

"A Coalition for Good: The UN System-wide Special Initiative on Africa"

Keynote address by

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Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for your kind introduction and for the warmth of your reception. It is a pleasure to be with all of you who wish for the United Nations to be on the front pages of progress rather than on the obituary page.

I welcome the opportunity to be with you:

- who have been supportive of the United Nations every step of the way,
- who have demonstrated the importance of citizen education and citizen activism for great causes, and
- who have mobilized significant financial and human resources to reinforce multilateral development efforts ...you are not an impersonal audience to me, but rather partners in the world's future.

Similarly, it is a pleasure to be under the organizational umbrella of this conference's co-sponsor, the justly famous Centre of African Studies.

I am particularly delighted that for this special gathering you have chosen to focus on Africa and the United Nations Special Initiative on Africa. My colleagues and I in the United Nations system, and particularly at the UN Economic Commission for Africa, are grateful.

If you will permit me, I will speak both on behalf of the Economic Commission for Africa and the Special Initiative. Between the two, I believe you will appreciate new and important aspects of the United Nations, a United Nations not draped in the black crepe of mourning, but a quite forward-looking and optimistic United Nations.

While it may be surprising that the United Nations is optimistic, perhaps it is even more surprising that you find many of us in Africa optimistic about our continent's future. We have had to face up to a steady stream of environmental and political disasters. The litany of woe was so great that it was given a special name: Afro-pessimism. Perhaps that was the correct

reading a decade ago and even up to a few years ago, but it is now time for a more balanced and updated assessment of where Africa is today and where it is likely to be tomorrow.

The Africa of today is dynamic: many countries are progressing, but some are not. We see a differentiating Africa, an Africa which is not so easy to characterize since averages tend to hide reality. Nonetheless, the progress is undeniable. Growth rates are now positive for most countries. Half of our countries are growing in excess of population growth rates, and of those, a third are growing at twice or more their population growth rate. High growth states in the Northern and Southern parts of our continent are providing added stimulus to the performance of neighbouring countries. A number of countries are moving beyond economic adjustment, and now tackling what had been stalled social progress. With these and many other indicators, we see a determined Africa, an Africa where a younger generation is asserting its commitment to growth and progress, an Africa of expanding internal ties, and an awareness of the need for Africa to stake its place in the global economy. It is this progress which, for the first time in many years, affords us the luxury of well-grounded optimism about our future. A future where, with diligence, within a generation we can sharply, and I mean sharply, reduce the scourge of absolute poverty which now afflicts two out of five citizens or people on the continent. We must achieve an Africa where the basic needs of education and health services and decent shelter are being met and where economic growth is powering the enhanced well-being of our peoples.

This vision of progress will be our future, if we the public and private sectors in Africa, as well as our partners abroad, apply our talents, and move to make the vision of a more progressive Africa a reality, and if we make choices along the way which are far-sighted and sustainable.

Increasingly, those choices will not be just to assure the quantity of development, but to assure a far higher quality of development. The key qualitative choice is to address the root causes of poverty. Poverty has often been neglected in our development. Beyond growth, we need quite deliberate investments, particularly in basic education and basic health. New technologies, more reliance upon local community management and many other innovations make these core social development tasks more doable. We also need policies which allow the poor to participate in economies which now often either neglect them or discriminate against them.

If ending poverty is the first challenge in our development, then sustainable development is the second challenge. The nexus of high population growth rates, an extensive rather than intensive agricultural system, and an imperiled environment are creating havoc with Africa's prospects. Already 10 African countries are short of water and another 10 are soon to join this unenviable category. Unless food security is assured, the food import bill forecast in a generation's time might affect us like the debt and its ensuing adjustment crisis of the past 15 years. Meanwhile, the adverse ecological trends of erosion, deforestation and pollution continue. Addressing these fundamental problems requires new industrial, social, agricultural, agro-forestry and sanitation practices. As in so many other aspects of Africa's development, the crisis is far better known than the ongoing work to counter the crisis. There are beginning to be positive signs from countries with good natural resources endowments which have been mis-managed in the past, but are now showing quite positive trends such as the increases in food production in Zambia and Ethiopia.

Tempering the population explosion is a harder task, and requires not only population planning services, but better health services and, I firmly believe,

a far more aggressive approach to ending poverty.

All of our development tasks require mobilizing and utilizing well our human resources. There are three critically important aspects of this goal that I want to underline:

- First is the requirement to involve the neglected half of our human resources, women. Inclusion is not only just and moral, it is an imperative for higher economic performance. Inclusion comes about not by exhortation or chance, but by deliberate, informed, fair and professionally sound policies and administration. The underpinning is universal basic education..which I will return to in a moment. As women rise to importance, there is the need to address the glass ceilings in Africa's economic and political establishments. ECA is establishing a Leadership Fund for African Women which will aim at opening up opportunities in economics and politics and preparing women to take advantage of those openings.

- The second way of taking advantage of available human resources is through the promotion of organized civil society so that our economies have the added strength of pluralism for our development. NGOs, professional associations, chambers of commerce, and the whole variety of civil society associations are booming in Africa, but still require a more tolerant and welcoming environment so that the full advantage of their resources can be gained.

- Third is the need to take advantage of the professional human resources now far more abundant on the continent. This calls for a new way of doing business: one which seeks out intellectual and organizational strengths in Africa, which works in partnership, which hires talent from the region and which anticipates more mature relationships (for example, two-way learning) as is found elsewhere. There may have been times when business, academic and policy organizations could justify an approach of self-sufficiency in terms of their African operations, but if so, that time has passed and a new more exciting and mature era has begun.

With a more progressive, differentiated, still problematic but more optimistic Africa before us, the United Nations system and ECA are acting in recognition that development investments in Africa are particularly attractive now. It is a time to tilt the balance so that progressive forces are solidified both within Africa's nations and between them.

In furtherance of this conclusion, the UN Secretary General asked the heads of all the UN agencies, including the Bretton Woods Institutions, to search for ways to accelerate Africa's development. He recognized that the political signals were clear and consistent.. as articulated in the General Assembly's United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s (UN-NADAF), itself a major follow-up to a mid-1980s programme of action on Africa, and as agreed in the OAU's June 1995 summit endorsement of the Cairo Agenda for Action..a statement of priorities for relaunching development in Africa.

Moreover, the global community, meeting over the decades at Alma Ata on Health, Jomtiem on Education, New York on Children, Rio on Environment, Cairo on Population, Copenhagen on Poverty, and Beijing on Women compiled a set of impressive commitments, including those on Africa. In each of these gatherings no other area of the world was given such attention. Altogether there was uniformity of opinion certifying that Africa is the global community's number one development priority.

Ah, but commitments and actions can be two different things. Thus the

Secretary General asked that all the UN agencies seek to accelerate Africa's development by identifying and taking organizational responsibility for a set of concrete actions on core development challenges. Originally we called this the Secretary-General's Special Initiative on Africa. But as the UN agencies developed plans for the proposed concrete action and took responsibility for coordinating and participating in work on them, it was agreed to call the exercise the United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa. I am here to tell you that it is a very special undertaking.

As its overly long name indicates, the Special Initiative is System-wide. UN Historians tell us it is the largest set of coordinated obligations ever undertaken by the UN system as a whole. Some of you no doubt recall that the UN has had development director generals in the past. But in the UN system where power is so diffused, the key point is to have actions agreed by all the independent agency heads, as well as the head of the UN Secretariat, the Secretary General. This was the approach taken with the Special Initiative. Using the Administrative Committee on Coordination, we created a high level sub-committee which I co-chair with James Gustave Speth, who is both the head of UNDP and the development coordinator of the UN. As a creation of the Agency-heads, and responsible for reporting to them, our Steering Committee based the Initiative on what UN agencies were themselves willing to do in five select areas: Water, Food Security, Governance, Social and Human Conditions, and Resource Mobilization. Within these five fields some 20 proposals covering one to ten years of work were identified and approved by all the UN agency heads. Each proposal was given a rough line item budget and each proposal has been taken on by an agreed group of agencies responsible for organizing the resource mobilization and implementation.

As the person who directed education and social policy at the World Bank prior to coming to ECA, it is a matter of great satisfaction to me that the heart of the Special Initiative is a commitment to help African bring about two absolutely essential achievements: Universal Basic Education and Universal Basic Health. These two elements account for 85 per cent of the agreed Special Initiative's resource requirements.

While we are in the process of discussing with African States the goals of expanding basic education and health to all their peoples within a decade, the aim is to increase both the quality and breadth of service and the quantity of it. For countries with just over 20 per cent of their children in school, we are raising sights considerably.

Already there are major national exercises being planned in 9 countries covering 12 different development sectors. While many of us wish for a faster pace, we only launched the Special Initiative 7 months ago and some countries have yet to be fully briefed. I am confident that momentum in the core work of the Special Initiative will increase soon. And it may also expand, for example, one of the outcomes of the recent summit on food and hunger could well be added impetus for the food security elements of the Special Initiative.

I want to touch upon three other features of the Special Initiative which, while not having the resource implications of the major sectoral components, are nonetheless of very great importance, nonetheless.

The peace-building component of the Special Initiative is intended to ensure support for the Organization of African Unity as it engages in conflict prevention, conflict management and conflict resolution. This would be accomplished by endowing a trust fund to enable the operations of data gathering, analysis, communications, networks of mediators and the

development of capacities to plan and coordinate peace operations. UNDP is charged with managing this effort. This will further the linkage within the UN between peace efforts and development planning while enhancing solidarity with OAU.

The second component, informatics, frankly was started with the simplistic notion that Africa should be connected to the Internet. We have subsequently expanded this notion in response to the African Information Society Initiative, adopted by ECA's Conference of Economic and Planning Ministers, to press for national planning of informatics development and regional cooperation to far better link Africa internally and externally. I would like to stress two aspects of this informatics effort. First, we want to have informatics serve not only the urban private sector of Africa, but also those working on the basic development challenges. Second, we believe that Africa will increasingly be a supplier of information as well as a market for information. As ECA is in charge of this component and as this work is an integral part of the new ECA, permit me to predict that informatics will be of sharply growing significance in Africa's development over the next decade.

The third Special Initiative component I want to emphasize is our commitment to strengthen the development and peace-building efforts of NGOs in Africa. Working with national governments, we shall strengthen their legitimacy and, working through a new ECA centre for NGOs, we shall strengthen the capabilities of NGO organizations.

The Special Initiative's components on peace-building, informatics and NGOs go to the root of giving development a chance in Africa. The factors which will make a huge difference in Africa's future are optimism about peace, modernization, and pluralism. Working with OAU and with civil society groups which aggressively work for peace, we address the first. Working with informatics and with the building blocks, such as basic education, which give parents confidence in their children's future, we attack the second. And working with the robust NGO movement in Africa, we address the third.

Let me now fairly rapidly address questions which have been poised about the Special Initiative:

How does it relate to previous UN actions on Africa? I mentioned earlier the relationship to UN-NADAF, a decade-long effort which recently had its mid-term review. There are very considerable overlaps between the two as there should be, since NADAF represents the goal-setting and global political level consensus on Africa's development, while the UN Special Initiative is a very major concrete manifestation of the NADAF. This is not conflict: it is deliberate implementation.

What are the implications for donors such as the United Kingdom? In general, for the larger components, donors will be asked to consider participation in certain regional projects and, more often, in country-specific proposals. For the major sectoral efforts, the World Bank has the lead in resource mobilization. They may well approach their work as they have the Special Programme of Action through which the Bank has mobilized many billions of pounds for Africa. We believe that sound activities will receive a good response.

Finally, is this an example the way the UN agencies will be cooperating in the future? To this I must say the answer is qualified. I have found that the Special Initiative has created synergies within the system and a tremendous amount of goodwill among agency heads. For example, my counterpart commission leaders in Asia, Latin America and Europe have expressed very strong interest in working with ECA in promoting inter-regional linkages

emphasizing technical assistance on the one hand and trade investment linkages on the other. In addition, reform efforts in the UN clearly are enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness in agencies and departments.

And what does all this mean for the future of reform in the UN? Here I want to be particularly clear. Reform has a momentum of its own in the UN. It is the result of a broad consensus that the UN must be stronger in the future. Speaking for myself: reform of ECA is a necessity which must be carried out. It is not an end in itself; rather, reform is a means to achieving the wider goal of providing critical services to Africa at a turning point in our continent's history.

We at ECA, as an example, are in the midst of such thorough-going reform that the UN Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has termed us to be in the vanguard of UN reform. In my 17 months at the Commission, we have conducted a series of diagnostic studies involving two centres of excellence in this country -- the London Centre for Economic Policy Research, the Oxford Centre for the Study of African Economies -- the World Bank, and leading international consultants; we have consulted widely within Africa among governmental, academic, business and NGO leadership circles; and we have now reformed our programme along strategic lines, and are in the final stages of putting in place a completely new management team, have updated every administrative process, have changed modalities of operations, and--de rigueur for these matters--we have reorganized the house. In the process we are moving from old fashioned technology to heavy reliance on electronic communications, from being a self contained organization to being a networker of talent from around the continent and beyond, and from being a somewhat minor player in the multilateral system, to co-chairing the largest UN initiative ever launched.

I mention all this not just because I hope links between ECA and the respected centres of excellence on African development in the U.K. will be strengthened; I mention our reform because it is not unusual in the United Nations these days. Indeed, it is the recurrent theme in the boardrooms of the UN agencies and in the hallways of the United Nations Headquarters. A recent report of the Secretary-General reviewed reform efforts throughout the UN system. It is worth more publicity than it has received. It records quite significant progress in reforms by virtually every part of the UN. New efficiencies, new ways to enhance effectiveness, new ways of doing business.

I will not speak for other sections of the UN, but I will say that as part of the UN Secretariat, I have found support, sympathetic interpretations of procedures and resources to support my organization's reforms.

Further, and this may surprise you, the staff of ECA has been among the strongest supporters of our reform. The Staff Union recognizes that by streamlining and professionalising administration we are providing exactly the kind of core services to personnel...transparent and fair administration, articulated career ladders, investments in staff training...that responds to their core concerns.

In this environment a strong ECA is an added asset to help clarify issues of economic and social policy; to mobilize an effective public sector, and to help that public sector enable the private sector and civil society to flourish; to add urgency at the national level in addressing the problems of the nexus of population, food and environment; to accelerate the information revolution on the continent; and to hasten the process of regional cooperation.

As we look to the outcome of this auspicious meeting and to your future work

of partnership with the UN, let me offer a few outcomes which would be particularly valuable. I will do this in the nature of a wish list.

My first wish is that you continue what you are so well doing by focusing on the Special Initiative. If the UN were a multinational corporation we would probably have a seven figure publicity budget for the Special Initiative. Unfortunately, we are not able to do that. Indeed budget stringencies are particularly affecting external relations budgets in order to preserve programme budgets. Your partnership in publicity and support is not only appreciated, but a real necessity.

My second wish is that as the seriousness of the Special Initiative is appreciated, I hope that the major donors will consider an intersectoral task force to respond to it. This could easily fit within the functions of the World Bank's Special Programme of Action for Africa in which the donors already confer and mobilize financial support.

My third wish...and I realize that in the myths of many cultures you only get three wishes...is that ECA be on your intellectual and relationship map. This country is the home of well respected institutions which are potential partners for the renewing ECA. Partnerships for Africa are a must and we will be active in securing the best partnerships possible.

Today Africa has rightly received the world's verbal priority for development. Now the challenge is to pursue with real actions the opportunities for development wherever they are reasonable...and, I assert that they are increasingly reasonable throughout the continent. The downside is all too clear if we neglect working with the forces of peace and progress.

Over time, we see an era in which the major external financing envisioned in the Special Initiative will be less needed and will end. We now see an Africa at a turning point which will, like today's Asia and Latin America, find reliance on the private market for its long term financial well being. We see the present one way intellectual flows beginning to move to two-way exchanges and mutual gains.

How soon will this new era for Africa be upon us? In answer let me quote a still classified assessment by a major donor:

- The country is and shall always be a basket case;
- The workers are corrupt, lazy, and unproductive;
- There are no natural resources so the export potential is next to nothing;
- Therefore, the world should never expect the country to succeed.

The report is dated 1956. The country was and is South Korea. Five years later South Korea began its export boom. Today it is one the verge of being a full donor partner within the OECD.

Do not be surprised by success. The UN and Africa singly and together could surprise. In terms of our potential, we are neither on the obituary page nor the front page. We are at a time when thoughtful observers see us as more dynamic than most expect. Yes, we are in crisis, but we are still strongly in business. Our transit to sustained progress is less lonely, more valued and far more possible with your friendship. And for this friendship, expressed so well in this meeting, I am grateful and so very pleased to have the opportunity of being with you.

Thank you.

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