

Eighth Ordinary Session of the Executive Council of the African Union

Address

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Khartoum, Sudan
20 January 2006

Mr. Chairman,
Your Excellency, Alpha Oumar Konare, Chairperson of the African Union Commission,
Your Excellency, Lam Akol, Representative of the First Vice President of the Republic of Sudan
Honorable Ministers,
Distinguished Commissioners of the African Union,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to begin by saying how delighted I am by the honor accorded me to address this esteemed Executive Council of Ministers today, for the first time. I am glad that this meeting is taking place in Khartoum and would like to thank the government and people of Sudan for their gracious hospitality. I also am pleased that this opportunity has arisen so soon after I have assumed office as Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). I wish to take this opportunity to thank each one of you and your respective governments, for the encouragement and support you have expressed to me since my appointment. At the same time, I want to express my sincere thanks to President Konare for the warm welcome accorded me upon my arrival in Addis Ababa.

Honorable Ministers

I have come to ECA from UNDP- a sister United Nations institution that is a key and committed partner to Africa. While at UNDP I was privileged to work very closely with African countries in support of their development agenda as I did with the African Union Commission, particularly with the Chairperson and Commissioners in supporting capacity building for institutional transformation as well as the AU Peace and Security Agenda. Through this collaboration and with the leadership of the Commission, we were able to build a strong partnership in support of Africa's development initiatives. That experience confirmed in me the conviction that strong and clear leadership in Africa is critical to building effective partnerships for addressing Africa's development priorities. It is my intention to build on this broad and positive experience and bring ECA and AU into closer partnership and upscale collaboration between the two organizations. This renewed partnership will take full advantage of the favorable factors of our shared vision and mandate, as well as our co-location in Addis Ababa, to effectively accompany Africa as it strives to achieve development. I am happy to observe that President Konare and his staff at the AU Commission as well as my staff at the ECA fully share in my enthusiasm and commitment to make this happen.

Excellencies

What does this mean in practical terms? Allow me to briefly share with you my reflections on this collaboration before moving on to present some perspectives on the agenda for this Summit.

I essentially see the primary role of ECA as being one of providing technical support to member states in their development efforts either directly or through the African Union. For ECA to do so effectively, I strongly believe that its programmes must be in full harmony with the African priorities and seamlessly woven into the work fabric of the AU Commission. AU Commission and ECA must therefore be prepared to think, plan and work closely together in support of Africa. It is through this seamless partnership that I see opportunities for maximizing synergies inherent in our comparative advantages and avoiding duplication and overlap in a way that will permit the two institutions to deliver effective support and service to Africa.

Furthermore, given the immense challenges faced by the continent and the bold regional response to meeting them expressed through the AU Strategic Plan and New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), I believe it is of the utmost importance for AU, ECA, and ADB to now significantly upscale their trilateral partnership.

In November last year, I had the privilege of addressing your colleagues, the African Finance Ministers, at a meeting organized in Tunis by my good friend, Donald Kaberuka, the President of the African Development Bank. Apart from the key issues of trade, debt, and oil that we discussed, President Kaberuka and I took opportunity of the meeting to look ahead at our collaboration and how we can provide effective technical support to AU within the context of the trilateral framework of cooperation.

Earlier I also had extensive discussion with President Alpha Konare on how best we can optimize our personal and institutional partnership in order to serve Africa better and as effectively as possible. I am glad to note that the three of us have a strong convergence of views on how this can be done. A key aspect of this will be through the revitalization of the joint AU-ADB-ECA secretariat under the leadership of the AU Commission as well as through the harmonization and rationalization of the ADB and ECA meetings.

Let me also say a few words on another important issue that I intend to pay close attention to over the coming months. This relates to forging effective coordination and partnerships within the UN system to serve this continent. ECA has a well-established history of collaboration with UN agencies and other African regional and sub regional organizations. However, I believe that there is much scope for deepening the scope and impact of this collaboration. It is my intention to take a closer look at the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing mechanisms, for instance, how we work together, coordinate and harmonize our efforts to avoid wasteful duplication and strengthen our development impact in Africa, working in close collaboration with the African Union, and the African Development Bank.

Excellencies

2005 was a year in which significant attention was focused on Africa's development needs and in which commitments to upscale efforts were made both by regional leaders and by our international partners. The Debt Initiative, The Commission on Africa Report and UN World Summit, among others, were part of the sustained effort to place Africa's development challenge foremost on the global agenda. While these have yielded some initial result, particularly with regard to the debt question, much more remains to be done to tackle Africa's development challenges in a fundamental way. We now must strive to ensure that the momentum generated by that attention is not allowed to dissipate and that concrete results accrue from it.

It is important for the international community to live up to its commitments in aid delivery and ensure the predictability of resources for African countries. In this context, I would like to note the important joint work carried out by ECA and the OECD on Mutual Accountability and Development Effectiveness in Africa, aimed at monitoring and catalyzing implementation of various commitments made by development partners to Africa, and the commitments we as Africans have made to our continent and to our people. There is a strong interest in operationalizing this concept of mutual accountability, especially in the aftermath of the G8 Gleneagles Summit. It is my hope that some recommendations would emerge on how we carry this agenda forward. Without a doubt, the seamless relationship between AU-ADB-ECA is critical in this area as well.

At the same time, as we demand the commitment of our partners, we must acknowledge that we also need to work harder on the key issues of governance, peace and security that continue to constrain development effectiveness. Africa has made appreciable progress in this area and the Africa Peer Review Mechanism is one eloquent testimony to Africa's commitment to strengthen and improve governance. ECA is honored to be a strategic partner to the implementation of the mechanism and will continue to render its contribution in this regard.

Mr. Chairman

Let me turn now to trade, another area on which there was particular focus last year and where Africa's concerns resonated in the global arena. Last month, in Hong Kong, the Doha Round negotiations once again did not go as well as we had expected even though some modest gains were made. The challenge will be to secure those gains and build on them as Africa seeks its rightful share of trade and leveling of the playing field. Let me in this regard acknowledge the solid work the AU Commission has done in facilitating the building of common positions by African countries in global, regional and bilateral negotiations. I believe that with continued capacity support from ECA, ADB and UNDP, AU's role as the coordinator of Africa's positions on trade issues in multilateral trade negotiations will be strengthened.

The main features of interest to Africa of the consensus that emerged from Hong Kong relate to the following:

On agriculture, an agreement was reached to end farm subsidies by the end of 2013 instead of 2010 as proposed by African countries. On cotton, it was agreed that there will be an end to export subsidies by 2006 and that there will be duty and quota free access for cotton exports from LDCs into developed country markets as from the beginning of the implementation period for the Doha agreements. However, on domestic support, which is the most important issue in the cotton debate there was no specific commitment. Clearly, the modalities phase of the negotiations will be critical in determining who gains or loses from the Doha agreements. It is therefore important for African countries to be prepared to make their concerns known and to protect their national interests.

Trade is pivotal to economic growth and development. It therefore must be given the utmost priority and mainstreamed across government activity.

Mr. Chairman,

At the World Summit on the Information Society, which I attended last November also in Tunis, there was strong consensus on the need to accelerate the pace of building the global Information Society, based on local, national, regional and international activities. In that regard, I am pleased to inform you that ECA is now going to be working very closely with the AU on the African Regional Action Plan on the Knowledge Economy, which we jointly launched in Tunis.

I am also pleased to note that the Tunis Summit demonstrated member States' appreciation for ECA's support in building an Information Society in Africa based on its strong partnerships both inside and outside Africa. It is clear your ministerial colleagues in charge of this portfolio now constitute a strong advocacy group to champion ICT issues in their respective countries as well as collectively on the continent. This is most significant as 2006 is going to be an important year for implementing our national and regional ICTs action plans.

Mr. Chairman

The Tunis meeting on Information Society serves as an instructive background to the theme of this summit given the central role of information and ICT in education and culture.

The role of education and training in the promotion of economic, social and political development cannot be over-emphasized. They play a crucial role in achieving higher economic growth by providing the economy with the required skilled human resources. Education and training also contribute to the health of nations, cultural development, democratic values, political stability and nation building.

This is why there is a strong correlation between the standard of education and training and the level of economic and social development. Indeed, evidence from around the globe shows that investment in human capital through high levels of education, especially for women, stimulates growth and has tremendous spillover effects.

There are huge challenges at all levels of education and training in Africa in terms of access, quality, relevance and equity. Although enrolment at all levels of education in sub-Saharan Africa has improved since independence, it is still very low. Pupil/teacher ratio and the number of untrained teachers have risen, while the number of textbooks per pupil, laboratory equipment have declined. The quality of education in higher institutes of learning has also declined due to a number of factors such as inadequate textbooks and journals, poor libraries, poorly equipped laboratories, brain drain, and low morale of teaching staff. There is also a growing obsolescence of the old outmoded curriculum content in relation to the advancing state of knowledge and the realistic needs of students. Inequities in education in terms of access, quality, gender disparities, rural, urban, and in some cases ethnic distribution are also high in many African countries.

Many factors underlie the challenges of education in Africa. These include declining resources allocated to education against rising demand. Although governments do recognize the need to invest in education and training and a host of policies geared towards promoting free primary education and supporting tertiary and higher-level education exist, in view of highly competing demands on limited and declining levels of governments' budgetary resources, investments in the education and other social sectors have not been as encouraging as one would have expected.

Education also goes hand in hand with culture. Human societies are governed by sets of rules, values and principles that define their culture and civilization. Such rules, values and principles are based on traditions,

languages, ways of life and thought. They are indeed based on a set of cultural values, which reflect the distinctive character, and personality of the society. Culture is therefore one of the most integrating factors in a society. Indeed, according to the OAU Cultural Charter for Africa adopted in 1976, the unity of Africa is founded first and foremost on its history.

The Cultural Charter for Africa encapsulates the value of culture in the African society. It aims among other things to rehabilitate, restore, preserve and promote the African cultural heritage. These values are as valid today as they were in 1976 when the Cultural Charter of Africa was adopted.

It is encouraging to observe efforts made in the context of Africa's regional integration to promote cultural cooperation among African countries not least, through the formulation of protocols on culture and sports. Many of our Regional Economic Communities for instance emphasize the promotion of culture as stipulated in the African Charter and the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community.

But the real challenge is to make culture one of the centerpieces of Africa's development agenda at the national level.

In that regard, African governments, through optimal education policies, can raise the levels of education and increase human capital, creating a vicious cycle that enables the economy to increase its capacity to produce and create wealth, taking into account our own local human resources and knowledge and cultural endowment.

Excellencies,

The linkage of education and culture is also crucial when we discuss the HIV/AIDS pandemic - the most serious constraint to Africa's development efforts - and the quest to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. The challenge of HIV/AIDS looms large over Africa's limited performance in attaining the MDGs, illustrating that all Goals are linked and must be achieved as a package.

Undoubtedly we all, as leaders, need to do more to turn back the tide. In that regard, I am pleased to note that the tabling of the "Progress Report on Aids Watch Africa (AWA) at this week's Summit of Heads of States and Government provides another good opportunity for Africa's leaders, at the highest political level, to review the state of our battle against the pandemic and propose options for stepping up the fight.

This is why ECA is glad to be associated with the Gaborone Declaration on scaling up universal access – to treatment, prevention and impact mitigation. We are happy to collaborate with the AU, UNDP, UNAIDS, DFID and other partners as we begin to build regional consensus around this important issue.

We know that our sub-regional mechanisms and longstanding work with the regional economic communities will be useful as we embark on the four sub-regional consultations which we must hold by March 2006 to help us identify the bottlenecks to universal access.

Mr. Chairman

To conclude, I would like to briefly highlight some of the challenges we continue to face in advancing the regional integration agenda. Regional integration and the creation of the African common market has been the vision of African leaders since the early years of independence. The rationale for this is clear. A common market combining Africa's 53 mostly small and fragmented economies will lead to economies of scale that make countries competitive.

Good progress in many areas of regional cooperation has been made, but much remains to be done.

Moving forward on Africa's integration agenda will therefore require sustained effort. One important area is the harmonization and empowerment of the Regional Economic Communities. Multiple, poorly coordinated and poorly supported RECs will not be solid enough building blocs to create the African Union that we envisage. The need for harmonizing the RECs is therefore timely so that the AU can be endowed with strong institutional blocs for the continental integration process. To this end, the combined technical efforts of the ECA and AU towards implementing this harmonization agenda are noteworthy. I assure you of our continued support in the months leading to the AU's Summit decision on the issue.

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,

Let me conclude by wishing you fruitful deliberations and assuring you that my colleagues and I at ECA are fully at your service as you undertake your noble task of advancing the continent's integration and development agenda.

I thank you.
