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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

INTERGENERATIONAL YOUTH FORUM

Keynote Address

by

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Your Excellencies,
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen
Young men and women of Africa

I feel particularly honoured to have this opportunity to address this meeting.

The spirit of Pan Africanism is a spirit of inclusiveness, togetherness, and unity. As we celebrate 50 years of Pan Africanist history, there is every reason why we should include the young people of the continent. I am indeed happy to realize that some of the youth with us today will be there in fifty years time to tell the story of May 2013.

Your Excellencies

Kwame Nkrumah at the age of 37 was deeply involved in the planning and organization of the 1945 Pan African Congress in Manchester. Abdul Gamel Nasser, was a colonel in the Egyptian army at the age of 35 and became President at the age of 38. Modibo Keita at the age of 28, founded the L'oeil de Kéné Dougou, a magazine critical of colonial rule that led to his imprisonment for three weeks in 1946 at the Prison de la Santé in Paris. Frantz Fanon at age 27, wrote his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, an analysis of the negative psychological effects of colonial subjugation upon Black people. Nelson Mandela was founding member of the Africa National Congress Youth League at age 26 and elected National President of the league 5 years later. At age 26, Amilcar Cabral had founded several student movements dedicated to opposing the rule of Portugal and promoting the cause of liberation of Portuguese colonies in Africa. When he died at the age of 46, he had achieved more than many people do in three lifetimes. Indeed, when Patrice Lumumba was assassinated at the age of only 37, he was already Prime Minister of the Congo having previously led a long struggle to liberate his beloved nation.

At their time, these actors were a source of inspiration, not only for Africans. Their ideas and contributions continue to be a source of inspiration for us today. They were great mobilizers, builders, purveyors and believers in the ideals of pan-Africanism. By comparison, our youth of today are still struggling to make their mark and to have their voices heard in all spheres of governance and influence. Indeed the current median age of African leaders is 3 times the median age of the African population.

We can nevertheless also safely assert that Africa's youth have made an impact on the democratic evolution of the continent. I am not talking only about their role in the so-called Arab Spring, which by the way is a misnomer. Spring is not applicable to Africa and it was not only in North Africa that the youth played a role in

stopping undemocratic practices at national level. Youth were also central to resisting a sit-tight President in Niger and to the general mobilization that resulted in the changes in Senegal. Despite these seemingly great achievements, it is sad to note that even though young Africans are more literate than their parents, they are more unemployed with current education levels lagging behind that of China and India.

The key message however is that the energy of Africa's youth, and their frustration with current conditions, has to be channeled through right policies. This goes without saying-Africa's youth are its future and the most important contributors to its structural transformation. Going forward, Africa, already the youngest continent will also have the largest labor force in the world. Indeed, by 2050, over a quarter of the world's labor force will be African.

Let me further stress this point. 2012 marked the tercentenary anniversary of the birth of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, considered one of the most original philosophers of the Enlightenment. His seminal work on the Social Contract gives us a starting place as he considered the possibility of balancing the relationship between man and nature. Rousseau also looked at creating a society based on the principles of equality, freedom and participatory governance. Indeed the idea of a social contract, which he originally postulated from the theory of family solidarity and togetherness, is thought of by some as the core constituents of sustainable development. This concept of sustainable development has now become the last incarnation of the continuous struggle to balance the relationship between humans and nature.

The world has reached a point where we need an intergenerational social contract that not only seeks to continue the sustainable development agenda but also looks at it in the new dimension of a demographic imbalance; a young Africa versus an aging world. This is why a debate on the youth in Africa is so relevant. This issue is not only critical to Africa but to the world's continuous development as a whole.

Given this background, our collective challenge is how to use Africa's youth potential to build a prosperous and peaceful continent. It would require that we create mechanisms to give more space to our youth. Needless to say, of course, that the older generation did not wait for space to be created for them but rather took it.

Don't tell them there are no jobs. The example of Asia's growth tells us otherwise. Don't tell them they cannot do science. India's growth shows that a developing country can train its youth to build a strong science and engineering base. Don't tell them not to dream. The growth of IT innovations in Africa shows our capabilities in the face of hardship.

Don't tell them not to grow. The business acumen of young entrepreneurs like Ashish Thakkar, Africa's youngest billionaire, shows that it is possible.

Don't tell them not to ask questions. Indeed that is the only way they can provide the answers we need for the next fifty years.

We want a youth that are ambitious, innovative and courageous, righting wrong, and speaks truth to power. We want a youth that continues the struggle for the total liberation of Africa started by our forefathers by fighting for equality, freedom and justice.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the past Africa's 52 million Facebook users, most of whom are youth, show clearly that they are up to date and well equipped to function effectively as part of the information and communications revolution. I have also very recently developed a social media presence and am getting used to the lingo such as 'posting', 'liking' and 'friending' on my Facebook page. I especially like the word 'LOL' which means 'laugh out loud'. Indeed, while I listen to and enjoy the work of Angelique Kidjo, Salif Keita and Hugh Masekela, I do appreciate that P-Square and Sauti Sol have more resonance with our youth. I assure you however that those of us of the older generation can also gyrate to the music generated by young Africans. After all, we all have rhythm!!

I thank you for your attention.