

SPEECH BY THE DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON AT THE
COMMEMORATION OF THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Your Excellency, Dr. Demeke Mekennen, Deputy Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,

Your Excellency Amb. Elsadil Omer Abdalah, Charge d’Affaires of Sudan to the African Union,

Your Excellency Mr. Achim Steiner, UNDP Programme Administrator,

Ms. Vera Songwe, Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and proud Daughter of Africa,

Madam Jessica Davis Ba, Deputy Chief of Mission, US Embassy to the AU,

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

I bring you the fraternal greetings of H.E. Dr. Moussa Faki Mahamat, the Chair of the African Union Commission, who, for reasons beyond his control, is unable to be with us today. Nonetheless, I am truly delighted to be able to be with you here today to share this moment of celebration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

The UNECA could be said to have, in figurative terms, given birth to our predecessor organization, the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Over the past 60 years, UNECA has partnered Africa, the OAU and now, the African Union, in all our numerous and multifaceted endeavours and exertions. We are joined at the hip, in the words of my

sister Ms. Giovananie Biha, Deputy Executive Secretary of the ECA. UNECA has partnered us through all the vicissitudes of national liberation, continental liberation, and is currently in lockstep with the AU in the difficult but enriching process of continental integration, the only context within which true socio-economic transformation Africa can realistically take place. Today, as we celebrate our 60 years together, it is probably not entirely out of place to reflect on our journey together, how it all began, and to undertake a walk down memory lane.

How did it all begin? We owe the origin of our existence to the lofty cadences of the UN Charter which highlights, inter alia, in the preamble, “to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom and in that regard to employ international machinery for the promotion of economic and social advancement of all peoples.”

Under Article 68 of the United Nations Charter, ECOSOC was specifically mandated to set up “Commissions in Economic and Social fields...” In 1946, the General Assembly decided to establish the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) mainly to provide effective aid to European countries destroyed by the Second World War. In 1947, the Economic Commission for Africa and the Far East, later designated the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, and ESCAP, was established. At the time, the general view was that the vast Asian population was entitled to United Nations assistance in confronting the huge problems of post-war development. In August 1947, one of the arguments for the setting up of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) was the region’s low standard of living which prevents its inhabitants from fully contributing to global progress and welfare.

The establishment of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa took a much longer struggle. This was led by a handful of independent African countries, at the time, supported by their allies – fellow independent and newly independent, developing countries. This proposal was directly introduced to the Second Committee at the 12th

United Nations General Assembly, in 1957, the year of Ghana's independence – the first in sub-Saharan Africa.

The United Nations General Assembly that year passed a resolution directing ECOSOC to establish an African Regional Economic Commission by ECOSOC Resolution 671 (XXV) of 29th April. UNECA was established on 19th April 1958 with a geographical scope covering the entire African continent. In a way, therefore, UNECA could be said to have paved the way for the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 1963. ECOSOC demanded that the problems of "social development" be made a part of the terms of reference of UNECA, and included in its mandate a provision for dealing with the social and economic development and the interrelationship between economic and social factors. In addition to the mandate to promote economic and social development of its member states, the ECONOMIC Commission for Africa was also to foster intra-regional integration and to promote international cooperation for Africa's development.

In 1958, when ECOSOC had a full membership of 15 states, only 8 of these states were from Africa. These were Ethiopia, Ghana, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Republic of Egypt. Six non-African states were then enjoying full membership – these were Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, the United States and the United Kingdom – you could call them the *usual suspects*. Associate members admitted to ECOSOC on 29th April 1958 were Nigeria, Gambia, Kenya, Zanzibar, Sierra Leone, British Somaliland Protectorate, Tanganyika and Uganda.

African member states of UNECA fought against the prevailing situation in which certain non-self-governing territories were not represented in the Commission as associate members, whereas certain non-African countries with territorial interests within Africa were full members. The African member states demanded that the full membership status of the colonial powers be altered, curtailed or even terminated, and that there should be African participation on behalf of non-self-governing states.

Eventually, France, Spain and the UK agreed to a reduction in their status to associate membership and to allow, in accordance with the will of the Commission, for the non-self-governing territories under their administration to be granted direct representation as associate members. This was ratified by ECOSOC in an amendment to the terms of reference in 1963.

Your Excellencies, what is distinctive and a significant singularity about the Economic Commission for Africa and could have implications on the functioning of its intergovernmental structure is its strategic and close partnerships with the African Union, particularly the African Union Commission which is becoming a more vibrant, politically influential Pan-African organization with overlapping and coterminous membership with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

It is, therefore, also remarkable, interesting and noteworthy that the Reform of the United Nations Development System is taking place at the same time as the Reform of the African Union and its Commission. In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly provided guidance for the repositioning of the United Nations to enhance its cohesion and to maximize its capabilities and capacities to achieve the United Nations social development focus. The three guiding principles which undergirded this ambitious agenda were:

1. Reinforcing national ownership;
2. Developing country-contextual response, and
3. Ensuring effective delivery of development outcomes on the ground.

To help member countries implement the 2030 Agenda, Secretary-General Gutierrez sought to reposition the United Nations Development System through changing organizational arrangements, skill sets, leadership as well as the coordination and accountability mechanism in the United Nations Development System. The United

Nations General Assembly, the world's parliament, welcomed the Secretary-General's vision on 31st May 2018.

The key reforms were to be centred around:

- i. A new generation of UN country teams focused around a strategic country plan, developed in close consultation with governments, and led by an impartial, independent and empowered United Nations Coordinator. This is intended to allow member states to guide the system-wide action and to bring greater transparency and accountability within a robust evaluation system;
- ii. Re-profiling and repositioning the work of the Regional Economic Communities to broaden the link between the Regional Communities and the broader UN family at both regional and country levels;
- iii. A Funding Compact designed to bring better quality, quantity and predictability of resources in exchange for accelerated repositioning and enhanced capacities of the system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda with increased transparency and accountability;
- iv. On partnership, steps will be taken for a stronger UN. Institutional response and system-wide approach to partnership for the 2030 Agenda by strengthening the capacities of the UN country teams and engagement with Headquarters, civil society, the private sector, international financial institutions and others.

From the foregoing, it became clear that the United Nations Secretary-General is seeking to make the United Nations Development System an active partner in the implementation of Agenda 2063.

The support of the United Nations regional body brings with it three major interconnected advantages:

1. Convening power in support of intergovernmental platforms; think tank functions, serving as a source of knowledge, data, statistics and evidence based analysis for member states on priority policy issues;

2. Operational functions; providing policy advice and targeted capacity development to assist member states on regional, global and trans-boundary, sub-regional issues;
3. United Nations and Regional Economic Communities to serve as policy integrator of the 2030/2063 Agendas. Together as policy Integrator, they could focus on knowledge, policy and research; garner and provide global intergovernmental support, coordination and alignment with the RECs, AU and UN Development Groups.

Under the rubric of Resolution 1998/46, the five regional mechanisms mandated by ECOSOC RCMs can provide a high-level policy platform for exchanging views on major strategic developments and challenges faced by regions and sub-regions and the alignment of regional and global agendas. This will help promote policy coherence within the UN system in response to identified regional priorities.

To me, what is crucially significant in all these is the role of organization and planning. "Organization", as Kwame Nkrumah said, some 50 plus years ago, "decides everything." And organization presupposes planning, and planning demands a programme to provide context and basis. Planning also demands a common understanding and a common integrated perspective on issues. All of which, Your Excellencies, brings us back to the question of Pan-Africanism, an important aspect of which is the revival and development of the African personality. Pan-Africanism finds expression in a re-awakening of consciousness among Africans and peoples of African descent and of the bonds that unite us, our historical past, our culture, our common experience and our aspirations. This, in reality, is Agenda 2063, coinciding and resonating with Agenda 2030, all over again.

And so, Your Excellencies, with these few remarks, I have the honour to wish the UNECA a happy 60th Birthday, and I thank you for your kind and polite attention. Thank you!