



UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**The Fifth African Development Forum
Youth and Leadership in the 21st Century (ADF V)**

Statement

by

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**16 November 2006
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Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

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

Your Excellency Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations,

Your Excellency Professor Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairperson of the African Union
Commission,

Your Excellency Mr. Donald Kaberuka, President of the African Development Bank,
Honourable Ministers,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Heads of UN Agencies and Funds,

Distinguished Guests,

African Youth,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the Economic Commission for
Africa (ECA) and to the fifth African Development Forum (ADF-V), on the theme of
"Youth and Leadership in the Twenty-first Century".

I would like to sincerely thank Prime Minister Meles Zenawi for his unstinting
support to ECA in general and to the ADF in particular. We are grateful that the Prime
Minister has always found time to support the Forum since its inauguration. Prime
Minister, your personal example of assuming the leadership of your country at a very
youthful age will undoubtedly inspire many among the young men and women that are
gathered here with us and underscore to them the life-cycle consequences of the
decisions that we make very early in life.

Permit me, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, to especially thank
Secretary General Kofi Annan, an illustrious son of our continent, for his presence here
with us. The Secretary General has been a strong supporter and promoter of youth
issues not just within the UN but also in the broader international community. One can
recall in this regard, the Roundtable on "The Challenge of Youth Employment and
Enterprise: What Can the Private Sector Do" that he convened with HRH The Prince of

Wales on the occasion of his visit to the UN.
Mr. SG, we are deeply grateful for your presence here.

This ADF is jointly organized with the African Union (AU) and in collaboration with the African Development Bank (ADB). I would therefore like to thank Prof. Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairperson of the African Union Commission for his personal commitment to the ADF and through him the AUC for all the effort they invested in making this ADF possible. In similar vein, I thank Dr. Donald Kaberuka, President of the African Development Bank for his support of the ADF and for the deepening collaboration between our two institutions.

Prof. Konare, Dr. Kaberuka, your presence here today has quickly made visible our tripartite agreement to work much more closely together in order to more effectively accompany our region in its development journey.

I would also like to thank all UN agencies, especially those working in Africa, and l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, for their enormous contribution to making this ADF possible. The manner in which all have worked so collaboratively and coherently in all aspects of delivering this ADF can be an example of how we can all work together for the common good of all.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen:

ECA initiated the African Development Forum in 1999 as a multi-stakeholder platform for building consensus on identified key challenges of African development and the strategies for overcoming them. The theme of each ADF has addressed a pressing development challenge. For example, the first ADF was on Information and Communication Technology while the second was on the Leadership Challenge of HIV and AIDS in Africa.

The theme of this ADF, "Youth and Leadership in the 21st Century" was chosen after a very long and deliberative process. The theme pays tribute to the actuality that Africa is a "young" continent - obviously not geologically, but demographically. Close to two-thirds of our population is below the age of 25. Currently, youth account for 45% of the total labour force in our region, a situation that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future according to latest projections.

Youth are a force in society not just because they are the leaders of tomorrow but also because they are crucial drivers of progress. Young people are – if not the most creative – among the most creative and innovative members of any society. Critical actors in several areas of development, they are the initiators of many of the "radical" ideas that very often transform societies. Nobel Literature laureate Wole Soyinka, another illustrious son of our continent and a keynote speaker at ADF III, reminds us in his new autobiography, *"You Must Set Forth at Dawn"*, of the central importance of this formative period of our lives. To make a demonstrable contribution to our society, Wole advises, we must set forth at dawn, start early in life.

This ADF is not solely about the "debts" African adult society owes their youth. That is one side of the coin. It is also about the important lifecycle decisions that youth must make, decisions about their own vision of the kind of African society that they and their children and grand-children will live in. In this era of globalization and heightened individualism, I must admit, making those decisions is often not easy. Not with MTV and Channel O dominating the airwaves.

Africa is making progress. Economic growth at more than 5% per annum has been sustained over 5 years in a considerable number of countries. Governance is also improving. There has been an expansion of democratic rights and freedoms across the continent. However, significant challenges remain: the challenge of overcoming poverty, disease, and overall low levels of human development. There is also the challenge of quickening progress towards meeting the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. Will our youth choose to live in Africa that is forever described as

the laggard in terms of human and social development among all regions? An Africa that is not the leader in aid receipts? An Africa that needs to improve its contribution to the march of science and technology? Or will they take advantage of recent improvements across the continent to build an Africa of their dream; an Africa that is equal with other regions of the world?

As inheritors of our continent's future, the decisions that each of our young people make, have enormous consequences for our region in particular and for humanity in general. In particular, whether Africa reaches the targets of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 depends critically on the decisions that youth make.

While each of us individual actors can set forth at dawn, there is an important role for our governments, adult society and Africa's development partners in making the conditions under which young people set forth as propitious as they possibly can be in terms of employment, good health, high quality education and so forth. This, I must admit, is not often the case. Young people and youth issues are often marginalized in national economic, social and political structures and are disproportionately adversely affected by development challenges that the continent faces.

In a sense, the challenge of African development can be said to be the challenge of creating an Africa where the life-chances of young people are not circumscribed by poverty, unemployment, disease, and poor quality education. Take for example the case of migration of Africa's young to other corners of the globe. While there is evidence that the evolution of personal aspirations plays a part, it is also clear that the lack of employment opportunities is a primary causative factor. Our economies are not creating enough meaningful jobs for our young people.

Increasingly, this lack of opportunities drives them to try to migrate to places where better opportunities exist. Many lives tragically end in this quest while many among those who succeed end up struggling for the bottom rungs of the societies to which they have migrated.

These problems and challenges can be successfully overcome through partnership, a compact between young and old, and a compact that youth can only make with itself. Let me in this regard paraphrase the SG's call to World Youth at the recent UN Youth Summit: youth, as leaders of the future are essential to our efforts to meet the simple but powerful people-centered targets of the MDGs. But youth must make itself essential and the rest of us, especially our leaders, must make it possible for youth to make itself essential.

Let us rise from this ADF, whose work programme I am sure we are all now well acquainted with, resolved and determined to create a new partnership with youths, a partnership based on a firm commitment by both not to abdicate responsibilities to self and to society at large. It is my hope and expectation that we will rise from with a consensus on an actionable agenda to enhance the contribution of youth to African development.

Thank you.