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45th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council

Educate an African fit for the 21st Century: Building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong, quality, and relevant learning in Africa

Statement

By

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Your Excellency, Mohamed Salem Ould Merzoug, Chair of the Executive Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania,

Your Excellency, Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Your Excellency, Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Ghana,

Your Excellency, Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa, Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Honourable Ministers and Heads of Delegations,

African Union Commissioners and Heads of Organs,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to address the 45th Ordinary Session of the Executive Council on the important theme of education.

I would like to start by thanking the Government of the Republic of Ghana for the warm welcome and hospitality.

Excellences, Distinguished delegates,

To rescue the Sustainable Development Goals and achieve Agenda 2063, we must put education, science, technology and innovation at the forefront of our efforts.

Unfortunately, Africa faces significant challenges, primarily due to inadequate financing and high indebtedness.

Governments struggle to access long-term concessional finance. Official development assistance and foreign direct investment are dwindling. Our limited tax to GDP ratios further constrains domestic resource mobilization.

These financial challenges are exacerbated by rising food and energy costs, fueled by increasing and unpredictable extreme weather events, which reduce the fiscal space for our countries to operate. In addition, the global level playing field remains uneven, with Africa's borrowing costs being over 10 times higher than Germany and nearly four times higher than the United States of America¹.

¹ UNCTAD World of Debt calculations

We must therefore persist in advocating for the reform of a global financial architecture that is fit for purpose.

Excellences,

Distinguished delegates,

Despite these obstacles, Africa has immense potential: significant arable land, coveted natural and critical mineral resources, major energy renewable potential, a youthful population, and a sizeable market. However, ‘potential’ does not drive growth or curb inflation. We must translate this potential into action, starting with transforming our education systems.

Education must be integrated into our industrial policy. We must not shy away from this approach, as other countries do the same to mitigate external shocks.

From the US Inflation Reduction Act to Made in China, to the European Chips Act, to name but a few.

It should also go without saying that science, technology and innovation (STI) must be at the core of our development agenda.

They are the foundation to building strong, competitive, resilient, and prosperous societies.

Without STI, we cannot avoid the middle-income trap, neither can we claim the 21st Century.

As such, we must make deliberate effort to ensure that the three quarters of Africa's youth without digital skills are equipped to meaningfully participate in the workforce of the future.

We may not be able to play catch up to the USD 370 billion spent on research and development in 2023 by Amazon, Alphabet, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla alone.

But deliberate investments in Africa's research and development, which currently stands at 0.45 percent of GDP, and STEM courses are fundamental to reap the benefits of smart technologies and artificial intelligence.

This is in our control.

It just requires political will and smart allocation of resources.

There will be tradeoffs but that is why we are here.

To make choices and take the right decisions.

Our schools need to be connected.

This is a sine qua non condition if we do not want to leave more people behind.

A choice we cannot afford.

The current connectivity levels of 40 per cent of primary schools and 50 per cent of lower-secondary schools will not be enough².

Here, innovative solutions such as the Giga Initiative, when scaled up, can make a real difference, in connecting all schools to internet.

Excellences, Distinguished delegates,

² UNESCO, 2024: Global Education Coalition Report - <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/how-global-education-coalition-contributing-transforming-education-africa>

However, boosting innovation and modernizing our education systems will require significant investments and governments alone cannot afford this.

Therefore, we must create the right incentives for the private sector to meaningfully participate in this important transformative agenda.

It makes business sense.

Indeed, Africa's private sector can only compete globally with a workforce equipped with the right skills.

Expanding access to technical and vocational education and training benefits the private sector and is key for employment and job creation.

Unlocking the full potential of public private partnership offers a win-win for everyone.

Finally, we cannot overlook the role of the regional mechanisms.

We need economies of scale to generate the resources required.

Therefore, regional agglomerations offer us the opportunities to grow the private sector, create more jobs and boost trade and investments.

Excellences, Distinguished delegates,

Securing adequate financing for education is both an imperative and a human right.

What is happening around us must strengthen our resolve for fairness and equity.

We also owe it to our future generations to remain resolute on the call for a better global financial architecture.

Next week, in Addis Ababa, Finance Ministers and other stakeholders from around the world will convene for the first of four preparatory meetings in the lead up to the 4th Financing for Development conference, scheduled to take place in 2025 in Spain.

The outcome will be a new consensus for global economic and financial governance.

Africa, perhaps, has the highest stake.

And we have an opportunity to make our voices heard.

We count on your active participation.

We need a strong Africa common position and voice.

And ECA remains committed to working side by side with you.

I thank you for your kind attention.