

A Statement on the 7th session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development

Preamble

The 7th session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (ARFSD) took place in Brazzaville from 1 to 4 March 2021. The ITUC-Africa and its affiliates, through the Africa Trade Union Development Network (ATUDN) participated in the forum.

Held against the emergent new challenge to global development posed by COVID-19 pandemic, the forum highlighted stark vulnerabilities and structural inequalities that the pandemic exposed in Africa. It was noted that the pandemic will further compromise the attainment of the SDGs of which the African continent was already off-track. In light of these developments, it was affirmed that greater efforts will be required to accelerate and expand the scale and speed of implementation within the narrow window of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development through transformative actions and investments in Africa.

The Forum proffered an opportunity for development partners to engage in dialogue, propose solutions and to translate into action the mantra that “the 2020s is a decade of action and delivery”. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, it was emphasized that the proffered solutions should have a particular emphasis on “building forward better” towards more resilient economies for shared prosperity to achieve the goals of the two agendas. In this regards, the following issues were discussed and agreed:

- **Vaccine for all:** The forum reiterated the call of the UN Secretary-General for COVID-19 vaccines to be a global public good, available to everyone, everywhere, along with the role of the COVAX facility.
- **Development Financing:** Relating to tackling the lack of financing by most African countries to adequately respond to the COVID-19 crisis, it was revealed that Africa needs an \$100 billion per year for three years to deal with the health and socioeconomic impacts of the crisis. The Forum, with the support of ECA and African ministers, also called for a new issue of Special Drawing Rights (SDR) of about \$25 billion that would benefit all African countries and be distributed equitably by quota. The SDRs could provide the opportunity to access convertible monies that could assist in addressing the worsening poverty as it shall facilitate the informal small and medium-sized enterprises to stay in business and relaunch the economy. The forum also called for a debt payment suspension for all developing countries to allow them fiscal space to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of financing the recovery from COVID-19 and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, five policy options were highlighted: (a) external debt relief and restructuring for Africa; (b) creation of \$500 billion in SDRs; (c) enlarging concession grants to benefit middle-income African economies; (d) mobilizing \$100 billion annually to finance climate change action, as pledged by developed countries as part of the Paris Agreement; and (e) curbing illicit financial flows from Africa and returning the funds to countries of origin.
- **Development Model:** It was argued that the world needs to develop a just economic model that shall embrace renewable energy, green and resilient infrastructure, and inclusive digitalization, while protecting natural resources.

Key messages

On progress regarding the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 and tackling the COVID-19, the Forum noted that Africa was on track to attain only one of the Sustainable Development Goals, namely Goal 14, and had made good progress on one other, Goal 10. The current pace of progress on all remaining goals was very slow or stagnant. To accelerate the progress in attaining other goals, it was reiterated that investments in key enablers such as reproductive health, mental health, primary health care, education and quality of governance must be boosted to engineer growth, address income inequality and reduce rent-seeking impulses.

Regarding meeting data and statistics needs to achieve the SDGs, the Forum observed that data and information are major assets to Africa's development process, since high-quality data are prerequisites to good policy and properly monitoring and evaluating implementation thereof. Therefore, it was resolved that high-quality data should be disaggregated by location, gender, age, disability, and other population characteristics, with a view to closing the digital divide and leaving no one behind, in particular minorities and other vulnerable groups.

On the principle of leaving no one behind, the forum suggested a rethink on strategies to strengthen the capacity of the most at-risk categories of people, such as older people and persons with disabilities, to help them out of poverty. To that effect, a possibility of having a universal basic income to socially protect the vulnerable was discussed. The Forum agreed that partnerships among public, private and other non-State actors should be strengthened, to accelerate progress and reassess international solidarity as an economic principle and that

international cooperation mechanisms should be strengthened, to improve market access for African products and leverage the African Continental Free Trade Area to add value and trade, improve welfare and reduce poverty. Public and private investment should be focused towards poverty reduction and job creation through a combination of labour-intensive manufacturing and technological innovation.

On meeting zero hunger, the Forum agreed that Member States need to scale up investment and political commitment to make progress towards Goal 2 and the aspirations for 2025 and 2063, by focusing on three priority areas: (1) Linking rural actors to markets, financial services and innovation to transform rural areas; (2) Sustainable development of food systems, climate adaptation and preparedness infrastructure; and (3) Human capital development, in particular childhood learning, healthy diets and social protection.

Regarding the sub-theme of good health and well-being, it was agreed that Member States need to pay particular attention to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on mental health and ensure access to quality community - based mental health care services and facilities, and take the lead in ending stigma associated with mental health conditions. It was exhorted that a comprehensive package of sexual and reproductive health services, and prevention of and protection from sexual and gender-based violence, must be prioritized at all times, including during crises, pandemics and other emergency situations.

Of decent work and economic growth, promoting decent work for all, while ambitious, was seen as critical in achieving other Sustainable Development Goals. It was noted that the significant economic growth in Africa, while impressive over the past two decades, had not been inclusive or fast enough to absorb the rapidly growing labour force. As a result, labour supply had outpaced labour demand, leading to a situation where even those who were employed were living in poverty. The forum discerned that the pandemic provided an opportunity to craft job-rich, inclusive and sustainable growth to build forward better, through facilitating structural transformation and economic diversification, and leveraging free trade opportunities within Africa. Social dialogue and an enabling environment for enterprises to create sustainable employment were deemed critical for inclusive economic growth. The Forum agreed that "Building forward better" from the pandemic will require decisive public policies to accelerate structural transformation and building Africa's long-term productive capacities in a way that also leverages opportunities for green transition. A proactive, concerted policy effort needs to leverage financial policies, "pro-employment" monetary and exchange rate policies, expanding the tax base while facilitating tax administration compliance, public investments, trade and investment policies, strengthening education and training, while aligning skills supply with business needs, progressive taxation, lifting wages, extending social protection systems, and strengthening labour market institutions and social dialogue.

On the question of Goal 10, of reducing inequality within and among countries, it was noted that there had been growing inequalities between youth and the rest of the population. The damage caused by COVID-19 on vulnerable populations had been enormous. Low-income workers who could not work from home had been affected the most. To deal with these issues, Member States called upon to ensure implementation of United Nations and African Union instruments that support social protection of vulnerable populations in order to reduce inequalities among and within countries. To that end, improving socioeconomic data collection and analysis, and building a repository of evidence to inform decisions and efforts was considered key. The role of the private sector, which has the potential to drive programmes on information technology-focused interventions that address inequalities in access to such technologies is to be strengthened.

To foster responsible consumption and production, it was noted that circularity in the blue economy and access to green financing will boost the innovative capacities of small and medium-sized enterprises and accelerate the transition to green economies. Resource-efficient and cleaner production should be promoted, including green business development, with a view to promoting productivity and competitiveness in Africa. It was also observed that the continent needs to invest in climate risk information and digital solutions, to enhance the use of technologies in the production of tailored and integrated climate information services for uptake and use by end user communities. Governments were urged to promote a whole-of-society approach that will ensure coherent development and implementation of adequately financed disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies.

To foster peace, justice and strong institutions, it was intimated that African countries must foster a human rights based approach to political leadership and meaningful stakeholder participation in the planning, decision -making, monitoring and reporting processes pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals. In order to forward better towards a resilient and green Africa, strong institutions are required to ensure human rights obligations and good governance, including innovative approaches to governance such as technologies that facilitate e-governance. It was noted that to achieve all the stated aspirations, partnerships are key. Therefore, international development partners should strengthen multilateral cooperation mechanisms, ensure the full and timely disbursement of their financial pledges and meet their official development assistance commitments.

Observations

The ITUC-Africa observes that forum, while meeting under challenging circumstances, managed to discuss the critical issues confronting the implementation of the Agenda 2030 and 2063. While almost all pertinent issues were discussed, ITUC-Africa is of the view that concrete solutions and steps to addressing the current challenges facing African workers and citizenry in general should have been agreed. In the face of unprecedented job and livelihood losses, the African governments need to expand social protection mechanisms to protect the most vulnerable.

As the pandemic continues to rage, there are major gaps in response capacity, especially in human resources and protective equipment. The forum should have emphasized on shoring up support in COVID-19 response capacity and also the protection of frontline workers through improved Occupational Health and Safety, by among other things, adequate provision of PPEs.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has continues to undermined peace at global, regional, national, subnational and local levels. In most African countries, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the secrecy and opacity of public institutions and their decision-making and accountability processes, in particular during emergencies. Civil society space has continued to shrink and problems persist with internally displaced people, worsening trends in freedom of association and assembly, labour rights, civil rights and liberties, and freedom of expression. The most worrying thing is that at a time when the multi-stakeholder approach, through social dialogue, is required to effectively deal with the raging COVID-19 pandemic, most governments in Africa have excluded social partners in crafting responsive policies. Resultantly, on top of suffering huge job losses, most workers face serious violations of freedom of association and limits to effective access to trade union rights. The forum fell short in addressing these critical challenges.