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Embrace data, counter stereotypes on Africa, says Carlos Lopes to media leaders

Addis Ababa, 13 November 2015 (ECA) - The Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Mr. Carlos Lopes has called on media leaders to counter stereotypes and perceptions about Africa, embrace the use of quality data and shift business models to play the role of provider of a public good. Addressing the annual African Media Leaders Forum in Johannesburg this week, Mr. Lopes said that a pessimistic narrative on Africa serves key investors as a means to dissuade competitors and extract deals with desperate locals. "It is not an exaggeration to say that some extractive industry activities are being paid to operate if one considers tax breaks, profit flying and illicit flows," he said.

Yet, intra-African investment has been growing since 2007, at a 32.5% compound rate, stressed the ECA Chief, noting that South Africa is leading, followed closely by Morocco and Nigeria. "What African investors have discovered is what a few outside the continent have known all along. In 2011, the rate of return on inward FDI in Africa (9.3 per cent) was the highest compared to other regions of the world, such as 8.8 per cent in Asia and 4.8 per cent in developed economies," he said.

He told the media leaders that Africans are not just asserting themselves in a new political narrative, they are also investing more in their own continent." In addition FDI attained US\$ 54 billion in 2014 and this year, Africa has already surpassed this figure. "As more realize Africa is not as risky an investment decision as it may appear why is it this is not reflected in the mainstream views?," queried Mr. Lopes.

Decrying the mainstream focus on conflict, he asked, "100 million Africans affected by conflict is indeed a lot. But what about the remaining 90%?". He pointed out that compared to Asia, almost a third more people are killed by conflicts than in Africa. "There are more people killed in the conflicts of India alone, with Kashmir and the Naxalite insurgency, than in the whole of the Great Lakes. However, people normally only hear about conflicts in Africa because these are in the agenda of the UN Security Council."

He urged the media "to confront the public with new narratives," and stressed that all the buzz about China's investments in Africa is misleading adding, "Africa's proportion of total Chinese FDI stock is less than 1% of what they invest in the world."

He continued to challenge once-sided narratives and referenced a new jointly published *Africa-India fact book*, stating that in 2013, 16% of India's total outward foreign direct investment (FDI) stocks were in Africa for the equivalent of USD 70 billion. Yet, said Lopes, "more impressive is the fact that compared to Brazil, China, the Russian Federation and the USA, Africa has invested more in India with its FDI stock closer to USD 65 billion, accounting for an impressive 26% of India's total inward FDI stocks."

And, while Africa has benefitted immensely from its cooperation with India, he said, “these achievements were even more impressive considering Africa’s GDP per capita has been one third higher than India’s over the last ten years and our share of international trade surpasses India’s.”

He challenged the perception of Africa on some indices, such as the *Ease of Doing Business Index*, which he said “does not seem to capture business confidence.” “Critics are quick to point out that Ethiopia does not rank very positively. It moved from position 127 in 2013, to 125 in 2014, and 148 in 2015. Yet, what is remarkable is that its FDI inflows jumped from 153 million USD in 2013 to 1,2 billion in 2014. Its GDP grew by 9.8% in 2013 and by 10.3% in 2014.

Mr. Lopes urged the media to embrace data, stating, “the data that informs the narrative dictates the story.” For the narrative to speak with authority and credibility, the media must engage with data and weave data within everyday reportage, into a language the average person can understand.”

“The media can embrace and innovate around credible data sources and spawn deeper and authentic home grown ways of telling the story,” he added.

He called on journalists to upscale their capacity to tell the story “with the kind of depth and context that goes beyond a sound byte,” noting that moving to the next level will mean adding value to the craft of journalism. That will require quality data. “Readers need to distinguish between the work of a career journalist and a citizen journalist, who can narrate a story in 140 characters and circulate it with lightning speed on *Whatsapp*, *Facebook* or *Twitter*,” he said.

Speaking on the decline of profits in print media, he said, “with the advent of new media, traditional business models are under a great deal of stress, I hope we can agree on the need for economically viable business models that allow for independent thought, while serving the needs of the public.” He added: “When there is an imbalance, it makes the job of shaping Africa’s narrative even more difficult,” he said.

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