

Statement by Mr. Carlos Lopes, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ECA

Africa Regional Consultative Meeting on the Sustainable Development Goals

Ministerial Segment

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4 November 2013, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Honourable Sufian Ahmed, Minister of Finance and Economic Development of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia;

Dr. Anthony Maruping, Commissioner for Economic Affairs of African Union Commission; and Mrs. Rhoda Peace, Commissioner for Rural Economy of the African Union;

Honourable Ministers;

Excellencies, Ambassadors and Heads of Diplomatic Missions;

My colleagues Wu Hongbo, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Economic

and Social Affairs; Maged Abdelaziz, UN Special Adviser on Africa, and
Gilbert Houngbo, Deputy Director General of the ILO;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the ECA and to the Ministerial Segment of the Africa Regional Consultative Meeting on the Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable development is about reframing the global development agenda in ways that will give both present and future generations the autonomy to be active forces in their own destinies. Your presence here today is a clear indication of a collective resolve to define the “future we want”.

As we embark on a pathway for Africa’s transformation, our challenge is to define solutions that do justice to the inter-generational social contract that defines our goals. Our actions are being watched by the younger generation already. They are not waiting to be actors in this debate; they already are. The call for transformation is very concrete in their formulations. They want a strong anti-poverty push. But they also feel that focus is not enough for creating jobs, having electricity or communicating through mobile phones. They want the future to be no different from region to region and natural resources to be used wisely by all, not just by some.

Honourable ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

Sustainable development, since its seminal inclusion in the Brundtland report of 1987, remains an aspirational set of values and principles, where development meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It challenges our ability to bring greater balance in our social, economic and environmental development goals, with human security and prosperity, seeing as necessary preconditions for a functional tomorrow. It is therefore imperative to treat all the three dimensions of sustainable development –economic, social and environmental- equally.

Africa is on a promising pathway. It has defied the naysayers who predicted it would spiral downwards into further conflict and insecurity as a result of poverty and privation. Over the last decade, Africa has experienced fast economic growth, improved governance, less people affected by complex conflicts and humanitarian crisis.

The way MDGs have been measured misses many of Africa’s achievements. When we started counting, year 2000, it is true Africans were further away from the universal finish line than most. Yet all countries were supposed to get to that the common 2015 banner in the same number of years. This was unfair and remains an issue. The prevailing narrative will not say that 15 out of 20 best MDGs performers by level of effort are African. It will not say that Africa’s

GDP more than doubled. It will not mention that the number of conflicts diminished dramatically. It will not acknowledge that Africa has less refugees today, than say the Middle East.

Africa now receives US\$ 50 billion of FDI per year, and growing. 8 countries went to the markets this year, and their offerings were all over-subscribed. Almost every month there is a new discovery of an energy source, or the announcement of a renewable project. We continue to have unparalleled natural resources. Africa's demographic trends, including rapid urbanization, offer opportunities if a proper demographic dividend is planned. Projections suggest that in less than three generations, over 40% of the world's youth will be African. By 2050, Africa's youth will constitute over a quarter of the world's labour force.

A correlation can be drawn between Africa and Asian emerging markets, where 40% of their rapid economic growth -between 1965 and 1990- was attributable to an increase in the working age population. In the case of Africa it comes when most of the world population is ageing. This enormous asset can help propel Africa's industrialization path. With half of the population living in cities, close proximity will allow economies of scale and closer interaction of skilled and qualified people, sharing knowledge and innovation. Cities in Africa already generate approximately 55% of the continent's total GDP. With more growth they could match developed countries, where cities generate approximately 90% of GDP. The opportunities for economic growth, poverty reduction, human development and innovation abound.

As a "latecomer", Africa can power its way through the technological revolution, and advances made in science and innovation. Leapfrogging is not a pipe dream, it is happening. Still, as we move forward, more and more of the poor are concentrated in rural and remote areas as well as slums. Development enablers have to be directed to these problem areas and help them transform into contributors of development. This has been done in many parts of the world, but Africa will have to do it faster than anywhere else. Is that possible?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Africa should remember its growth is not yet producing enough transformation. Those countries already industrialized, and the ones that aspire to be, have two common worrisome truths to deal with: they are becoming less industrialized and more unequal. The two go together, unfortunately. Tackling this necessitates leadership and courage. It requires determination. Nobody can do it for the Africans.

That being said Sustainable Development Goals should not fall victim to certain dysfunctional practices that underpin the principles of justice and social equity. For instance, developed countries throw away 222 million tonnes of food every year, which constitute the annual harvest of sub-Saharan Africa. Developed countries should make efforts to reform their agricultural subsidies and trade policies to reduce the vulnerabilities of African smallholder farmers; whose productivity and entrepreneurship is often held hostage to such practices.

For development to be sustainable, we need to be guided by the utilitarian principle, which provides a moral compass of ensuring the “greatest good for the greatest number”. Africa has within its reach, the capacity, the people, resources and opportunities to lead the way on sustainable development.

Allow me to propose three sectors where Africa can lead.

First, there is opportunity in the energy sector. The evidence is mounting that Africa’s need to expand its capacity to generate power can be met through renewable energy technologies that deliver clean and sustainable energy supplies. Overcoming the barriers that prevent the development of renewable energy in a context of climate change will depend largely on improving the policy and institutional environment in Africa. Inclusive green growth is a frontier that could focus on affordable renewable energy services, the promotion of green jobs and the reduction of poverty.

Second is the agriculture sector. Agriculture holds the key to unlock Africa’s growth potential, to attain the 7% threshold. Leveraging the continent’s agriculture sector is critical given our growing population and an ever-increasing demand for food. This will entail making efficient investments in technologies, innovation, enhanced water management capacity and sustainable land tenure systems. Africa needs agro-business, higher productivity and backward and forward linkages to work.

The third sector is manufacturing. Africa can prove that climate change is better tackled by moving industrial production next to where the resources are. Not only we reduce CO2 and deal effectively with green technology leapfrogging, but we will also add value to commodities. Africa has the option to choose technologies that may be too costly for others.

Honourable ministers, ladies and gentlemen

The landmark decision at Rio+20 to define a universal set of SDGs is laudable. Today, this consultative meeting can ensure that Africa’s priorities are adequately reflected in the global formulation of SDGs. It is important to ensure that the outcome of consultations is favourable to Africa’s development aspirations. Beyond the adoption of SDGs at the global level, sound and dynamic national development policies and planning will be indispensable to the realisation of the continent’s goals. For this to be achieved, National Development Strategies and long-term vision will have to integrate sustainable development as its core. And one cannot plan without data. It is imperative that Africa generates its own robust data and statistics to accurately measure, monitor, evaluate and ultimately report on progress. Through Agenda 2063 and properly defined African Development Goals clear complementary objectives will demonstrate ownership.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are entering a negotiation. This exercise is part of preparing for a negotiation. The Hausa from Nigeria say that escaping with your reputation is better than escaping with your property. In making the case for a different narrative Africans are saying they want their reputation to match reality. They want a future that sees the continent for more than its natural resources riches. They want an outcome that reflects their reputation.

I thank you