coping with food and water insecurities, and ameliorating fragile ethnic relations are among the serious challenges as we head into the 21st century. Additionally, the globalisation of economic activity, especially trade and finance, adds several dimensions to the issues Africa and her development partners must address so as to avoid marginalisation of the continent. ECA is at the center of it all and is repositioning to meet the challenge and assist Africa realize her expectations.

Being more responsive to Africa' Development Agenda: ECA' Internal Reforms

Africa' expectations have heightened. As her development moves on sluggishly, and teeters between the forces of progress and fracture, ECA is hearing the voices of its member countries calling for new brands of services, and not just what the Commission can offer on the basis of past trends, or what it can afford, given the constraints of its regular financial and staff resources. The Commission recognizes that it has entered an era of unprecedented challenges and opportunities, where past practices would not constitute an adequate response. And timing is critical. To prepare itself to be effective in this time of decision, the Economic Commission for Africa recently completed a systematic, year-long assessment (mid-1995 to mid-1996) of its strengths and weaknesses. In the process, ECA was willing to put everything on the table-substantive work programmes and management systems alike. After all, ultimately, successful African development will require African nations and institutions to implement home-grown or home-adopted solutions to problems of the continent. To carry out its mandate to support economic and social development in Africa, ECA must have the capacity to develop and disseminate credible options, advocate positions, and forge consensus on key issues. The year-long assessment mapped a strategy for organizational, systems, management, programs and operational reforms that will enhance the Commission' assistance to member States in defining and implementing Africa' development agenda.

Changes in ECA' Operational Strategy and Modalities

Focus, Selectivity and Leveraging are central to ECA' new strategy, enabling concentration of resources on critical issues and activities which underpin the program of assistance to member States. This approach was a key conclusion of the consultation process between ECA, its network partners and other development analysts and practitioners, and is being implemented with ECA's comparative advantage in mind, and in the framework of networking and strategic partnership.

Networking is the main new feature of ECA' operational modalities. The Commission is putting in place new practices that will emphasize ECA' role as a net-worker of development expertise on Africa. ECA will actively seek out relationships and network with regional centers of policy expertise, research and policy institutions in member States, individual experts on Africa, and centers of excellence outside the continent that concentrate on African development. ECA will also serve as a clearing-house for best practices and development information, which will be disseminated to the networks and to member States.

Strategic partnerships is the major new element of ECA' strategy to increase her own capacity, and those of partners and member States, to deliver services. A major outcome of the consultation process with partners was identification of specific areas and modalities for collaboration, stressing the importance of each partner contributing in areas of comparative advantage to achieve optimal output. Suggested areas for cooperation are: sharing of data, joint studies and seminars, combined missions to member States, staff exchanges, and networking on issues of mutual concern.

An example of such strategic partnership and networking is the collaboration between ECA and the Nairobi, Kenya-based economic research network, the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC). The network has contributed to substantive capacity building in Africa by providing Sub-Saharan African researchers with financial support and availing them the opportunity to interact with world authorities in their respective thematic fields. Collaborative activities between ECA and AERC have taken the forms of research dissemination conferences, joint training seminars, review workshops, and joint research planning and administration. ECA plans to replicate this relationship with other networks, including the new ones it will sponsor.

The UN sister institutions, another network that has traditionally been a partner in delivering services to member States, will be even more important in future in the context of the UN System-wide Special Initiative on Africa. The Special initiative is about bringing discipline to the system' fragmented actions in support of Africa, and to give momentum to the positive political and economic trends in Africa. To this end, the Initiative is designed to bring coherence and achieve synergy based on concerted collaboration in thirteen priority areas. A major focus of the Initiative is on poverty reduction through coordinated sector-wide support to African countries for the provision of universal, primary education and essential health services. Specific leadership roles are taken by agencies across the UN System, including the Bretton Woods Institutions, in each of the priority areas. A joint ECA and UNDDP Special Initiative Secretariat has the responsibility for the day to day coordination and monitoring of the Initiative. In addition to its Secretariat mandate, ECA also has leadership responsibility for the Initiative' program on South-South Collaboration, Harnessing Information Technology for Development, Governance, and Poverty Reduction through the Promotion of the Informal Sector.

ECA will build on its well-established history of collaboration with the UN System agencies, and, under the Special Initiative, leverage its development impact and those of its sister agencies and regional partner institutions, the Africa Development Bank (ADB) and Organization of African Unity (OAU). With its strengthened institutional capacity, and the systematic coordination built in the Special Initiative, the Commission, through its work program, will more effectively assist UN agencies to meet their mandates on Africa' development agenda.

Africa' Development Agenda and ECA' Core Work Program

There is an emerging consensus as to what the critical issues for Africa are and what should constitute Africa' development agenda. ECA sees these issues, and the agenda for tackling them, as logically emerging from the "opportunity and challenges" described earlier in this briefing note: i. e. developing the capacity for designing and implementing economic and social policies to alleviate poverty; grappling with the delicate balance between population growth, agriculture and the environment, which collectively underpin sustainable development; strengthening development management culture and institutions, particularly enhancing the capacity of the state to create and nurture a development enabling environment, promote a prominent role for the private sector, strengthen civil society organizations for development and peace, foster gender equity, and implement policies that expedite the use of information technology in Africa's development. With this agenda in mind, the Commission has set forth the target areas for implementing five core programs so as to respond to Africa' needs:

Facilitating Economic and Social Policy Analysis. A key element in Africa' development agenda is to develop the capacity for analyzing economic and social issues so as avail policy makers and implementers options for realizing economic and social objectives. ECA will gather and synthesize available information on Africa, analyze policy options, particularly on long-term issues, and disseminate information to her constituencies on successful development models and best practices. ECA will use partnerships and networking to draw on the work of other development organizations and serve as a catalyst for development efforts of member States, focusing on multi-country strategies and addressing issues of a regional nature. Economic policy analyses conducted by ECA will also focus on macro and international economic priorities-fiscal and monetary management, open trade and investment policies, liberalization of financial markets, and regional integration. ECA will work with African countries to articulate common positions in international negotiations, provide assistance with debt reduction strategies and post-Uruguay Round trade issues, so as to maximize benefits from globalization.

The eradication of *poverty* and the improvement of the human situation undoubtedly constitute the supreme objective of Africa' development, subsuming all other objectives. Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, is the only region in the world where both the absolute number and the proportion of people living under conditions of poverty has increased since 1980, and where the conditions themselves have worsened. Social policy analyses will focus on monitoring poverty on the continent and, drawing on the work of all sub-programs, promote effective strategies for its reduction.

Gender issues underlie many critical elements of the economic and social agenda in Africa, including the poverty and education crises. Policies and actions to promote social and legal equity for women and further their education are a core element of the ECA program. In addition, ECA's African Center for Women will devote its activities to a major cross-cutting concern, *Fostering Leadership and Empowerment for Women in Africa*. Its work will be mainstreamed throughout the Commission's programs to help member States improve the socio-economic conditions of women, enhance their involvement in development-related decision making, and ensure that women and gender equity are key elements in national development. This cross-cutting theme is one of the ways ECA will promote implementation within Africa of the Global Platform of Action and its regional counterpart, the African Platform of Action.

Ensuring Food Security and Sustainable Development. One of the most compelling issues facing Africa is the nexus dynamic, i.e., developing policies to mitigate the problems arising from the related phenomena of population expansion, declining per capita agricultural production, and increasing threats to the continent's fragile ecology. Africa is the only continent where agricultural production per capita has been declining steadily, and population and environmental degradation are increasing. This situation has resulted in greater food insecurity in Africa and undermined prospects for long-term sustainable development. Today, Africa is the only region where the number of poor-and hence the number facing food insecurity (now estimated as one-third of the continent's population)-is projected to continue rising. ECA's actions in this core program will include: raising African policy-maker awareness of the urgency to integrate food, population, and environmental concerns into development planning; building national and local capacity to manage nexus issues in the context of national development policies; encouraging attention of member States to develop policies to accelerate agricultural productivity; and, identifying and promoting the adoption of best practices in the three nexus areas.

Strengthening Development Management. Effective management of development must be anchored on three of the five pillars of the UN' Global Agenda for Development: peace, social justice and democracy. It requires an efficient and competent public sector, a robust and properly functioning private sector, and enhanced popular participation, which is mostly found in civil society organizations. Strengthening the managerial and institutional capacities of these segments of society is key to enhancing their individual and collective roles in promoting civil reconciliation, peace, good governance and democracy, which are pre-requisites of sustainable development. Thus ECA' third core program will focus on activities aimed at developing an efficient public sector and a robust private sector, enhancing popular participation in civil society, and exploring modalities for promoting their separate and mutual roles. In public-sector management, ECA will promote good governance by encouraging systems that foster accountability and minimize corruption. Additionally, the Commission will foster civil service reform and promote decentralization and strengthening of local government. In private-sector development, ECA will assist governments to reform regulatory regimes, so as to improve the functioning of markets, promote dialogue between government and business, and participate in collaborative programs to foster credit schemes that target the informal and micro enterprises sectors. ECA will also augment its already-active role of promoting development through institutions of civil society by promoting collaboration between NGOs and UN organizations, establish a resource center for NGOs and civil society organizations, and continue organizing and facilitating dialogue between civil society and governments. The center will also provide training and technical assistance to build NGO capacity.

Harnessing Information for Development. Information is a resource and has value that can be traded and exploited. Information, including data, is a tool for development. Timely and reliable information and data are needed for policy-making in the public sector, and for business decisions in the private sector. If Africa does not embrace information and communications technology, her development will lag behind the rest of the world even further. By entering the Information Age, Africa can exploit new technologies that the continent needs to participate fully in the global economy. Harnessing information for development has been central to ECA' work for a long time, and will continue to be so in future. As in the past, the Commission will play a leading role in promoting electronic dissemination of information in Africa.

In its last two sessions, the annual ECA Conference of Ministers adopted

resolutions endorsing the African Information Society Initiative (AISI), an action framework for building an information and communication infrastructure in Africa. ECA was also charged by all the partners in the initiative with coordinating the implementation of AISI, and the related component: 'Harnessing Information Technologies for Development', of the UN System-wide Special Initiative on Africa. Implementation of these initiatives will strengthen ECA's advocacy role as it conducts policy workshops for African member States. The workshops will focus on the importance of building the information society and the policy reforms necessary to make this happen, as well as on effective utilization of information and information technology to improve the competitiveness of African economies and build sound social systems.

National capacities for statistical data generation have seriously deteriorated in the past fifteen years. Therefore, another priority in this core program is rehabilitation of African statistical systems. This will be done in the context of ECA' role of assisting member States to implement the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development. A complementary activity will be ECA' effort to improve its own database with a view to serving as a regional data services center; no such regional database exists in Africa at present.

Promoting Regional Cooperation and Integration. Regional cooperation and integration offers tremendous opportunities for economic growth, enabling African countries to overcome the constraints of small national markets and increasing intra-Africa trade, while facilitating economies of scale in production. It is increasingly recognized that regional integration which promotes trade through efficiency gains due to larger markets (and spatially closer markets, where freight costs are far less than for overseas markets), rather than through high tariffs against competitors, is a desirable policy objective. Such approach to regional integration is consistent with the World Trade Organization rules and should be encouraged. To realize the benefits of integration, the right policies and investments are needed, including harmony in monetary, trade, investment and competition policy, as well as physical infrastructures to link national economic spaces, and to free the movement of goods, services, capital and people. Equally important, the institutions that underpin regional cooperation must be credible in consistently applying agreed rules, and effective in managing inter-state differences when they occur. Africa has made a start in this direction, but rationalization of groupings and integrative activities within the groupings need to be underpinned by research to establish comparative advantages and the spatial, inter-country incidence of policy actions.

Promotion of research, transport planning and other regional integrative activities are a major mandate of ECA and are pivotal to its work program, which in the past has helped member states to prepare for intra-Africa linkages, and to establish or strengthen sub-regional organizations. The Commission will help member States in further strengthening sub-regional organizations and will make the economic case for regional integration through policy papers and advocacy. Potential gains from coordination of infrastructure and material-resources investment in Africa will be emphasized. Facilitation of cross-border enterprise development will be advocated in ECA' policy dialogue with member states. The Abuja Treaty will continue to be the major framework around which ECA will collaborate and integrate efforts with its Joint Secretariat partners, the OAU and the ADB.

ECA is also decentralizing in order to strengthen sub-regional activities and staff, so as to respond more expeditiously to requests for ECA services. The

Commission's Sub-regional Development Centers (SRDCs), formerly known as Multinational Programming and Operational Centers (MULPOCs), located in each of Africa's five sub-regions, are being rationalized to provide more equitable geographic coverage and improve their functional relationships, especially with organizations such as the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The SRDCs will forge joint programs and activities for the benefit of member States, international governmental organizations, and non-governmental agencies. They will facilitate networking and information exchange among development agencies in their sub-regions, and provide links between these organizations and ECA, thereby helping disseminate the Commission's policy recommendations, information, and technical publications.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, ECA will operate as a *net-worker* of development expertise in Africa, a clearing-house for best practices and a policy integrator that pools together analyses from a number of fields to provide the best possible advisory services to member States. Priorities for activities and operations in support of ECA's five core program areas, including the cross-cutting theme of gender, have been set so as to maximize value-added. They are geared to building capacity within ECA and in member states. They are:

- Training, seminars and workshops aimed at developing critical skills in support of the agenda and programs objectives of the Commission and member States;
- Research and studies, within the commission, in member States, and among development organizations that are needed for proper decision-making;
- Well targeted conferences and publications as vehicles to disseminate results of studies as well as syntheses of "best practices"; and,
- Internships, Resident Scholars and Staff Exchange programs to increase ECA's in-house capabilities, as well as contribute to its network formation goals.
- ECA is convinced that tapping network-affiliated expertise outside the Commission is a cost-effective way to amass talent on behalf of the region, and to make relevant advice available to member States in a timely manner, as, when requested of ECA, such advice could be provided by a network member in closer proximity to the user than the staff in Addis Ababa. The *network* approach holds a lot of promise, judging by the evidence so far. The example of the ECA partnership with AERC, the premier economic analysis network in Africa, has already forged strong links. AERC is ECA's empirical evidence that there is nothing wrong with innate African capacity once the resource constraints are relaxed. The ECA/AERC collaboration is a good model of the type of several partnerships ECA is forging. It is a precursor of the web of networks that ECA hopes to build to the benefit of Africa.