



ECA POLICY BRIEF

Salvaging the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union

I. Introduction

1. At the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in the final year of the first 10-year implementation plan of Agenda 2063, The Africa We Want, of the African Union, the prospects of achieving both agendas in Africa are bleak. What will it take to rescue the two agendas?

2. The present brief sets out the prospects in Africa for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 in the context of the cascading crises that have been triggered by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The analysis draws on the findings of the 2022 Africa Sustainable Development Report of the African Union Commission, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the United Nations Development Programme and the African Development Bank, which was focused on the theme of the 2022 high-level political forum on sustainable development: "Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". The brief includes proposals for policy measures to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and to enhance resilience to external shocks.

II. Background

3. For most African countries, progress on the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 is off-track. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, spiralling inflation and extreme weather events caused by climate change are derailing progress on both agendas. The impact of those compounding disruptions on developing countries is aggravated by an unfair and crisis-prone global financial system that is focused on the short-term and that further exacerbates inequality (United Nations, 2023b). The Secretary-General has warned that the 2030 Agenda will become an "epitaph for a world that might have been" if the international community fails to act immediately (United Nations, 2023a).

4. There is a window of opportunity to improve the trajectory of the Goals, but unprecedented, collective action from the international community will be needed. The Sustainable Development Goal stimulus proposed by the Secretary-General is a call for concerted efforts to mobilize investment for the Goals while simultaneously establishing a new international financial architecture that supports just, inclusive and equitable transitions for all countries to reverse the current regressive course and make steady progress on the Goals (United Nations, 2023b).

5. Time is of the essence, however. The Africa Sustainable Development Report 2022 reveals that, despite some progress, Africa has stalled or regressed in relation to several Goals. The report provides

compelling reasons to scale up investment and regain the lost momentum.

III. Performance in Africa in relation to the two agendas

A. Steady but modest progress in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals

6. Africa is making progress towards its universal primary education objectives, in particular in the areas of primary school enrolment, completion and gender parity. In Africa, excluding North Africa, the primary school completion rate has risen substantially from 49.2 per cent in 2000 to 64.1 per cent in 2019. Furthermore, the proportion of Africans who use the Internet has steadily increased from 16.3 per 100 people in 2015 to 35.3 per 100 in 2021. The positive trend in Internet penetration is evident in other regions, including small island developing States and least developed countries. Nevertheless, increasing Internet coverage, in particular in rural areas, addressing gender disparities in Internet use and improving access for micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises are urgent policy priorities for the African region (African Union Commission and others, 2022).

7. The prevalence of child marriage and female genital mutilation has declined in Africa, despite sluggish progress towards gender equality. In Africa, excluding North Africa, the proportion of women who were married or in a relationship before the age of 15 years decreased from 12.6 per cent in 2015 to 10.8 per cent in 2021, and the proportion of women married before the age of 18 years decreased from 35.8 per cent to 34.7 per cent. Similarly, female genital mutilation decreased from 29.4 per cent in 2015 to 24.7 per cent in 2021. In North Africa, the rate of female genital mutilation also declined, from 83 per cent to 74 per cent during the same period. The political participation of women is on the rise: the percentage of national parliamentary seats held by women in Africa, excluding North Africa, has steadily increased from 11.5 per cent in 2000 to 22.6 per cent in 2015 and to 24.9 per cent in 2021.

8. Several African countries are making progress towards attaining the goals of zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning information and services, and zero gender-based

violence that were set at the Nairobi Summit on the International Conference on Population and Development, which was held in November 2019. Eswatini is implementing measures to change relevant behaviours at the family level. South Africa has begun training adolescents in comprehensive sexuality education. The United Republic of Tanzania has provided information on comprehensive sexuality education and sexual reproductive health through youth clubs and youth corners. Zimbabwe has begun an initiative to empower young women through the “Young for Real” School Club (Save the Children International, 2019).

9. Across Africa, excluding North Africa, 23 per cent of marine areas are protected, which is greater than the global average of 20 per cent. Some African States (17 out of 54) have demonstrated a strong commitment to enhancing the conservation and sustainable use of their marine and oceanic resources to make progress on inclusive and sustainable development pathways. Through the development of marine spatial plans, countries will have the opportunity to adopt an integrated ecosystem-based approach and a multisectoral approach to support the blue economy with climate change adaptation and biodiversity protection. Africa met 64 per cent of its 2021 targets for the sustainable management of land and the preservation of natural resources. Between 2000 and 2020, the average proportion of mountainous key biodiversity areas that are protected in Africa increased significantly, demonstrating the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of mountain ecosystems.

B. Challenges remain

10. Despite significant progress in school enrolment, some 288 million children of school age remain out of school, in particular in conflict-affected countries. In 2021, the proficiency levels for pupils in Africa, excluding North Africa, in grades 2 or 3¹ were projected to be 28.9 per cent for mathematics and 17.8 per cent for reading, which are below the global averages in those subjects (62.6 per cent and 61.4

¹ Percentage of children and young people achieving at least a minimum proficiency level (MPL) in mathematics during primary education (grade 2 or 3), at the end of primary education, and at the end of lower secondary education. The indicator aims to measure the percentage of children and young people who have achieved the minimum learning outcomes in mathematics during or at the end of the relevant stages of education.

per cent, respectively). Most African States continue to allocate less than 20 per cent of their national budgets to education, with roughly one third of States allocating less than 15 per cent (African Union and United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Despite a slight increase between 2015 and 2019, Africa is still the continent with the lowest proportion of qualified primary school instructors. To achieve the majority of the targets under Sustainable Development Goal 4 by 2030, Africa will need to accelerate progress on school completion rates and net enrolment rates.

11. Most African countries lack adequate policy tools to ensure gender equality in public life. Overall, legal frameworks are insufficiently enforced, limiting the participation of women in the labour force, impeding workplace equality and perpetuating gender pay inequalities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). African countries will need to accelerate progress in raising the share of women in managerial roles, national legislatures and local governments. The gender gap in managerial roles is, however, gradually narrowing in Africa, except in North Africa, where it is widening.

12. Africa continues to experience high rates of deforestation and biodiversity loss, and pervasive land degradation. In addition, access to safely managed sanitation remains a challenge in many coastal cities, and inadequate wastewater infrastructure results in the pollution of coastal regions with untreated sewage. Plastic waste poses a significant hazard to marine life, human health and the environment in the coastal regions of Africa. With less than 10 per cent of urban areas in Africa having access to sewerage services, there is growing concern regarding the associated health risks, such as frequent cholera outbreaks in the region (African Union Commission and others, 2022; United Nations Children's Fund and World Health Organization, 2022). The marine ecosystems of Africa continue to be imperilled by organic and chemical pollution resulting from human activity, and marine debris carried by freshwater systems, such as rivers. It is apparent that pollution and acidification, the dumping of solid and liquid waste, discharges and run-off from agricultural chemicals, and poor coastal infrastructure management are affecting coastal and marine waters and fresh water in most African countries. Policy measures and resources are urgently needed to reverse the negative trends in the conservation and sustainable management of

terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, and to halt the decline of biodiversity.

13. There has been little progress in the achievement of Goal 17 on the continent. Domestic revenue generation in Africa lags behind other regions. In Africa, excluding North Africa, total government revenue as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) fell from 16.5 per cent in 2019 to 15.0 per cent in 2020, before rising to 16.4 per cent in 2021. In 2019, domestic taxes accounted for 65.8 per cent of domestic budgets in Africa, up from 61.9 per cent in 2015. Africa suffered approximately \$89 billion of capital flight each year on average between 2013 and 2015 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2020).

14. Despite some notable progress, information and communications technology in Africa remains limited, undermining the capacity of the continent to leverage it fully for development. Fixed broadband subscriptions in Africa rose modestly from 0.4 subscriptions per 100 people in 2015 to 0.6 per 100 people in 2021, which is significantly lower than the global average of 16.7 per 100 people. Debt management has been difficult for African countries, with debt servicing obligations diverting scarce capital resources away from sustainable development and infrastructure projects.

C. Slow progress exacerbated by external shocks

15. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives and livelihoods, stalled economic growth and is reversing the hard-won development advances of several countries. Its unprecedented effects on societies, livelihoods and the well-being of families and communities are still being evaluated. As new COVID-19 variants emerge and governments progressively lift containment restrictions, future waves of the pandemic cannot be ruled out. Even though extraordinary scientific advances have led to the creation and distribution of vaccines to millions of people across the globe, vaccine inequity remains a significant problem in Africa, where vaccination rates lag behind other regions. African countries, particularly those with low vaccination rates, are, therefore, susceptible to future outbreaks and global movement restrictions.

16. In 2021, the pandemic pushed 23.6 million Africans into extreme poverty. It is anticipated that 492 million people will be living in extreme poverty by 2030, and 350 million by 2050. The pandemic has been linked to an uptick in gender-based violence and disruptions in school attendance. Approximately 69 million children were out of school in Africa in 2021, owing to school closures related to COVID-19 and other factors, such as an inability to pay school fees, child labour, school dropout among girls and access challenges for children with disabilities (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). The absence of adequate digital infrastructure during school closures has widened existing disparities in access to education. The pandemic adversely impacted the progress some African governments were making on increasing education budgets and compromised the quality of education. More than 60 per cent of children and adolescents do not satisfy the minimum requirements for reading and mathematics proficiency (Sachs and others, 2022).

17. Despite an increase in international commitments for budgetary support, the COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to a long-term risk of decreased official development assistance. Effective responses to the pandemic will require global solidarity, shared responsibility and a renewed commitment to multilateralism.

D. Opportunities to build resilience against future shocks

18. Scaling up concessional development financing for low-income and middle-income countries is key to responding to the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic. African States must strengthen their fiscal positions and reduce their debt vulnerabilities, which requires the implementation of aggressive domestic resource mobilization programmes, a reduction in wasteful tax waivers and incentives, the prevention of tax leakage and more efficient and effective tax administration. ECA has found that African countries can increase revenue by 12–20 per cent of GDP through the deployment of digital technology and other reforms in tax policy and administration. For instance, e-taxation reduced tax compliance costs in South Africa by 22.4 per cent in 2008 and increased revenue in Rwanda by 6 per cent of GDP in 2012. Kenya raised value-added tax collections

by more than \$1 billion by digitalizing value-added tax operations during the period 2016–2017 (ECA, 2019).

19. Measures to improve transparency in debt negotiations and promote fiscal prudence are critical in strengthening debt management. Strategic partnerships with countries in the global South and collaboration with the private sector can unlock additional resources and expand investment flows to the continent.

20. Investing in health and education systems is vital to prepare young people for the fourth industrial revolution and to capitalize on the opportunities offered by digital technology and decarbonization. Innovation and investment in Internet and energy access will, therefore, be key to closing the digital gap and reducing inequalities in access to quality education. In addition, measures to protect women and girls from violence, criminalize child marriage and prevent such harmful practices as female genital mutilation are necessary to reduce gender-based inequalities significantly.

21. The abundant green minerals and carbon sinks of Africa are natural assets that can be leveraged for economic diversification, revenue generation and employment creation through value addition and the development of climate resilient and low-carbon sectors. African countries should consider promoting and protecting nature-based jobs and livelihoods, nurturing community-based solutions and approaches, especially in indigenous communities, and accelerating green energy transitions as part of the COVID-19 response. Countries must intensify efforts to adapt to local contexts and implement policy frameworks that promote the sustainable management of forests, biodiversity and land.

22. Reducing poverty and inequality will require a substantial investment in protecting vulnerable people from socioeconomic shocks. Investments in social protection programmes, including cash transfers, universal health coverage and basic amenities, will, therefore, be critical. Public-private solidarity and partnerships can support the design of fiscally robust social protection programmes for vulnerable groups. Temporary and universal basic income initiatives, and fiscal stimuli that prioritize the care economy, domestic and informal workers,

people with disabilities and women migrants could be a part of a revised social contract.

23. The war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has underscored the urgent need to build resilient economic systems to reduce reliance on food imports by modernizing agriculture and improving agricultural productivity. Climate-friendly investment in irrigation, mechanization, research and development, and access to fertilizer can increase agricultural productivity, reduce reliance on grain imports and improve food security and household incomes.

24. Regional cooperation can magnify the impact and effectiveness of national development initiatives by expanding markets, establishing common standards and norms, and leveraging economies of scale. Through its regional approach to vaccine procurement, the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust facilitated access to COVID-19 vaccines at competitive rates for several African countries that had been excluded from the vaccines market. Furthermore, by reducing barriers to the free movement of goods and services and creating a market of 1.2 billion people, the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area provides an overarching framework for regional cooperation in Africa and a catalyst for structural transformation. African countries must make bold efforts to accelerate the implementation of that agreement.

25. The coherent implementation of the recommendations outlined above, however, requires effective development planning frameworks that are costed and aligned with global and continental commitments. According to a 2019 study, although most countries had incorporated the Sustainable

Development Goals into national development policies, the majority of plans had not been costed.² Furthermore, the alignment of national development plans with Agenda 2063 remains weak, and most plans are neither linked with national budgets nor consistently monitored and tracked (Chimhowu, Hulme and Munro, 2019). Integrated national financing frameworks can help countries to operationalize the Sustainable Development Goal stimulus by re-prioritizing investments and aligning budgets with development priorities. In August 2022, ECA updated the integrated planning and reporting toolkit to include a module on such frameworks. The new version of the toolkit is designed to link development financing with national development plans that are aligned with the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. The financing module of the toolkit links the financial programmes of budgets with specific targets under national development plans. In addition, the connection between a national budget and the two agendas is evaluated by mapping financial programmes to targets under the agendas. As a result, the toolkit can be used to help to align planning and financing functions, and to display a dashboard of a national funding landscape.

26. Consistent access to reliable and credible data is key to policy implementation and performance tracking. Countries must, therefore, invest in building and enhancing the capacity of national statistical offices to improve timely access to disaggregated data on the implementation of the Goals and Agenda 2063.

27. The fate of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 hangs perilously on the action and inaction of Governments and development partners. Time is running out. Action is needed now to avoid collective failure.

² A review of 107 national development plans in 2019 revealed that the majority of the plans (79) had no specific costing associated with implementation and only a minority (29) explained how the plan would be financed.

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