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Item 10 of the agenda*
Consideration and adoption of key messages

Seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development: summary, key messages and Brazzaville Declaration

Introduction

1. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), together with the Government of Congo, in collaboration with the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank and the United Nations system¹, convened the seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development at the Grand Hotel Kintele, in Brazzaville, in a hybrid format featuring both in-person and online participation, from 1 to 4 March 2021.
2. The Forum was attended by more than 1,800 participants, comprising ministers and high-level representatives of the Governments of all 54 ECA member States, intergovernmental bodies, United Nations bodies and specialized agencies, other international organizations, major groups and other stakeholders.
3. A summary of the deliberations, including main issues and key messages emanating from the Forum, may be found in section III below.

* ECA/RFSD/2021/1/Rev.2.

¹ The following entities of the United Nations system were involved as partners in that process: United Nations Development Coordination Office, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, United Nations Office to the African Union, United Nations Population Fund, United Nations Volunteers programme, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, World Food Programme and World Trade Organization.



A. Background

4. The Forum was held against the backdrop of the new challenge to global development posed by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which had exposed severe vulnerabilities and structural inequalities in Africa. The pandemic had compounded existing climate, economic and health-related risks to seriously threaten the attainment of the continent's development objectives. Even before the pandemic, Africa was already not on track, and in some cases regressing, with respect to the attainment of the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: the Africa We Want, of the African Union. Given this context, greater efforts were 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.

5. The seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development represented an opportunity to engage in dialogue and propose solutions to translate into action the proclamation of the 2020s as a decade of action and delivery for sustainable development, as endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 74/4. Accordingly, the Regional Forum was designed as an action-oriented gathering for member States and other stakeholders to deliberate and agree upon solutions and transformative actions, with a particular emphasis on building forward better towards more resilient economies for shared prosperity to achieve the goals of the two agendas.

B. Theme and activities of the session

6. The seventh session was held on the theme: "Building forward better towards a resilient and green Africa to achieve the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063". The theme is closely aligned with that of the 2021 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, namely: "Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development".

7. The principal activities carried out during the session were the following:

(a) Regional follow-up and review of progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. To that end, the Forum undertook a review of Goal 1 (end extreme poverty), Goal 2 (zero hunger), Goal 3 (good health and well-being), Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth), Goal 10 (reduced inequalities), Goal 12 (responsible consumption and production), Goal 13 (climate action), Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), and Goal 17 (partnerships for sustainable development) of the 2030 Agenda, in conjunction with the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063;

(b) Peer learning, including sharing approaches, experiences and lessons learned, with respect to conducting voluntary national and local reviews and other efforts to advance the integrated implementation of the two agendas;

(c) Identifying and assessing gaps, challenges and opportunities associated with implementation of the two agendas;

(d) Articulating transformative actions, commitments, levers, partnerships and measures that countries should adopt to respond to, and recover from, COVID-19 and to build forward better by accelerating implementation of the two agendas within the decade 2021–2030;

(e) Identifying and articulating African priorities, policy options and recommendations in the form of key messages, to inform and accelerate implementation at various levels, and as the region's collective input to the

2021 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development (6–15 July 2021, New York);

(f) A round-table panel on leveraging science, technology, innovation and digital transformation for a resilient and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, to realize the decade of action in Africa;

(g) A regional dialogue on African food systems;

(h) The proceedings of the main segments of the Forum were enriched by the preparatory and side events that were held on its margins². Among those events were the third session of the Africa Regional Science, Technology and Innovation Forum; a regional preparatory workshop for African voluntary national reviews and voluntary local reviews; a regional preparatory and capacity development workshop for major groups and other stakeholders in the African region; and a session on the Regional Collaborative Platform for Africa.

I. Opening of the session [agenda item 1]

8. The session was moderated by the Director of the Technology, Climate Change and Natural Resources Management Division, ECA, Jean-Paul Adam. Journalist Gyldas Mayela was the master of ceremonies.

9. The session was officially opened by the President of the Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso, who noted the robust and passionate deliberations unfolding in the Forum.

10. Opening statements were delivered by the Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare, Zimbabwe, and Chair of the outgoing Bureau of the sixth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, Paul Mavima; the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, Vera Songwe; the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, Amina Mohammed; the President of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, Munir Akram; the Commissioner for Economic Development, Trade, Industry and Mining, African Union Commission, Albert Muchanga; the Minister of Tourism and Environment, the Congo, Arlette Soudan-Nonault; and the Deputy Prime Minister of the Congo for Civil Service, State Reform, Labour, and Social Security, Firmin Ayessa, representative of the President of the Republic.

11. Mr. Mavima thanked the President of the Congo, Denis Sassou Nguesso, for hosting the seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in a year in which the COVID-19 pandemic dictated the way of engagement. He outlined the work and achievements of the Bureau of the sixth session of the Regional Forum. Among those were successfully steering the session, leading to the adoption of key messages and the Victoria Falls Declaration on the United Nations Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development in Africa, and adoption and implementation of an action plan to implement priority outcomes of the Forum. With the support of ECA and partners, the Bureau had presented the outcomes of the Forum at the 2020 high-level political forum; guided ECA to commission the development of a strategic road map for the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development in Africa; and catalysed the roll-out of voluntary local reviews, including through the development of regional guidelines. He expressed confidence in the capacity and capabilities of the Bureau of the seventh session of the Forum, which was chaired by the Congo. He said that 2020 had proved to be a year of huge challenge, and the COVID-19 pandemic continued to ravage economies worldwide and derail progress on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the

² See <https://www.uneca.org/arfsd2021>.

African Union. He welcomed the roll-out of vaccines, but echoed growing calls for Africa to use its capital and human resources to develop its own medical solutions, including the production of vaccines. He outlined priorities that should be considered by the Bureau of seventh session to implement the outcomes of the Regional Forum. Those priorities included: (a) changing the mindsets of the populations to develop local solutions; (b) aggressively exploring and adopting effective resource mobilization strategies anchored within the endowments of the continent; (c) the population of Africa taking the future into its own hands; (d) fostering a new inclusive development trajectory to uplift the lives of the majority of people; and (e) utilizing the outcomes of the forum on science, technology and innovation to deal with the technology divide. He also called for the roll-out and adoption of the integrated planning and reporting toolkit developed by ECA and partners, and implored all delegates and participants to play their parts in coming up with a comprehensive plan of action to be followed by Africa to achieve the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

12. Ms. Songwe started by thanking the Government and people of the Congo for the excellent hosting of the Forum under the exceptional circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic. She highlighted that the massive and brutal shock produced by the unprecedented health pandemic, and the measures taken to overcome it, had plunged the global economy into a serious recession. She noted that, for Africa, ECA estimated that the contraction stood at 8 per cent in the best-case scenario and 9 per cent in the worst-case scenario, due to COVID-19. She further underlined that Africa was already spending 2 per cent to meet the impact of climate change, and that the COVID-19 pandemic had created a deficit of about \$345 billion. Ms. Songwe emphasized that the crucial issue of debt was discussed in two conferences by ECA with African ministers of finance, organized by ECA in March 2020. The conference deliberation led to a call for a debt payment suspension for all developing countries – the Debt Service Suspension Initiative. This initiative was enacted by the G20 and was benefiting about 30 countries. She emphasized that, while the debt moratorium was important to increase countries' liquidity, only low-income countries benefited from it, not middle-income countries such as the Congo. She further noted that ECA, along with African ministers, was calling 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. She advocated for a reallocation of these SDRs, as this new injection of liquidity could assist in addressing the worsening poverty. The SDRs could provide the opportunity to access convertible monies that would allow the informal small and medium-sized enterprises to stay in business and relaunch the economy. She further noted that, while developed countries had already spent 20 per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on new liquidity to combat the crisis, the number was only 2 per cent and 6 per cent for low-income and middle-income countries, respectively. On building forward better, Ms. Songwe gave the example of the Congo River to illustrate the immense wealth and great potential of the environment, but also of its fragility, as the Congo Basin and its peatlands were among the biggest carbon sinks on our planet. She highlighted the need to preserve this "green lung" and look into nature-based solutions through increasing jobs in the agroforestry sector and ecotourism, while promoting sustainable value chains. She indicated that a study on green investments conducted by ECA had shown that investments in renewable energy and nature-based solutions could create 250 per cent more jobs and 450 per cent more added value than traditional investments based on hydrocarbons, and pointed to the need to mobilize the necessary funding. She noted that the Blue Fund offered a development vehicle in that direction. She further underscored the need to invest in information and communications technology to reach an Africa that could achieve its potential. She further urged the continent to reflect together about the demands to be made at the twenty-sixth

session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and for the United Nations family, civil society organizations and Governments to continue this debate by including the issue of women, which was fundamental.

13. Ms. Mohammed thanked the President and the People of the Congo for hosting the seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. She reiterated that COVID-19 was undermining plans to deliver on Sustainable Development Goals. Some 100,000 Africans had died from the virus, and Africa was facing its first recession in 25 years. The continent continued to grapple with diverse regional crises, as well as conflict and violence, including a recent outbreak of Ebola in Guinea. However, there was hope and opportunity to leverage all of the capacities of Africa and the potential of its 226 million young people to chart a new direction, with the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 as guides. She outlined four areas to inform the deliberations of the Forum: (a) the call of the Secretary-General for COVID-19 vaccines to be a global public good, available to everyone, everywhere, along with the role of the COVAX facility; (b) tackling the lack of financing by most African countries to adequately respond to the crisis, noting that ECA estimated that Africa needed \$100 billion per year for three years to deal with the health and socioeconomic impacts of the crisis; (c) the need to develop a just economic model that embraced renewable energy, green and resilient infrastructure, and inclusive digitalization, while protecting natural resources; and (d) the repositioning of the regional United Nations development system – combined with the reform of the African Union, which had established a much stronger footing to support member States in their sustainable development efforts. She concluded by pointing out that, with the power of women, young people, cutting-edge technology and innovations, Africans could drive transformative change over the next 10 years.

14. Mr. Akram stated that the 2030 Agenda remained the blueprint to achieve sustainable development regionally and globally. Yet the prospects for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals had been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. He recalled that African economies were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic due to their existing vulnerabilities, worsening inequalities, reducing financial resources and causing recessions. Mr. Akram outlined three priorities to recover from COVID-19 and accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, including mobilizing financial resources for the Sustainable Development Goals, investing in sustainable infrastructure, and promoting science and technology. In terms of financing the recovery from COVID-19 and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, he highlighted five policy options: (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.

15. Mr. Muchanga conveyed greetings from the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat. He said that COVID-19 had posed challenges to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063, and that the theme of the seventh session of the Regional Forum was timely, as COVID-19 had disrupted the sustainable development systems, which required rebuilding. The progress of sustainable development in Africa was mixed. For example, poverty had declined, but with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was on the rise again. African debt had soared to 70 per cent of its GDP. The debt-to-GDP ratio was likely to exceed 100 per cent in at least seven African countries. Therefore, domestic resource mobilization remained critical, and he said that countries must aim to mobilize at least 75 per cent domestically to allocate the resources for sustainable development. One strategy to increase

domestic resource mobilization would be to minimize illicit financial flows, through which \$59 billion was lost annually. Another would be to strengthen revenue collection, through which \$100 billion was lost annually. Africa had allocated \$10 billion to acquire COVID-19 vaccines through the Africa Medical Supply initiative. The African Export–Import Bank provided a \$2 billion guarantee for vaccine procurement and pledged to extend the package to \$5 billion. This all demonstrated the commitment of Africa to rolling out COVID-19 vaccines across the continent, leaving no one behind. He said that the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Government was instrumental in reinforcing the joint implementation, monitoring, reviewing, reporting and resource mobilization processes of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, as clearly indicated in the African Union–United Nations framework for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. The fourth African Union–United Nations annual conference, in December 2020, underscored the importance of robust African Union–United Nations cooperation in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The African Union Commission – in collaboration with ECA, the African Development Bank and the Regional Bureau of the United Nations Development Programme – had prepared annual African sustainable development reports since 2017, to provide an integrated assessment of progress and catalyse implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. He called for deliberations of the Forum to generate recommendations to move towards a resilient and green Africa, as well as accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

16. Ms. Soudan-Nonault thanked the President of the Congo for his leadership. She also thanked ECA and the United Nations country team in the Congo for contributing to organizing the seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. She recalled that Africa had 10 years left to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, and 3 years to achieve the goals of the first 10-year programme of Agenda 2063. The lack of adequate technical and financial resources remained the main challenge to reaching the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. Ms. Soudan-Nonault reiterated the crucial importance of the Congo Basin, the second-largest carbon sink globally, and called upon the international community to contribute to its preservation. She stated that the world could not achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement without safeguarding the Congo Basin. The basin covered 220 square kilometres of forest and sequestered 30 billion tons of greenhouse gas emissions, which accounted for three years' worth of global emissions. The key messages adopted by the Forum would inform the 2021 high-level political forum and inform policies and actions to implement the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 at national and regional levels.

17. The Deputy Prime Minister of the Congo for Civil Service, State Reform, Labour, and Social Security, Firmin Ayessa, representative of the President of the Republic, expressed appreciation for the selection of the Congo as host of the seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. He noted the objective of the Forum, namely, to advance the integrated implementation of the complementary 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063. He said that the Regional Forum was being held in a year of unprecedented conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In that context, he welcomed and noted the relevance of the theme of the Forum, “Building forward better towards a resilient and green Africa to achieve the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063”. The world had realized many achievements on sustainable development since the signature of the International Convention for the Protection of Birds in 1950, through to the United Nations conference leading to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the Paris Agreement in 2015. Through various initiatives under the leadership of its President, Denis Sassou Nguesso, the Congo was among the leading countries in the fight against climate change. The Congo established the Blue Fund for

the Congo Basin. In June 2018, the country also launched a climate change project establishing its concerns related to climate change in the context of the national development priorities. The Congo had already embarked on the development of digital economy development. In light of their weak industrial foundations, most African countries had the possibility to promote green industrialization by adopting less polluting technologies within an industrial development strategy to achieve sustainable development.

II. Summary and key messages

18. The following sections summarize the main issues, trends and key messages, including policy recommendations arising from the presentations and deliberations during the seventh session of the Regional Forum. The key messages comprise African priorities, policy options and recommendations to accelerate implementation of the two agendas at various levels, and the region's collective input to the 2021 meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development.

A. High-level panel on transformative action and investment to better build forward from the COVID-19 crisis towards a resilient and green Africa to achieve the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 [agenda item 2]

1. Background

19. The high-level panel on the theme of the Forum set the scene for subsequent deliberations on the issues outlined in the agenda for the seventh session.

2. Discussion and trends

20. Panellists noted that, despite notable progress in some areas, Africa remained off track in achieving the targets of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

21. While Africa was disproportionately affected by climate change and its impacts, it was also a major source of the resources needed worldwide to save the environment: protection of those resources was therefore the shared responsibility of the global community.

22. Without effective intervention, the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to stymie efforts towards sustainable development and availability of funds.

23. Health aspects of the two agendas were under particular threat and necessitated stronger financing commitments and prioritization, including resolute efforts to stop illicit financial flows and the proposed creation of a blue fund for Africa.

24. Innovation, technology and inclusive new skills training, involving women and youth, could unleash the region's green potential and fuel economic transformation. The African Continental Free Trade Area could play a vital role in that endeavour.

3. Key messages

25. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) As the continent with the second largest carbon sink in the world, a major source of the resources needed to save the global environment, Africa should not alone bear the cost of preserving these important resources for the global commons;

(b) United Nations system entities are urged to campaign for Africa to be rewarded for its contribution to protection of the global commons;

(c) In addition to general support, targeted support should be provided for protecting the Congo basin and for regional and global partnerships focusing on this region;

(d) The African Union Commission and ECA should explore the sources and accessibility of new financial resources, such as through debt relief;

(e) The African Union Commission should continue convening environment ministers and ministers of finance and planning in fulfilment of a sustainable African recovery agenda.

B. Progress report on implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 and tackling the COVID-19 crisis at the regional and subregional levels [agenda item 4]

1. Background

26. Every year the Forum engages in an evidence-based review of progress at the regional and subregional levels towards attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 of the African Union. In 2021 that review also took into account the challenges posed by the continuing COVID-19 crisis.

2. Discussion and trends

27. 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.

28. GDP growth had slowed under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had been particularly severe on remittances, and poverty reduction rates had also slowed. As a consequence, fiscal deficits and debt were rising and effective debt management measures were urgently needed to enable the continent to move forward successfully.

29. Improvements were noted in such areas as life expectancy, school enrolments and literacy rates, albeit slower than desired, and the share of women in parliaments was on a par with the global average; but concern continued to be aroused by the prevalence of undernourishment, the low coverage of formal social welfare benefits and high levels of gender-based violence.

30. More needed to be done to ensure access to clean energy and electricity and investments in green sectors were urgently needed, thereby also creating more jobs.

31. African marine resources were comparatively less polluted than those of other regions, but more needed to be done to ensure the sustainable exploitation of the continent's fish stocks.

32. Democracy was under threat in some parts of Africa and there was an overall perception of high levels of corruption; investments in key areas such as health and governance were crucially needed.

33. ECA was requested to support African countries in the use of the integrated planning and reporting toolkit to monitor and track progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals and their alignment with Agenda 2063.

3. Key messages

34. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key

messages:

(a) 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;

(b) State and non-State entities should put in place measures to ensure the sustainable extraction and use of natural resources and to promote investments in digitalization and modern technologies to increase productivity, bridge the digital divide, spur innovation and accelerate growth;

(c) Measures to address governance, peace and security must be applied, following a people-centred approach;

(d) Governments should put in place measures to boost domestic resource mobilization through efforts to expand revenue sources, broaden tax bases and stem corruption and illicit financial flows;

(e) Governments and development partners should foster a more conducive climate and broadened partnerships for science, technology and innovation in support of sustainable development;

(f) Countries are urged to avail themselves of the integrated planning and reporting toolkit, to ensure coherence in tracking progress towards development goals.

C. Plenary round-table panel on meeting data and statistics needs for evidence-based, inclusive and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to achieve the goals of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development in Africa [agenda item 5]

1. Background

35. The panel focused on the need for improved capacity in the use of data, including big data, in meeting the development aspirations of the continent and ensuring its recovery from the pandemic.

2. Discussion and trends

36. The Forum observed that Africa's data and statistics needs for development were underpinned by the quality of data principles that had been set out in the African Charter on Statistics, namely: (a) Relevance in meeting the needs of users; (b) Granularity (i.e., providing as much detail as possible); (c) Accuracy and reliability in reflecting reality; (d) Continuity (i.e., comparability over time); (e) Coherence in employing internationally recognized and accepted concepts, classifications, terminologies and methods; (f) Timeliness; (g) Topicality (i.e., reflecting current events and trends); and (h) Specificity in taking into account African peculiarities.

37. Data integration in support of the production of high-quality data was still a challenge in Africa. High-quality data were public goods and their production required the development of new skills and the investment of public resources.

38. The digital agenda was a priority in many sectors, including the statistical sector. The COVID-19 crisis had demonstrated the importance digitizing systems, with a view to harvesting a wealth of data; utilizing previously unavailable sources of data to inform existing official statistics; and introducing efficiencies into the production, compilation and dissemination of statistics.

3. Key messages

39. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) 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;

(b) 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;

(c) The provision of timely and disaggregated data by national statistical systems is critical to informing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of the two agendas;

(d) Despite having sound statistical institutions, data collection in many African countries remains poor and scattered across multiple jurisdictions. Member States are urged to break down existing silos to increase collaboration and the exchange of data among national statistical offices, government departments, academic centres, civil society organizations, and continental and regional data-related centres;

(e) Sound development decision-making requires robust data foundations, with timely, accurate and disaggregated information on development metrics. Given the importance of political will to the data-collection process, there is an urgent need for African governments to invest in digital data infrastructure and capacity development.

D. Plenary round-table panels on national and local action and reviews for sustainable recovery and building forward better from the COVID-19 crisis, and to review the implementation of and follow-up to the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063: voluntary national reviews and peer learning to strengthen recovery from COVID-19 and implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 [agenda item 6 (a)]

1. Background

40. Under this agenda item, the Forum considered the role of voluntary national reviews in accelerating the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 in Africa.

41. The voluntary national reviews were important in focusing attention, in particular on legislation; strengthening the engagement of stakeholders, including civil society organizations, young people and vulnerable groups; and promoting reforms in areas such as poverty reduction, health, water and sanitation, and renewable energy.

42. Prior to the seventh session of the Forum, 45 African member States had conducted voluntary national reviews and submitted those to the High-Level Panel on Sustainable Development. Ten African countries planned to submit voluntary national reviews in 2021.

43. COVID-19 presented severe challenges, both to progress towards ambitious sustainable development visions, and in monitoring and reporting on the frameworks in place for those visions.

2. Discussion and trends

44. It was noted that Africa was already behind schedule to achieve the

Sustainable Development Goals before the current crisis, with specific vulnerabilities ranging from food security to economic diversification, and health systems in a state of vulnerability.

45. Given those challenges, voluntary national reviews were more vital than ever, as they could measure and give a picture of the full impact of COVID-19, help lay the foundational plans for a sustainable rebound, and encourage important peer-learning across countries going through similar challenges.

46. Protection of children, which cut across multiple Sustainable Development Goals and already was not sufficiently addressed before COVID-19, was hampered by the crisis, poverty, inequality and displacement. The issue of violence against children had not been sufficiently addressed in voluntary national reviews.

47. A lack of timely and accurate data was a challenge in the pursuit of voluntary national reviews.

48. Civil society organizations were the link between visions and implementation on the ground.

49. Voluntary local reviews were an important tool to localize the Sustainable Development Goals at the district, governorate and municipal level, and to support voluntary national reviews.

3. Key messages

50. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) Member States are urged to:

(i) Continue in their commitments to the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063, and in their commendable progress on voluntary national reviews, and to continue to be forthright not only in their success stories, but in their challenges and areas needing assistance, to fully contribute to peer learning;

(ii) Draw on lessons from past completed voluntary national reviews when engaging in their second, third and even fourth voluntary national reviews;

(iii) Maintain focus on policies for long-term sustainable socioeconomic development, and embed this in COVID-19 response packages;

(iv) Engage with initiatives linked to the high-level political forum, including the “friends of voluntary national reviews”, chaired by Mexico, to help review voluntary national reviews and prepare for reporting, as well as voluntary national review labs, which allow for exchanges of ideas;

(v) Bring the case for international cooperation on COVID-19 relief, financing for sustainable development and other multilateral processes to the high-level political forum.

(b) The United Nations system is urged to:

(i) Ensure that the global, regional and national pandemic response is a central element discussed at the 2021 high-level political forum;

(ii) Elevate advocacy and multilateralism for the rights and protection of children;

(iii) Promote peer learning, building new partnerships, and addressing the specific challenges and opportunities of Africa at the 2021 high-level political forum;

(iv) Strengthen the capacity of Member States to produce voluntary national reviews that integrate voluntary local reviews and other priorities, including green and resilient growth, trade and the Paris Agreement on climate change;

(v) Continue taking the lead on COVID-19-specific support and socioeconomic responses provided by the World Health Organization, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Population Fund and regional commissions.

E. Plenary round-table panels on national and local action and reviews for sustainable recovery and building forward better from the COVID-19 crisis, and to review the implementation of and follow-up to the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063: voluntary local reviews and peer learning to bolster local action to recover and build forward better from the COVID-19 crisis, and to review progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 [agenda item 6 (b)]

1. Background

51. Under this agenda item, the Forum considered the role of voluntary local reviews in accelerating the implementation, follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 in Africa. The 2030 Agenda encouraged United Nations Member States to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and subnational levels that were country-led and country-driven.

52. Voluntary local reviews were critical in ensuring ownership, accountability and the commitment of all stakeholders at all levels. They were recognized as important tools for meaningful multi-stakeholder engagement and mobilization to advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

2. Discussion and trends

53. It was noted that local governments had been localizing and aligning their plans with the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 for several years.

54. Voluntary local reviews conducted to date had led to concrete results.

55. The review processes enhanced local awareness, ownership and participation of stakeholders; better private–public engagement; improved national–local government engagement; and visibility of the importance of localizing the Sustainable Development Goals and the needs of local governments in that respect.

56. Key constraints included informality of the local economy, local government capacities and competencies, including fiscal capacity and implementation; data gaps and challenges; and investment impact monitoring.

57. COVID-19 heavily impacted local governments' finances, capacity to deliver services and infrastructure. The voluntary local review process could support COVID-19 recovery.

3. Key messages

58. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) ECA should compile best practices coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic on how local authorities can strengthen and support the informal sector (small and medium-sized enterprises);

(b) The collection of disaggregated data should be strengthened for better policy, planning and investment, to collect imbalances in communities;

(c) Public and private sector partnerships should be enhanced to leverage finance and engagement in the voluntary local review process;

(d) Benchmarking local service delivery is key to ensuring inclusivity in provision of services;

(e) There is need to prioritize sustainable development through strong leadership and integrated governance mechanisms, to raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals at the local level and foster multi-stakeholder/sectoral deliberations and involvement.

F. Parallel meetings for an in-depth review of progress made and peer learning on the sub-themes of the Regional Forum: parallel meeting on the sub-theme of no poverty [agenda item 7 (a)]

1. Background

59. The sub-theme of no poverty covered Sustainable Development Goal 1 on ending poverty in all its forms everywhere the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063, and the means of implementation needed to deliver the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 over the decade 2020–2030.

2. Discussion and trends

60. Participants felt that Africa needed to look at economic sectors such as construction and housing, which were labour-intensive, to create a quantum of blue jobs that were needed by semi-skilled African youth.

61. The war against poverty in Africa would never be won without good governance.

62. COVID-19 allowed opportunists to take advantage of people.

63. On the principle of leaving no one behind, there was a need to rethink the 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.

64. Some felt that universal basic income could increase productivity and income. Others felt it could be dangerous.

65. Official development assistance should focus more on least developed countries.

3. Key messages

66. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) It should be recognized that the slight progress of Africa towards the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 has been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which reversed some of the gains made, and therefore Africa is not on track to reduce and end poverty by 2030 and 2063, respectively;

(b) Data generation should be strengthened for poverty measurement and overall empirically grounded policy formulation;

(c) Partnerships among public, private and other non-State actors should be strengthened, to accelerate progress and reassess international solidarity as an economic principle;

(d) 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;

(e) Public and private investment should be focused towards poverty reduction and job creation through a combination of labour-intensive manufacturing and technological innovation.

G. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of zero hunger [agenda item 7 (b)]

1. Background

67. The sub-theme of zero hunger covered Sustainable Development Goal 2, on ending hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

2. Discussion and trends

68. Africa was at a crossroads, with 8 of the 12 countries in the world with highest prevalence of food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic threatened previous gains made in respect of food security. As such, it was imperative to address the immediate and long-term repercussions of the pandemic.

69. Notwithstanding the progress recorded on nutrition outcomes, Africa was not on track for achieving zero hunger by 2030, given that the number hungry people had increased between 2014 and 2019, and that healthy diets were out of reach for a billion people. Moreover, low agricultural productivity, coupled with the expansion of land cultivated to increase food production, came at the cost of natural resources and environmental degradation.

70. There were a multitude of overlapping threats relating to climate, conflicts, transboundary pests and diseases, economic turndowns, all of which had been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, public investments in agriculture were low and declining, despite the commitment by African Union member States to increase public investment in agriculture by 6 per cent.

3. Key messages

71. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) 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:

(i) Linking rural actors to markets, financial services and innovation to transform rural areas;

(ii) Sustainable development of food systems, climate adaptation and preparedness infrastructure;

(iii) Human capital development, in particular childhood learning, healthy diets and social protection;

(b) The transformation of food systems should focus on food safety, expanding early warning systems, and building resilient ecosystems using holistic, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches;

(c) Member States need to improve the forest-product value chains to

help diversify food and income sources, using food commodities that are abundantly available in ecosystems, for rural communities that are largely poor and food insecure;

(d) In addressing the impact of COVID-19, it is crucial to save lives and livelihoods through humanitarian and nutrition assistance; to support and enhance social protection; to invest in resilient and sustainable food systems to avert climate change.

H. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of good health and well-being [agenda item 7 (c)]

1. Background

72. The sub-theme of good health and well-being covered Sustainable Development Goal 3, on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

2. Discussion and trends

73. Although Africa had made progress on SDG 3, the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed vast vulnerabilities and inequalities in access to health care and digital information.

74. The pandemic had also exposed Africa's weak research, development, and pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity, in particular for vaccines and essential drugs. To that end, there was a need for collaboration and partnership among the African Union, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, regional economic communities, and African Governments.

75. Health systems in Africa are not resilient or fit for purpose, nor are they adapted to the needs of persons living with disabilities.

76. The deployment at scale of proven health technologies and digital solutions offer great opportunities to accelerate progress towards Goal 3.

3. Key messages

77. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) 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;

(b) 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;

(c) Intersectoral structures coordinated at the highest level of government are needed to ensure that health-related targets across all Goals are being monitored and reported within accountability mechanisms, e.g., the domestic financing scorecard of the African Union;

(d) The readiness and functionality of health care systems, especially at the primary level, must be improved to deliver integrated, people-centred, non-discriminatory, equitable, high-quality care over the course of the lifecycle, in particular for rural communities and disadvantaged groups;

(e) There is an urgent need to improve the allocation of resources to expedite civil registration and collect vital statistics to enhance the research that informs health-related decision-making;

(f) Efforts to improve diagnostic capacity and raise awareness must increase to redress the rising burden of non-communicable diseases and their role in exacerbating the impact of COVID-19.

I. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of decent work and economic growth [agenda item 7 (d)]

1. Background

78. The sub-theme of decent work and economic growth covered Sustainable Development Goal 8 on promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

79. Promoting decent work for all, while ambitious, was seen as critical in achieving other Sustainable Development Goals. 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.

80. Although Africa had achieved higher economic growth rates over the previous two decades, informality and working poverty remained. Fast-growing labour forces were met with insufficient labour from enterprises and, as a result, youth unemployment and underemployment had been rising. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8 was impacted by the pandemic, further accentuating pre-existing decent work challenges.

81. Further, COVID-19 had exacerbated the economic and labour market challenges, reduced working hours in Africa by 7.7 per cent and increased inequalities, as women, youth and the informal sector continued to experience the brunt and effects of the pandemic. As such, the pandemic also provided an opportunity to craft job-rich, inclusive and sustainable growth to build back better, through facilitating structural transformation and economic diversification, and leveraging free trade opportunities within Africa.

2. Discussion and trends

82. Decent work was seen by participants as a critical element to poverty eradication in Africa. Greater participation of youth and women in productive employment was also crucial in achieving more inclusive and sustainable development.

83. Promoting decent work called for comprehensive, broad-based action, economic policies and a need to focus on closing the gap between the supply and demand aspects of job creation, through supporting investments and strengthening employability.

84. Social dialogue and an enabling environment for enterprises to create sustainable employment were critical for inclusive economic growth. Enterprises had been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and needed to be included in all interventions to ensure sustained employment in addition to job creation.

85. Private sector enterprises and business were seen important stakeholders that should be included in the design and implementation of holistic and sustainable policies to create a successful business environment across the continent, while simultaneously increasing job creation and employment sustainability.

86. COVID-19 also had a negative impact on livelihoods in Africa. Economic growth should translate to structural transformation and a new social contract that would include guaranteed workers' rights, gender equality,

inclusion and social protection.

3. Key messages

87. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) “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;

(b) 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.

J. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of reduced inequalities [agenda item 7 (e)]

1. Background

88. The sub-theme of reduced inequalities covered Sustainable Development Goal 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

2. Discussion and trends

89. 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.

90. Member States were urged to adopt the Protocol relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment.

91. Access of local populations to protection and investment in health, education and security, especially in the Sahel region, was considered crucial.

92. Women should not be left behind in the development of programmes to address inequality.

93. There was need for stronger efforts with regards to equal access to vaccines.

3. Key messages

94. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) Member States are urged to:

(i) Promote an enabling legal and policy framework and encourage the participation of all in national and local, social and economic development;

(ii) 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;

(iii) Improve socioeconomic data collection and analysis, and build a repository of evidence to inform decisions and efforts;

(iv) Engage with the private sector, which has the potential to drive programmes on information technology-focused interventions that address inequalities in access to such technologies;

(v) Invest in research and innovation to increase local productive capacities and reduce reliance of developed regions of the world (for example, in the production of COVID-19 vaccines and personal protection equipment).

K. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of responsible consumption and production [agenda item 7 (f)]

1. Background

95. The sub-theme of responsible consumption and production covered Sustainable Development Goal 12, on ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

2. Discussion and trends

96. The Forum agreed on a range of major milestones achieved on the path towards Goal 12, citing as evidence the 2019 and 2020 Africa Sustainable Development Goal index and dashboards reports. National sustainable consumption and production plans had been developed and mainstreamed as priorities in national development plans, in a number of pilot countries.

97. A number of initiatives to that end had been mounted and associated multilateral conventions had been widely ratified.

98. Significant progress had been made towards other Sustainable Development Goals that had synergies with Goal 12.

99. Major challenges were identified, including data constraints, lack of financial resources, insufficient political will and a weak institutional framework, all of which had been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

100. A range of remedial measures were proposed to accelerate progress towards Goal 12, as outlined in the key messages.

3. Key messages

101. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) Member States should scale up measures to achieve inclusive green economies and sustainable consumption and production such as telecommuting and greener public procurement;

(b) 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;

(c) Advocacy and educational measures should be stepped up to encourage young people to follow sustainable lifestyles;

(d) Resource-efficient and cleaner production should be promoted, including green business development, with a view to promoting productivity and competitiveness in Africa;

(e) ECA should strengthen its collaboration with the African Union Commission, thereby fostering engagement between the African Union Commission and other United Nations entities;

(f) Stepped up efforts should be made to harness the potential of the African Continental Free Trade Area and other positive developments in the international arena;

(g) Member States should take the necessary measures to promote sustainable production and consumption, including by connecting smallholder farmers to markets, increasing diversification of production systems, promoting secure land tenure rights and others;

(h) With the support of development partners, member States should take all necessary steps to achieve sustainable ocean economies.

L. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of climate action [agenda item 7 (g)]

1. Background

102. The sub-theme of climate action covered Sustainable Development Goal 13 on taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

2. Discussion and trends

103. It was noted that climate change was disproportionately affecting the African continent and the agriculture sector, on which Africa was heavily reliant. Projections showed that the impacts on economies would increase with time, exacerbating current vulnerabilities. The continent, however, faced many challenges that hampered climate action and sustainable development, including low capacities and challenges to access climate finance.

104. The African Development Bank estimated that the adaptation need was about \$7 billion to \$14 billion annually. Although there was significant increase in climate finance in Africa, it was not enough to fill the huge gap.

105. Climate shocks hampered the sustainable development of countries – therefore, reducing vulnerability on the ground and strengthening resilience of people and communities was a priority.

106. There was a need to address the challenge of access to energy. The question was not only to change the source of energy (renewable) but also a governance issue related to who had access to energy.

107. Africa had an important role to play in reaching the goals of the Paris Agreement. The continent was working on strengthening resilience, including through the protection and creation of carbon sinks.

3. Key messages

108. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) 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;

(b) Governments must 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. Additional efforts will have to be applied to ensure that disaster risk reduction strategies are informed by risk assessments, and that adequate frameworks are put in place to strengthen multi-hazard early warning systems;

(c) Climate actions need to be just and include local communities and the youth. Countries need to ensure that young people are meaningfully

involved in the design and implementation of climate action based on their qualifications and competencies;

(d) Nature-based solutions, including reforestation and protection of peatlands, should be prioritized, in recognition of the environmental, social and economic benefits of this approach, and to help build resilience. Experience and good practices, such as the example of the Congo Basin, should be shared across Africa;

(e) Protecting climate and biodiversity, while debt stands at record levels, will be critical in the coming years. Swapping debt for nature and climate protection provides a bridge to greater debt sustainability, potentially benefitting both agendas;

(f) COVID-19 is increasing the vulnerability of young people. Most activities that involve capacity-building have been cancelled or postponed;

(g) The role of the youth constituency is not fully acknowledged, and young people should be included in planning and policy formulation.

M. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of peace, justice and strong institutions [agenda item 7 (h)]

1. Background

109. The sub-theme of peace, justice and strong institutions covered Sustainable Development Goal 16, on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

2. Discussion and trends

110. It was noted that the outbreak of COVID-19 had undermined peace at global, regional, national, subnational and local levels. In that context, Goal 16 was of key importance as the foundation for and enabler of the attainment of other Goals and crucial to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

111. Without capable, accountable, inclusive and participatory governments and institutions, it was impossible to tackle pandemics and other contemporary and emerging challenges and build forward better in an effective manner. Strong institutions were required to ensure human rights obligations and good governance.

112. Although improvements were being made in the areas of the rule of law, participation, rights, and transparency and accountability, those positives were diminished by the prevalence of conflicts, civil unrest and terrorism in several countries.

113. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the secrecy and opacity of public institutions and their decision-making and accountability processes, in particular during emergencies.

114. Insecurity, social strife, arbitrary arrests, political tension and riots continued to plague the continent. Organized crime, extremism and violence were enduring and sometimes worsening challenges.

115. While trust in the judiciary and participation had improved, civil society space continued to shrink and problems persisted with internally displaced people, worsening trends in freedom of association and assembly, civil rights and liberties, and freedom of expression. In addition, corruption and illicit financial flows continued to pose challenges.

116. A significant proportion of people in Africa still lived under oppressive

laws that failed to comply with international human rights standards and lacked access to legal services to resolve their problems.

117. Accelerated implementation of Goal 16 required strong multi-stakeholder engagement, commitment and collaboration at the national, regional and global levels and the use of standardized and reliable data. It also required visionary and committed leaders, and whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches.

3. Key messages

118. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) African countries must foster political leadership and meaningful stakeholder participation in the planning, decision-making, monitoring and reporting processes pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals;

(b) In order to leave no one behind, member States must provide adequate resources to strengthen their human resources and disaggregated data collection, monitoring and evaluation systems and must be accountable for the resources deployed ostensibly in pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(c) African member States, together with United Nations agencies and development partners, should strengthen the capacity of their institutions to adopt a human rights-based approach to development and to integrate international and regional human rights norms and standards;

(d) In order to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, African member States should work with partners such as the African Union Commission, ECA and others to protect the financial security of Africa through curbing illicit financial flows, including corruption, to increase availability of domestic resources;

(e) In order to build back and 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.

N. Parallel meeting on the sub-theme of partnerships [agenda item 7 (i)]

1. Background

119. The sub-theme of partnerships covered Sustainable Development Goal 17, on revitalizing partnerships to promote post-pandemic recovery: building back better and accelerating sustainable development.

2. Discussion and trends

120. The COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in a severe economic slowdown across the continent, rising unemployment and falling incomes. The external financing sources on which African economies relied had been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Government revenue and tax revenue remained low, debt, corruption and illicit financial flow continued to impede resource mobilization for the Sustainable Development Goals.

121. The pandemic had demonstrated the need for countries to focus more on elevating science, technology and innovation in both policy and practical terms. While it had offered a unique opportunity for technology transfer and joint research and development by the global community, Africa had been largely absent from the teams developing the vaccines. Limited investment in research and development, and inadequate human capital and high-tech manufacturing capacity remained major constraints across the continent.

122. Public investments, including countercyclical investments, directed towards growth-enabling investments could help economies to recover more quickly once the pandemic was under control.

123. Measures were identified to lower borrowing costs for sovereign agencies and ministries and States were enjoined to break down institutional barriers and foster the creation of alliances between public administrations, private entities, rights holders and accountability mechanisms to better assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human rights and ensure a sustainable post-pandemic reconstruction.

124. Among facilities available to assist the recovery from the pandemic, attention was drawn to specific financial instruments and public investment, including countercyclical investment, and to the importance of fiscal management.

125. African Governments were harnessing a variety of digital transformation opportunities and using innovative technologies, including artificial intelligence and blockchain, in particular in the development of smart cities.

126. Implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area would facilitate the achievement of Goal 17 through the elimination of tariffs; development of value chains; establishment of an African customs union and other measures.

127. Digital delivery had enabled capacity-building service providers to reach many more countries and beneficiaries, increasing the participation of women.

3. Key messages

128. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) 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;

(b) African economies should strengthen domestic resource mobilization by promoting capital market development, addressing administrative and tax policy loopholes and combating illicit financial flows;

(c) Africa must invest more in research and development, infrastructure and human capital development;

(d) The establishment of the African Continental Free Trade Area will boost intra-African trade, promote industrialization and facilitate African countries' integration into the world economy, thereby facilitating the recovery of African countries from COVID-19;

(e) The African Union, United Nations system, regional economic communities and member States should all take action to strengthen national capacities to make effective use of innovative technologies and big data when drawing up development policies and priorities;

(f) The United Nations development system should forge stronger partnerships across Africa and beyond so as to leverage the expertise and capabilities of relevant sustainable development stakeholders;

(g) African countries should promote women's professional networks and ensure women's full and active participation in working towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

O. Plenary round-table panel on leveraging science, technology, innovation and digital transformation for a resilient and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to achieve the goals of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development in Africa [agenda item 8]

1. Background

129. Under this agenda item, the Forum considered the leveraging of science, technology, innovation and digital transformation for a resilient and sustainable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to achieve the goals of the decade of action and delivery for sustainable development in Africa. The panel reviewed ways in which Africa could recover better from the COVID-19 pandemic by harnessing science, technology and innovation.

2. Discussion and trends

130. The panel noted the importance of intellectual property rights to trade, investment and industrial development, driving innovation, promoting entrepreneurship and strengthening manufacturing. Excessively broad and exclusive intellectual property rights could, however, stifle innovation, kill competition and drive prices up.

131. A range of challenges faced by Africa in that area were identified, to remedy which the continent needed support in policy formulation, legal frameworks and capacity-building.

132. There must be greater investment in higher learning institutions to generate critical skills, taking advantage of the continent's youthful population.

133. Steps were identified that Africa must take to harness science and technology to meet its development needs.

134. African countries must take particular care to not lock themselves into resource extraction economic models based on technologies and assets that were likely to become stranded.

135. Science, technology and innovation policies should be mainstreamed in all sectoral policies and strategies, including in such areas as agriculture, industry, trade and environment, to ensure their contribution to development and attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Key messages

136. In the light of that discussion, the Forum agreed on the following key messages:

(a) Africa needs to prioritize low carbon development strategies, leveraging its natural resources and building value chains by adopting appropriate technologies and skills to optimize economic opportunities;

(b) Countries are encouraged to increase investment in science, technology and innovation, by allocating more finance for development, reducing illicit financial flows and other measures, to strengthen education and health, which are of such importance in human capital development;

(c) Countries should also step up their investment in human capital development, the importance of which has been evidenced by the global COVID-19 pandemic;

(d) Strategies should be developed to use key assets such as energy and information and communications technology as catalysts for technological development and industrialization, capitalizing on the opportunities afforded by the African Continental Free Trade Area, strengthening institutions and harnessing technology and innovation;

(e) Africa must prioritize low carbon development strategies, leveraging its natural resources and building value chains by adopting appropriate technologies and skills to optimize economic opportunities;

(f) There is need to leverage and build partnerships by strengthening digital and energy infrastructure, to enable people to learn and work anywhere;

(g) Countries and the private sector should work together to develop innovative and inclusive financing models for science, technology and innovation that will drive entrepreneurship and promote innovations and industrial development;

(h) Countries should implement science, technology and innovation policies to accelerate attainment of the goals of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.

Annex

Brazzaville Declaration

We, African ministers and senior officials responsible for environment and sustainable development, finance, economic and social development, agriculture, education, justice, statistics, the digital economy, science and technology, heads and members of delegations of the parliaments of African Union member States and experts representing governments and intergovernmental organizations, the private sector and civil society,

Gathered online and face-to-face in Brazzaville from 1 to 4 March 2021, on the occasion of the seventh session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, held under the theme “Building forward better: towards a resilient and green Africa to achieve the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063” and placed under the high patronage of the President of the Republic of Congo, H.E. Denis Sasou Nguesso,

Expressing our appreciation and gratitude to the Government for having kindly hosted this Forum, ensuring all the necessary conditions for the success of its work, which was marked by fruitful and high-quality discussions on the monitoring and evaluation of the progress achieved, exchanges of experience in the field of sustainable development in Africa, and the formulation of key messages aimed at accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union,

Considering that the health and socioeconomic impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic could compromise the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular in the least developed countries,

Considering also the crucial role played by Africa in general and Central Africa in particular in regulating the global climate, thanks to the Congo basin forest, which constitutes the world's second largest ecological lung,

1. *Invite* development partners to mobilize the necessary financing for the operationalization of the Blue Fund for the Congo Basin, in order to support the member countries of the Congo Basin Climate Commission in reconciling efforts to combat climate change with economic development;

2. *Urge* the international community to support initiatives for the conservation and preservation of the peatlands of the central basin of the Congo River, which, by sequestering nearly 30 billion tons of carbon, help to maintain the global climate balance;

3. *Call upon* all African countries to redefine and develop economic models that incorporate the protection of natural resources, the promotion of renewable energies, the development of green and resilient infrastructure and inclusive digitization, informed by an awareness of the value of our human capital;

4. *Also call upon* all African countries to harness science, innovation and emerging cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence and blockchain systems, to drive the transformative change needed over the next 10 years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals;

5. *Call upon* all countries to implement the key messages of the Forum;

6. *Request* the Government of the Congo to present the key messages on behalf of Africa to the high-level political forum on sustainable development, to be held under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council at its meeting in New York from 6 to 15 July 2021, at the twenty-sixth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Conference on Climate Change, and at various global, regional and subregional forums, to call for the accelerated implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063.