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**Economic Commission for Africa
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**Intergovernmental Committee of Senior
Officials and Experts for Central Africa**

Thirty-sixth session

11–12 November 2020, (Held online)

**Report of the thirty-sixth session of the
Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials
and Experts for Central Africa**



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I. Introduction

1. The Subregional Office for Central Africa of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) organized the thirty-sixth session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials and Experts for Central Africa on 11 and 12 November 2020, by videoconference. The theme of the session was “Building skills for economic diversification in Central Africa”.

2. The main objective of the session was to take stock of skills and other knowledge in support of economic diversification in Central Africa, to identify challenges, constraints and opportunities, and to propose recommendations on the training and skills mobilization strategy necessary for the structural transformation of the economies of the subregion.

3. The meeting was also aimed at discussing statutory issues relating to the functioning of the ECA Subregional Office for Central Africa, namely: first, the report of the Subregional Office on its activities over the period 2019–2020; second, an update on the status of regional and international programmes and other special initiatives in the subregion; and, third, a report on the implementation of subregional initiatives in Central Africa.

II. Attendance

4. Nearly one hundred participants took part in the meeting. The following countries were represented: Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe.

5. Representatives of the following institutions also took part: Development Bank of Central African States, Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), African Development Bank, European Union.

III. Opening ceremony

6. The opening ceremony was presided over by the Minister of Planning, Statistics and Regional Integration of the Congo, Ingrid Olga Ghislaine Ebouka-Babackas. Three addresses were delivered at the opening, by the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Vera Songwe; the outgoing Chair of the Intergovernmental Committee and head of the delegation of Equatorial Guinea, María Del Mar Bonkanka Tabares, and Ms. Ebouka-Babackas, who opened the work of the thirty-sixth session.

IV. Election of the Bureau

7. The meeting unanimously elected the Bureau, which comprised the following members:

Chair: Congo

Vice-Chair: Chad

Rapporteur: Cameroon

V. Adoption of the agenda and programme of work

8. The participants adopted the agenda and programme of work.

VI. Conduct of deliberations

9. The meeting was conducted online. Key elements of the document “Building skills for economic diversification in Central Africa”, the background report for the meeting, was presented in a high-level dialogue, including experts from the Subregional Office and other external resource persons.

A. High-level dialogue on the theme “Revolutionizing skills for economic diversification in Central Africa in the time of COVID-19 – a call to build back better”

10. The high-level dialogue focused on key issues related to skills development in Central Africa as outlined in the report “Building skills for economic diversification in Central Africa”.

11. The panel comprised, Gabriel Dodo Ndoke, Minister of Mines, Industry and Technological Development of Cameroon; Irmgard Nubler, economist at the International Labour Organisation (ILO); Amir Mougache, Professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of N’Djamena in Chad; Jean Luc Mastaki, Economist at the Subregional Office for Central Africa, and Antonio Pedro, Director of the Office. The participants took part in the dialogue by using the “Event chat” function of the Interprefy platform. The high-level dialogue was moderated by Abel Akara, a communications expert at the Subregional Office for Central Africa.

12. At the start of the dialogue, panellists identified the labour market imbalance as a barrier to occupational choice. Young people were aiming at arts professions because they provided access to administrative work in the public sector. As a result, they lacked interest in the technical, scientific and engineering professions. That imbalance raised the question of the signals that society sent to young people to guide them in their career choices, while highlighting a weak link between the human resource needs of the sectors and the career choices of young people.

13. For the panellists, one of the major challenges facing the economies of the subregion was the lack of processing of raw materials. That was identified as a missed opportunity to furnish young people with the wide range of skills needed to promote industrial development. They recommended that the countries of the subregion should put in place measures to add value to local products in order to enable young people to benefit from training in trades and on-the-job training within industries.

14. In the debates about qualifications and competence, prominence had been given to the question of specific skills and the extent to which academic qualifications adequately indicated the right career choice. Panellists stressed the need for companies to be able to figure out what a job seeker’s practical skills might be, as that was often not clearly apparent from their qualifications or their job application, still less from their curriculum vitae. The experts urged employers to give due attention to the individual’s career path, through better recognition of skills acquired in the workplace.

15. The participants stressed the need to address the problem of the training-employment mismatch in Central Africa by increasing the appeal of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics sectors, which would provide the subregion with the human resources capable of moving it forward from a development model based on strong dependence on exports of raw materials.

16. The high-level experts urged officials in the subregion to draw on successful models for the promotion of special economic zones and other industrial clusters as a basis for skills development through their inclusive partnerships with training and research institutions and industry.

17. Other innovative skills promotion models were suggested, including recognition of the role of the diaspora and measures to ensure the mobility of skills through certification in a subregion which was more integrated, where the free movement of people was being promoted.

18. Calling for efforts to enhance the learning and training model, the panel stressed the urgent need for a skills revolution and the promotion of a learning-oriented society as a necessary condition to enable the predominantly poor countries of Central Africa to launch a dynamic appropriate to the sophistication of production systems and conducive to improved productivity and economic diversification. The panel also stressed the need to create an environment that facilitated the transfer of learning outcomes in the workplace through the promotion of innovation and the strengthening of links between schools and trades.

19. Panellists requested countries of Central Africa, notwithstanding their limited capacity, to emulate countries that had been successful in their diversification processes, such as China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Those countries had the shared benefit of having aligned their learning and skills development strategies with their ambitions for economic diversification. Their school curriculum developers had been challenged to meet the needs of a transformed economy.

20. Teaching methodology and the ability to develop projects and exploratory methods were identified as forming the basis for a versatile skills development system. The panellists also urged education stakeholders to develop a teaching methodology that would enable students to enjoy learning, and above all avoid demotivating them with unnecessary punishments. Calling for a healthier learning environment, the experts stressed the key role played by businesses. The latter played a crucial role in the national productive system and in any learning process. Attention was drawn to the example of countries such as China, Japan and the Republic of Korea in promoting foreign direct investment as a means of developing specific skills that had facilitated the integration of those countries into a number of global value chains.

21. The experts pointed out the indispensable role of the family and the social environment in general in the development of students' curiosity, which remained crucial for the adoption of new technologies. They encouraged universities and other training centres to use new information and communication technologies to offer online programmes that could benefit the majority of the population, in particular young people.

22. Participants deplored the lack of opportunities available to the talented youth of the subregion. They recommended that companies offer internships and incentives for those in the first jobs, while calling for the promotion of exchanges between schools and industry.

23. The panel encouraged the adoption of the 70-30 model in the subregion. This was reflected in the choices made by 70 per cent of the students, who enrolled for courses in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics field, while 30 per cent enrolled for arts and humanities courses. The experts stressed that one of the major pillars of the success of that strategy was the substitution of imports by processed local products, a process driven by a strong political will manifested in grants and scholarships to encourage enterprises and young people to shift towards the science, technology, engineering and mathematics field.

24. The experts urged the Central African subregion to articulate its values more clearly, before launching a process of categorizing resources on a sector-by-sector basis. That approach would enable each country to identify its strengths and thus invest in processes that matched the supply of goods and services with demand and in developing the right skills for the situation on the ground. For example, Chad, with a livestock herd of 96 million head, could define policies to develop the specific cold-chain skills needed to move along the global meat value chains. In addition to developing partnerships with the private sector, Central African countries should enlarge the scope available for skills development in their economic diversification strategies and national development plans.

25. Special economic zones, areas for the focus of economic activities forming the interconnected system necessary to attract national and foreign investment, had been identified as poles of development and sharing of skills. The experts noted that the establishment of such zones could contribute to the development of skills through partnerships with training institutes and the promotion of access to technologies. For countries where there was a dominant informal sector with a high concentration of small and medium-sized enterprises, investments crystallized by special economic zones could benefit the local economy through better promotion of local content, local procurement policies and subcontracting with foreign firms. Special economic zones open to local small and medium-sized enterprises would serve as a channel for the transmission of knowledge and skills to local businesses. Central African countries should follow the model of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana and South Africa in promoting local supply and content in the mining sector.

26. Special economic zones were thus relevant tools for industrialization at both national and subregional levels. They provided a framework for collaboration between companies and stakeholders operating in various fields, including universities and training centres, and constituted an appropriate framework for promoting innovation. The regional industrialization and economic diversification plan currently being developed offered a better opportunity to strengthen the practice of cross-border special economic zones and the certification, mobility and portability of skills in the subregion.

27. The experts encouraged member States to benefit from the experience of their diaspora for skills development and to propose solutions to the problems of governance, administrative delays and lack of political will, all of which posed obstacles to the active participation of the diaspora in the process of skills development in Central Africa.

28. The experts criticized traditional skills development policies, which depended on scholarship funding and the promotion of training abroad, for failing to include a business creation component which would ensure the better integration of young graduates returning from abroad. They noted that many countries in the subregion, such as Cameroon, had put in place policies to encourage the return and development of skills acquired by members of their diaspora communities.

29. The panel also stressed the importance of strengthening the corporate culture, which was largely ignored in the process of imparting knowledge and skills in schools. Managers, who were responsible for skills development, were asked to encourage soft skills, including the ability to pursue continuous learning, teamwork, communication and innovation. The mobility of human resources should be based on the harmonization of training curricula and the creation of a common labour market in the subregion. The subregion should draw on the experience and best practices of the European Union. For its part, the European Union had succeeded in establishing a common framework for the accreditation and certification of skills, thus placing better portability of skills at the heart of its regional integration process.

30. Panellists recalled that economic diversification, the creation of an economic system favourable to skills development, and the sustainable use of resources must be at the heart of the development process in Central Africa. They stressed that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the disruptions that it had caused to supply chains and international trade had created a new dynamic that underscored the urgency of developing the industrial fabric of the subregion and strengthening local productive capacities in terms of inputs and other essential products.

31. ECA stressed the need to make the decade 2020–2030 the decade of economic diversification in order to mobilize energies around the promotion of economic diversification, a long-cherished goal but one that had been slow to take shape in the subregion. The decade of diversification and the mobilization of the stakeholders involved should be aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development through its Goal 8, which promoted decent work for all, and Goal 9, on sustainable and inclusive industrialization.

32. From the presentations and views put forward by the panellists and the discussions of the panel, the following major recommendations emerged:

- (a) There is need to improve the learning model under way in the subregion and to promote a learning-oriented society that offers skills to young people, a skills revolution that will enable the predominantly poor countries to initiate a dynamic conducive to more sophisticated production systems, increased productivity and competitiveness and economic diversification;
- (b) An environment should be fostered that encourages on-the-job training and strengthens the system of continuous training;
- (c) Students should be encouraged to enrol for science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses and investment should be promoted in technology and innovation;
- (d) Learning strategies should be put in place that are aligned with countries' economic diversification plans and programmes and that enable the school system to respond to the needs of a transformed economy and industry through innovative and inclusive partnerships;
- (e) Inspiration should be drawn from models and best practices identified elsewhere and special economic zones should be turned into the flagships of skills development, with strengthened links with local small and medium-sized enterprises through an active policy of local content, subcontracting and procurement that transfers skills to the local economy;

- (f) The development of soft skills should be encouraged, including corporate culture, communication, teamwork, innovation and a propensity for continued learning, in addition to promoting cognitive skills;
- (g) Efforts should be made to harmonize training curricula, to facilitate the accreditation and certification of acquired skills, to promote the development of cross-border special economic zones and the creation of a common labour market as a guarantee of skills portability, drawing on the experience of the European Union, India and other innovative countries;
- (h) Studies should be initiated to inform the choices of the subregion on the profile of skills required and the efforts to be made for their development, drawing on the guidance of ILO and mobilizing other stakeholders to ensure better support in this endeavour.

B. Presentation of the report on the activities of the Subregional Office of the Economic Commission for Africa in Central Africa since the thirty-fifth session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts and on the strategic framework for 2021

33. The representative of the secretariat presented the results achieved by the Subregional Office for Central Africa for the period from September 2019 to October 2020 through the implementation of its programme of activities. The presentation reviewed the remaining activities for 2020 and then outlined the strategic framework for 2021.

34. Among the achievements of the Office, he drew attention to the recognition of the Subregional Office for Central Africa as a reference institution and centre of excellence for issues of economic diversification and structural transformation of the economies of Central Africa.

35. He reviewed the various forms of support provided by the Subregional Office to countries as part of the development and finalization of strategies and visions for economic diversification and industrialization, such as in Cameroon, Chad and the Congo, along with their related co-benefits. He outlined support for the establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area at the level of the countries of the subregion before underscoring the Office's investment, through the agreements between ECA and the European Union, in the gradual removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade and reviewed progress made to that end, including ratification of the draft legal and regulatory framework and validation of the study on the operationalization of the free practice and re-export regimes for the CEMAC-ECCAS common external tariff.

36. Other achievements by the Office included progress in the area of subregional roaming and studies on the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic at the national and subregional levels.

37. He highlighted the challenges posed by the difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had affected implementation of the Office's activities under its programme, and drew lessons from that particular situation. In conclusion, he defined the strategic framework for the Subregional Office for Central Africa for 2021 and highlighted the Office's

commitment to continue its support for both horizontal and vertical diversification of the economies of the subregion.

38. The Committee commended the efforts by the Subregional Office to support the countries of the subregion that had been seriously weakened by the decline in commodity prices, in particular oil prices, and the socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, before adopting the report on the activities of the Office.

C. Presentation on roaming in Central Africa

39. Giuseppe D'Aronco, Economic Affairs Officer at the Subregional Office for Central Africa, presented the progress made in the establishment of a single, consolidated network in Central Africa. Recalling the key role played by such a development in the process of subregional integration, he pointed out that Central Africa was the only area in Africa that had not yet operationalized the single network to its full extent. He noted that the process of implementing the network had started in 2010 with an awareness-raising meeting organized by the Office and underlined the slow pace of the process, as it had taken 10 years before adoption of the Community regulation abolishing roaming charges in CEMAC zones with effect from 1 January 2021.

40. Regarding the impact of the single network on the tariff system of the subregion, he stressed that the roaming tariffs for calls and incoming or outgoing text messages in the CEMAC area could not exceed the highest tariffs of all operators in that area. That limit on charges would also apply to data roaming charges. The rates could therefore not exceed the highest tariff per megabyte in the country visited. He confirmed that that new measure would have a significant impact on consumers, as roaming tariffs would drop to 100 CFA francs with effect from 1 January 2021, a reduction of more than 98 per cent.

41. As a recommendation for future action, he encouraged ECCAS to incorporate the instruments that had been adopted with a view to establishing a single, harmonized network in its area. He called on operators to be ready to apply the regulatory provisions adopted by CEMAC on the abolition of roaming charges with effect from 1 January 2021. He urged States to expedite the application of the regulations adopted by ministers, in order to have effective roaming arrangements by early 2021. He called on technical and financial partners to support CEMAC in monitoring the implementation of that project and on ECCAS to extend free roaming to the other countries of the subregion.

42. He concluded his presentation with a vigorous appeal to Central Africa to make the digital revolution a key priority for successful economic diversification in the subregion.

43. In the ensuing discussion, participants called for the sharing of experiences of countries in the subregion that had already implemented such roaming arrangements on a bilateral basis. They also stressed the need to widen the scope for money transfers between countries in the subregion, using the services offered by mobile telephone operators.

D. Presentation of the annual status report on regional and international programmes and other special initiatives in the subregion: integrating natural capital accounting for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 12 in Central Africa

44. The secretariat presented the annual status report on regional and international programmes and other special initiatives in the subregion aimed at the integration of natural capital accounting for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 12 in Central Africa. In his presentation, Mamadou Malick Bal, Economic Affairs Officer at the Subregional Office for Central Africa, demonstrated how natural capital was a key asset for the countries of the subregion, for which it constituted a significant share of their total wealth. He noted, however, that the full contribution made by that capital was not reflected in traditional economic metrics derived from national accounts, such as gross domestic product (GDP). He analysed the system of environmental and economic accounts established by the United Nations to measure the contribution to the development process of natural resources, such as fisheries, minerals and forests. He noted also that the COVID-19 pandemic had provided an opportunity for Central African countries to reassess their priorities and build back their economies better by adopting sustainable and inclusive consumption and production patterns.

45. In closing, he called for stepped up efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals before the 2030 deadline. He stressed that sustainable consumption and production were central to enabling the countries of Central Africa to achieve sustained economic growth and poverty reduction. He also indicated that, although natural capital accounting did not in itself provide the wherewithal for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, it could serve as a useful framework, providing valuable elements, lessons and practices that could be mobilized to develop, implement and evaluate the policies or governance arrangements needed to achieve the Goals at the country level.

46. Taking up key messages from Mr. Bal's presentation, Antonio Pedro, Director of the Subregional Office for Central Africa, said that ECA was closely studying ways of ensuring that natural capital was more adequately reflected in GDP. In that process, it was addressing the problem that current means of measuring national accounts underestimated the contribution of natural capital. Those traditional measurements thus failed to reveal opportunities which Central Africa could deploy to mobilize additional funding for economic diversification and structural transformation. A more effective approach to accounting for natural capital would lead to an upward revaluation of the subregion's GDP, giving a more accurate picture of the subregion's contribution to global wealth. He called on the subregion to draw on the work of such bodies as the World Bank in developing wealth indicators that gave due consideration to the contribution of natural capital, such as the Wealth Accounting and the Valuation of Ecosystem Services (WAVES) initiative.

47. Experts posed a number of questions, which focused on approaches to measuring natural capital and the channels through which its effects on financing for development were transmitted. The director of the WAVES initiative indicated that a better measurement of the natural capital of the Central African subregion would lead to a fuller appreciation of the wealth of that subregion, by taking proper account of that capital in the measurement of GDP. That wealth could then be used as a funding lever for the subregion's diversification plans, as it would broaden the countries' tax base and make it possible to mobilize green and other innovative financing. The Subregional Office for Central Africa cited the example of debt-for-nature swaps, which enabled some countries to obtain debt relief or buy back their debts at

lower cost in exchange for undertakings to preserve the assets of nature. The Director of the Subregional Office indicated that those swaps represented only one of an array of mechanisms through which a better measurement of natural capital could lead to the mobilization of new sources of financing for the countries of the subregion, and also to a widening of the fiscal space that they needed to pursue environmentally sound economic diversification policies.

48. Experts called on the Subregional Office to play a key role in building the capacity of States to carry out natural capital accounting, to harness those results to ensure better financing for development and to engage the involvement of the private sector in taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the green economy, while strengthening the ability of States to make investments in that area.

E. Report on the integrated planning and assessment toolkit, the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063

49. ECA presented its integrated planning and reporting toolkit. The toolkit had been developed to assist African countries to simultaneously adopt and integrate the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 of the African Union into national development plans in a harmonized manner.

50. ECA stressed that the toolkit also contributed to reducing transaction costs associated with reporting on regional and global programmes such as the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, and also other commitments, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries.

51. Specifically, the toolkit made it possible to monitor progress in a country's national development, using national data and tracking progress against the goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. It assessed a country's or region's progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals using the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators Database and other internationally recognized data sources and reports, such as the data from the Sustainable Development Goals Centre for Africa used to generate the continent's report on the Sustainable Development Goal indicators.

52. The experts recommended that the Subregional Office for Central Africa should facilitate access by other member States to training in the use of the integrated planning and assessment toolkit for the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063 and, in that way, foster a more integrated approach in their policies. They also encouraged countries to articulate their needs, identify resource persons and enable ECA to support them by arranging training, as it had already done for Cameroon and the Congo.

VII. Other matters

53. No other matters were raised.

VIII. Theme, date and venue of the next session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials and Experts

54. Participants unanimously adopted, as the theme of the next session of the Intergovernmental Committee of Senior Officials and Experts: "Promoting effective

governance, inclusive leadership and agents of change for economic diversification in Central Africa” and called on the secretariat to refine the wording and come up with a final formulation.

55. They stressed the urgent need to hold discussions on the date of the next session and to consider the possibility of holding it in Brazzaville and recommended that the secretariat take the necessary steps to that end.

IX. Adoption of the final communiqué

56. Following a discussion, the secretariat presented a brief summary of the recommendations of the session, which was adopted by the participants with some amendments.

X. Closing

57. Upon the conclusion of the two days of work, Franck Corneille Mampouya M'bama, Director General of Planning and Development of the Congo and chair of the current session, expressed his gratitude to the Committee for the honour bestowed upon him by vesting in him the responsibility of chairing the Bureau of the thirty-sixth session of the Intergovernmental Committee. He was fully aware of the magnitude of the task before him and pledged to make every effort to ensure that the Bureau was properly represented.

58. Ferdinand Sosthène Likouka, Director of Cabinet of the Congo, delivered the closing address on behalf of Ms. Ebouka-Babackas, Minister of Planning, Statistics and Regional Integration of the Congo. He congratulated the participants and the organizers on the success of their work. He highlighted the important contribution that the Intergovernmental Committee had made to the implementation of the Douala Consensus, by advocating the design and implementation of diversification strategies and intelligent industrial policies specific to the context of Central Africa.
