

# Accelerating Social Development in Africa for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Statement by

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Honorable Chairman of the Conference,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,  
Distinguished Participants,  
Civil Society Leaders  
United Nations Colleagues  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure for me to extend a very warm welcome to all of you at this historic subregional Follow-up Conference to the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. On behalf of the Economic Commission for Africa I would like to express our deep gratitude to the Government of Kenya for its generosity in agreeing to host this Conference, and for the excellent hospitality and cooperation accorded to us in the organization of this conference. Let me also express my deep appreciation to our sister organization, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for co-organizing this meeting, and to the United Nations Office in Nairobi for providing these great facilities and services.

As you know the World Summit for Social Development was held at Copenhagen, Denmark, in March 1995, against the background of deteriorating social conditions in the world, and particularly in Africa, which was represented by 35 heads of state and Governments. Eighteen Heads of State or Government attended that meeting, representing Eastern and Southern African countries. This strong African representation at Copenhagen was an eloquent testimony to the high priority which countries in Africa attached to resolving the social development problems confronting Africa within the framework of Copenhagen Social Summit Declaration and Programme of Action. This meeting, along with two others programmed for Western and Central African countries and the Northern African subregion respectively, is in fulfillment of the General Assembly's mandate for regional follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development.

It is now four years since Copenhagen. At the time, world leaders made a number of major commitments towards the eradication of absolute poverty. It is in light of these commitments that this conference is being convened to take stock of the progress made in the Eastern and Southern African subregions in the most important areas of social development identified by the Summit. This conference also resonates with the role of the renewed ECA as a catalyst for ideas and a networker of development expertise in Africa, bringing policy makers and civil society leaders together to dialogue on critical issues in support of African development.

Excellencies, Dear Colleagues,

What were these commitments? The Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action for Social Development required action on four main areas. These are: reducing and eradicating wide-spread poverty; achieving the goal of full employment; enhancing social integration; and fostering stable and just societies. The Programme of Action outlined policies, actions and measures to implement the principles and fulfil the ten commitments spelled out in the Declaration.

The exceptional challenge of Africa's social development featured prominently during the Social Summit, in which world leaders dedicated themselves to accelerating the economic, social and human-centred development of Africa and the least developed countries. As you all know, of the 45 countries classified by the UN as Least Developed, 32 are in Africa. These 32 countries account for about 46 per cent of the total population of the continent. Sixteen out of these 32 are in the Eastern and Southern Africa subregions.

What have we achieved since Copenhagen?

Allow me to start with the good news. In terms of economic growth, overall, the African economies have improved their performance since the Social Summit. Compared to the average annual rate of GDP growth of only 1 per cent for the two years preceding the Summit, the rate of GDP growth increased to 3.2 per cent as an average for the four years after the Summit. Indeed, the period since the Summit has witnessed a consistent economic growth recovery to the extent that a number of observers are wondering whether this is a turning point in Africa's fortunes. However, given Africa's high population growth rates, we do not believe that celebrations are in order as yet. The fortunes of our two subregions were similar to those of the continent as a whole. In the Eastern Africa subregion GDP growth rate increased from an average of 2.4 per cent per annum before the Summit, to an average of 3.7 per cent for the four years after the Summit. All these achievements, however, fall far short of the required growth rate to reduce poverty by half by the year 2015. To achieve this objective, ECA estimates that sustained rates of GDP growth of 8 per cent for Eastern Africa and 6 per cent for Southern Africa are required. While these performance requirements are high, we believe that they are achievable.

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is to be recognized that the positive economic growth achievements have not been matched by recovery in the social sector in most countries. A major problem is the fact that per capita GDP growth has been too minuscule to have a significant impact on the social sectors. Secondly, the efforts to divert needed resources to social development have not been sufficient. Consequently, social development indicators have rather deteriorated since Copenhagen and in many countries, to pre-1960s conditions

In the area of poverty the situation is grave indeed. An ECA study reveals that in the early 1990s, 51 per cent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) lived below a poverty line of \$ 34 per person per month. In both Eastern and Southern Africa, as elsewhere in SSA, poverty is not only widespread, but it is also deep and severe. Today, one country in Eastern Africa registers the lowest average income for the poor of less than \$11 per person per month. Unless determined action is taken to reverse such trends, poverty levels in Africa are projected to increase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Poverty reduction and its eventual eradication must now be considered the highest imperative and development priority for African countries. One means towards achieving this goal is to ensure access to basic health care, education, nutrition, productive employment and sustainable livelihoods. Furthermore, an important point I must stress here is that basic data and information on the poor are seriously inadequate in many countries of the subregion. Some countries are currently completing their poverty monitoring or assessment studies. We hope to learn from their results, and we urge others who have not already done so to initiate similar programmes.

On the Social Summit objective of moving towards full employment, there has been little progress, except in one or two countries. We look forward to receiving a detailed report from the International Labour Organization later on this morning.

In terms of education, while some progress has been made in the past three decades, major challenges still lie ahead. For instance, in recent years, enrolment ratios at all levels have been on the decline. This trend is particularly worrying at the basic level education. Rural and urban disparities, as well as gender

disparities in Africa, are still among the most profound in the world. We need to rededicate our efforts towards giving female education, and in particular the education of the girl child, the highest priority.

The health sector has recorded some significant gains. Infant and under-5 mortality rates, the prevalence of chronic child malnutrition, and the fertility rate have improved. However, malaria and childhood diseases continue unabated. The HIV/AIDS pandemic, of which Africa bears the greatest burden, has significantly exacerbated the health landscape in recent years. In December 1998, UNAIDS reported that 70 per cent of the people who became infected with HIV in 1998 were from Africa, while 90 per cent of all children under 15 who contracted the virus came from our region. In some countries of our two subregions, UNAIDS projections are that life expectancies may be reduced by as many as 20 years by the first quarter of the next century, if the current progression continues. HIV/AIDS is posing exceptionally serious challenges to health and the productive work force in Eastern and Southern African countries. This is an additional major challenge to social development in the continent to which we must respond speedily and with greater determination.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It has been aptly argued that there can be no development without peace and good governance, but there will also be no peace and stable governance if there is no social justice and social development. The gains in this area, since the early 1990s, have been maintained and in some cases consolidated as countries have conducted multi-party elections, adopted new constitutions and legalized political activities. The number of countries with elected governments has risen significantly over the last decade. However, the spectre of civil war continues to haunt us. In recent years, more than half of the countries of our subregions have been involved in one form of internal strife or another. Of the estimated 25- 30 million displaced persons world-wide, 16 million, or about 50% to 66% are thought to be in Africa. Peace in the Horn and other parts of Eastern and Southern Africa continues to be elusive. Available statistics indicate that over 50 per cent (180 million) of the population in our subregions lack peace and security. The victims of these conflicts are predominantly women, children. These developments constitute serious constraints to our long-term recovery and structural transformation

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Having noted the above salient features of the record of social development since Copenhagen, albeit very briefly, allow me now to highlight some of the programmatic work ECA is undertaking in support of the goals of Copenhagen. Working together with the United Nations System and other development partners through the United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa (SIA), which we co-chair with UNDP, our objective is to support member States to achieve basic education, and to address other key social sector challenges.

In the context of the SIA, ECA and UNDP are taking the lead in the area of governance. A major activity in the last two years has been the annual African Governance Forum. The first forum, held in July 1997 in Addis Ababa, reviewed governance initiatives in the areas of democratic transformation, socio-economic aspects of governance, and promoting empowerment and participation. The second Forum, held in Ghana in June 1998, discussed governance culture within the administrative set-up. It focused on the issues of transparency, accountability and ethics. The Third African Governance Forum, programmed for June 1999 in Mali, will address issues of conflict resolution.

ECA is also proud to be working in close partnership with African governments, the private sector and a broad coalition of partners in developing the African Information Society Initiative (AISI). AISI is a blueprint for a development-serving Information highway on the continent that the Commission was mandated to implement by its Conference of Ministers in 1996. It addresses a wide range of policy issues

towards putting in place enabling environments for Africa to harness information technology for development.

Mr.  
Your  
Distinguished  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Chairman,  
Excellencies,  
Guests,

In the coming days, we will get a clear picture of the situation in our two subregions with regard to progress made in meeting the Social Summit objectives. However, we should not leave Nairobi having simply taken stock of the situation. We need to renew and reinforce our commitments and our efforts. We should also consider very carefully the steps we need to take to accelerate progress towards the Copenhagen goals. If we are to succeed, follow-up is critical. Just as Copenhagen belonged to world governments, this follow-up process belongs to the member States and must necessarily be driven by member States. We in the United Nations stand ready to provide whatever support we can towards this end. In conclusion, I would like to stress that the future of Africa's social development will depend on the critical decisions you take here and the determination with which you implement them.

I wish you fruitful and action-oriented deliberations, and thank you all for your kind attention.

We are indeed gratified encouraged by your presence here today. This is ample evidence of your very strong commitment to respond effectively to the challenges that face our subregions at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We are particularly grateful to His Excellency, the President of the Republic of Kenya for finding time from his busy schedule to personally be with us today. We would also like to thank the heads of ministerial delegations and their collaborators who are here with us today; the leaders of civil society and non-governmental organizations; our international partner organizations who so generously contributed to the convening of this conference; and the leaders of our employers and workers organizations.

In conclusion, let me stress that as this meeting belongs to you the member States, the future of Africa's social development will depend on the critical decisions you take here and the determination with which you implement them in the future. We hope to learn from your deliberations.

I wish our deliberations every success and look forward to a productive outcome.

I thank you all for your kind attention.