Opening Plenary Address

"African Women and Economic Development: Investing in our Future"

by
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Your Excellency, Mr. Meles Zenawi,
Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,

Your Excellency, Mr. Richard Kaijuka, Chairman of
the Bureau of ECA’s Conference of Ministers
and Minister of Planning and Economic
Development of Uganda,

Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished speakers,
Civil Society leaders,
United Nations Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Most of us are old enough to fully appreciate what it means to have a 40th birthday as ECA now celebrates: old enough to bear the burden of responsibilities, young enough to accept the responsibilities with joy. In many ways it is a very good time. In fact it feels just right.

We in ECA greet each of you warmly and with thanks for your being here. It is an important occasion, which we celebrate with the intellectual fireworks of this audience. We celebrate by reflecting on the past, looking towards the future and rededicating ourselves to the people of Africa.

ECA was founded 40 years ago almost to the day. It is rightly seen throughout this continent as being Of Africa, By Africa, and For Africa.

My five predecessors in office, including some of the great names of African development... along with many other prominent Africans who served on our staff, our Bureau and in partner organizations all around the continent... have all added to this institution. I honour their contributions to ECA and to Africa’s development.

Now, Africa is experiencing a renaissance and so are we. ECA is in the midst of major reforms to serve Africa better.

I know we have achieved a great deal, but I also know we have a long way to go until ECA lives up to its full potential.

Given the dynamic nature of Africa’s development, it can be expected that our member States will ask ECA to shift its emphases over time as the environment for development evolves. But we are agreed upon the enduring fundamentals: peaceful cooperation; development of Africa’s economies; loyalty to the well-being of every African.

This conference is a hallmark not only of our 40th anniversary, but of our reform. It is structured to highlight forward-looking issues, to bridge sectors, to foster results-oriented discussions, and to share joy in our work together.

The topic of the conference was chosen carefully.
The issue of gender and African development goes back to the early years of ECA's work. In response to a groundswell of African women seeking gender equality, ECA began its first formal women in development program in 1971.

At that time it was not obvious that major institutions working for Africa's progress should devote a lot of their energies to gender issues. In later years gender did become an obvious issue.

In the late 1970s it was not obvious, as it was in ECA, that Africa's rising debt should become a priority. In later years debt did become an obvious issue.

In the mid-1980s it was not obvious, as it was in ECA, that economic reforms should be so tightly woven with governmental reform and reform with a human face. In later years, broad-based reforms safeguarding the human condition did become an obvious issue.

In the early 1990s it was not obvious, as it was to virtually the entire United Nations family, that human rights are necessary both for peace and development. Now it is obvious.

Today, it is not obvious, but it soon will be, that we are entering into a very opportune era to advance the social conditions of Africa's peoples. Social development in Africa, on an unprecedented scale, will entail major advancement in the well being of all people, particularly the poor. These advances will be brought about through concerted efforts in education, health and pro-poor economic policies.

We can reach universal basic education, still the best development investment for women and for our societies, in less time than most think possible. We will also need a resurrection and expansion of Africa's secondary and higher educational systems. Many of the needed tasks are increasingly doable.

We will see major expansion of the health systems in Africa, at long last creating the horizontal base of community health, so necessary for sustainable maternal and child health and normal preventive health systems.

And we will see more progress than most can imagine in the spread of pro-poor economic policies such as micro credit, support of small scale enterprises, attention to employment and protection of the poor in times of economic disruption.

As I say, it is not obvious that bold advances in the social condition of Africa's peoples are on the horizon. Indeed, the advances I have just outlined seem completely counter-intuitive at a time when many social indicators are in decline in Africa. So for the moment, please have a willing suspension of belief, while I spell out what I believe to be a compelling rationale for this optimism.

((Power point begins))
In fact, there are five fundamental developments which are creating new opportunities of historic dimensions for social development.

The first fundamental development we should note is the spread of the information revolution throughout Africa. From our groundbreaking work starting in 1979 through to our current service as the secretariat for Africa’s Information Society Initiative we have been amazed at the spread of information and communications, particularly in recent years.

In just a few years, Internet service has jumped from 4 countries to 46; computer services are popping up all over; and costs are starting to decline. Development information spread through radio and television will pick up markedly with the rise of regional satellites. Make no mistake about it: Africa will enter its own information age in the decades ahead where we will see far more widespread communications and information as part of our lives.

There are dramatic implications for social development: distance education services will grow markedly; Regional radio will be a powerful non-formal educator; Basic education will be furthered, as ECA, the World Bank and USAID will explore in an important conference here next month; Tele-medicine systems will grow. The early work is impressive as is now demonstrated in Mozambique; Telecenters, starting this year, will be established to serve the information needs of poor communities in the rural and urban areas; Sales of products of the poor will be enhanced as in a new virtual souk selling women’s handicrafts in North Africa; and Virtual conferencing and networking, such as was used to prepare for this conference, will link people as never before.

Such information and communications developments open up major opportunities for Africa’s social development.

The second fundamental factor altering the possibilities for Africa’s social development is the promise of major health improvements. New medical products and biomedical advances relevant to us can be expected as the world turns more serious attention to diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis and polio. A lot of innovations will take place to lower the cost of health systems. Over time health services should be more reliable as systems are better established and more widespread. Reproductive health components will increasingly be integrated into health sector reforms and primary care. A more vibrant private health system will use advertisements and more widespread distribution of health products. Nutrition education will be more available through mass media and educational systems.

One major threat to these promising prospects is the HIV/AIDS pandemic which, unless checked, will have very negative consequences for Africa’s prospects in the decades
We will need to sharply increase population education and programs. And we would do well to join the call of the Secretary General. Recently he urged the pharmaceutical industry to work with African countries and the World Health Organization; the goal would be to set a timetable for achieving more affordable access by Africa to life-saving and life-enhancing drugs for the treatment of HIV/AIDS and other pervasive diseases. The point is that we must seize the many opportunities which will open up to improve health. If we act on these opportunities there will not only be more years of life for Africans, but far more productive years during life.

A generation ago, it was not part of our planning to expect lifespans to increase 25%, but it happened. Are our current planning projections so static that we cannot foresee significant health gains on this continent in the next few decades? Indeed, we should have a very positive future.

The third fundamental reason we can envision enormous social progress in the years ahead is the positive changes in governance now underway on this continent. Over the long haul there is a trend to more democratic governments and such governments tend to respond more to the public demands for basic services, of which education, health and sanitation services are at the top.

We also know that more transparent and accountable public services means that social services can be expected over time to be more effectively delivered. And populations which are better connected to the world and learning to voice their concerns will only sharpen their demands for social services. Meeting these demands in an era of improving governance will increasingly be a political imperative.

The fourth fundamental shift favorable for social development is the rise in partnership possibilities in the delivery of social development. The dramatic growth of Africa’s organized civil society means that there are many more potential organizational resources for the tasks of social development and these civil society institutions can be very innovative. They also allow the state to share the risks of social interventions. The dramatic growth in Africa’s organized capital markets, particularly in North Africa and Southern Africa, means that there are an increasing range of possibilities for public-private partnerships in financing social development. For example, if Africa follows other parts of the world, we will see the floating of long-term bonds for social development.

Because of their high potential for Africa’s development, ECA is turning into an important meeting ground for the non-profit and the profit sectors.

The fifth fundamental shift is the gender cause itself. Those working to fully include women as equals in Africa’s development have an agenda which is very pro-social development.

They are educating policy makers to the need to advance the well-being of girls and women. And their research has proven that as women progress economically, and there has been progress, they spend more for the social betterment of their families, which, of course, adds to the demand for social services.
But, the fact is that you cannot isolate progress for girls and women from progress for society as a whole. For example, you cannot just demand access to basic education for girls: both genders move ahead when you widen opportunities for girls. Politically you can’t create community health services which just cater to maternal and female child health needs: everyone in the community must have access. So in a very real sense, the advocates for gender progress are advocates for general social progress.

Information and communications, health systems, more responsive governance, more opportunities for partnership, gender advocacy: Five strong fundamental shifts all of which are gaining momentum in Africa. These shifts make it far more likely that Africa will have its “golden age of social development” in the decades ahead.

That golden age is likely, but not inevitable. It will happen when leaders and policy-makers consciously build on the opportunities I have outlined. There are choices to be made.

There is serious work to do in implementing the agreements made at the World Summit for Social Development. To focus on these implementation issues ECA in tandem with UNDP will sponsor late this year in Nairobi a regional follow-up meeting to the Summit. There we could usefully focus on implementation of basic education, basic health and anti-poverty measures, many of which are being assisted by the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa. The meeting also might consider other measures African nations, alone or in partnership, can take to accelerate social development.

The choices before us regarding the future of social development on this continent will become much more clear so that we will be entering a time our leaders and our partners will increasingly be held to the test of whether they are enhancing the well being of our peoples at the community, municipal and national levels. If, as research shows, two-thirds of a nation’s wealth is contained in human capital, leaders will increasingly be challenged to reflect this in budgets.

With the climate for social development now turning so favorable, this is a time for boldness, for vision and for optimism for the well being of Africa’s peoples in the decades ahead.

It is within this context of sharply enhanced prospects for the social development of our peoples, a not now obvious opportunity which is about to become obvious, that we can face with optimism a New Era for Africa’s Women. It is why we can hold this conference with such confidence.

A new era of gender integration and equity for women is not dependent on following the current international consensus on the requirements for progress:

- Progress for women can be helped, but does not intrinsically require, multiparty elections and Westminster democracies. All governments, all political systems can and should be held to the tests of gender integration and equity.
• Progress for women can be helped, but does not intrinsically require, fully liberalized markets and fully adjusted macro-economic policies. All economies, all economic systems, can and should be held to the test of gender integration and equity.

But progress for women does require the fair and widespread promotion of human rights, for if the rights of a bit over half of society are not an issue in human rights, then the term ‘human rights’ is meaningless. Historically, progress for women does require space for and understanding of dynamic tensions with civil society.

For while all of us, including governments, like to think of ourselves as enlightened on all issues, on this issue it most often takes the ideas, pressures and cooperation of civil society.

And a final factor, progress for Africa’s women requires something the international consensus on progress does not speak about: it is the requirement of people who know that their self-interest and their self-worth requires progress for Africa’s women.

I speak of women willing to change. The good future of African women in development will not take place just because the rhetoric is sweet. The good future depends upon women who see a different future for themselves, with real opportunities, and with the odds shifting more in their favor.

I speak of men willing to change. Men who value gender partnership, who see that when women meet their full potential, societies will be better off, communities will be a better place to live, families will be more prosperous, and children will have a far brighter future.

We know that an engendered society requires leadership from all sectors: from corporate leaders and the small business owners, from heads of state to heads of government sections, from presidents of civil society organizations to community leaders, and from cultural icons to media editors. Leaders who understand the stakes for their constituencies know that this is an issue they must face.

They know that change can be postponed, but it cannot be thwarted. They know that new Africa requires a new gender partnership.

It is with this perspective in mind that ECA has chosen Africa’s gender issues as the single greatest cross cutting issue for our work. We will be close listeners to this conference. We expect to learn a lot for our substantive work. So my first hope for this meeting is that ideas will be translated into actions.

My second hope is that there will be new synergies and opportunities discovered to strengthen support of Africa’s policy-makers as they grapple with the implications of the rich agenda before you.
And my third hope is that we will work together for expanded partnerships within Africa and between Africa and its friends abroad to hasten a new era for women in Africa and to exploit and make far more obvious the enormous opportunities for social development of all Africans.

If we can accomplish these things, what better way to celebrate ECA’s 40th birthday?

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen of a new era of gender and social progress,

We are so pleased that each of you is here. We are particularly grateful to the heads of state and government who will be with us; to the leaders of civil society; to our international partner organizations who so generously enabled this conference to take place; to the pioneers and the youth, the future pioneers of social progress in Africa, who will enrich this conference; and for all those throughout Africa whose enormous human potential inspires our deliberations and our confidence in the future.

Thank you.