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Fourth session

Online, 17 and 18 November 2021

Item 6 of the provisional agenda*

General discussion on the theme of the fourth session “Building forward better towards an inclusive and resilient future in the context of COVID-19”

Building forward better towards an inclusive and resilient future in the context of COVID-19

Aide-memoire

I. Context

1. The fourth session of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender will be held online on 17 and 18 November 2021 under the theme “Building forward better towards an inclusive and resilient future in the context of COVID-19”.
2. The Committee is a statutory intergovernmental body of experts and policymakers that provides guidance and advises the Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) on its work and engagement with member States.
3. In May 2018, in its resolution 966 (LII),¹ the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development endorsed the reforms proposed by ECA to enable the latter to better respond to the continent’s evolving needs, further build on its body of work, and take advantage of emerging opportunities to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. As part of those reforms, the Social Development Policy Division of ECA was restructured to enhance its focus on poverty and inequality, and renamed the Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division.
4. The Division, organized in three sections (the Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Section, the Social Policy Section, and the Urbanization and Development Section), works with member States to support the design and implementation of appropriate national and subregional policies, programmes and strategies to achieve inclusive, equitable and sustainable human and social development. It generates knowledge products, tools and approaches as a think tank to enhance the capacity of member States to develop, implement and monitor policies to reduce poverty and inequality, promote

* E/ECA/CSPPG/4/1.

¹ See E/ECA/CM/52/2, annex II.



gender equality and women's empowerment, and harness urbanization for inclusive and equitable growth.

5. In line with the new divisional structure and pursuant to resolution 966 (LII), the intergovernmental body, previously known as the Committee for Gender and Social Development, was reorganized and renamed the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender.² Details on the organization of the Committee are provided in the annex to the present document.

II. Theme

6. During its fourth session, the Committee will discuss the Division's vision, perspectives and areas of focus in support of African countries in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will discuss strategies for building resilience and moving forward collectively and towards a better and inclusive future. The Committee will also discuss strategies and priorities for accelerating progress in eradicating extreme poverty and reducing inequality to achieve gender equality, inclusive growth and sustainable development.

7. The prospects of Africa meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and eradicating extreme poverty were low even before the COVID-19 pandemic.³ This was in part due to the slow pace of poverty reduction in Africa compared to other regions of the world. Globally, there has been extraordinary progress in reducing extreme poverty since the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2015, nearly 1.2 billion people worldwide were lifted out of extreme poverty, as the percentage of those living in extreme poverty declined from 35.9 to 10 per cent over that period. Much of the progress came from East and South-East Asia, with the economic rise of China responsible for most of that decline in poverty. More recently, South Asia has made impressive inroads against extreme poverty, thereby reducing the global incidence of poverty even further.

8. In contrast, poverty in Africa increased from 54.3 per cent in 1990 to 55.6 per cent in 2002. However, in the period 2002–2015, poverty in Africa declined at a faster pace (by 1.4 percentage points per year) than the global average (by 1.2 percentage points per year). Nevertheless, the encouraging rate of economic growth in Africa since the early 2000s has had a limited impact on poverty reduction, and an estimated 36 per cent of the population was still below the international poverty line in 2016. Unfortunately, the shock brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to further increase poverty in Africa, causing anywhere from 49 to 161 million more people to fall below the poverty line.

9. Countries in Africa are faced with hard policy choices and limited resources as they attempt to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and aim to minimize its economic and social costs. After a contraction in gross domestic product (GDP) of 3.4 percentage points in 2020, Africa is projected to achieve a modest recovery, with its GDP forecast to expand by the same percentage in 2021. The pandemic has had an adverse impact on household incomes and well-being, with the impact varying across countries. It has also heightened existing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems, and deepened pre-existing inequalities, in particular gender inequality. For example, women have been disproportionately affected by the social and economic effects of COVID-19, through an increased amount of time spent on home schooling, other childcare duties, and caring for the sick. Moreover, nearly one in five women (17 per cent) 18 to 24 years of age have experienced violence from a partner in

² Ibid.

³ Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2021: Addressing the Challenges of Poverty and Vulnerability in Africa in the Time of COVID-19* (Addis Ababa, 2021).

the past 12 months. Pre-pandemic figures show that, in much of Africa, only 40 per cent of girls completed lower secondary school, and even those who attended school were not learning. Experts fear that girls will not return to school after the lockdowns have ended. As part of the African agenda towards building an inclusive and resilient future, it will be essential to put in place policies to mitigate the impact of the crisis, sustain access to services and food security, and support the poor and vulnerable households. Several African countries are in the process of designing and implementing policies that, over the medium term, will promote an inclusive and sustainable economic recovery and support employment and livelihoods.

10. In the past, growth on the continent has been neither inclusive nor sustainable, which has left African economies highly vulnerable to shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is therefore important that policymakers carry out deeper structural reforms to bolster the current expansion, strengthen resilience to risks, and increase medium-term growth. It will also be necessary to deepen structural reforms aimed at diversifying Africa's productive base and reviving growth, with a view to radically diversifying the continent's economic base away from primary commodities to manufactured commodities, which are less susceptible to price volatility. In this regard, deliberate and carefully targeted policies aimed at moving productive resources away from informal, low-productivity sectors to formal, high-productivity sectors are required to increase GDP and unlock untapped growth potential. To that end, African countries should fully leverage opportunities arising from increasing regional integration through the African Continental Free Trade Area and digital transformation.

11. It is against this backdrop that the fourth session of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender will focus on the theme of "Building forward better towards an inclusive and resilient future in the context of COVID-19". The theme provides a framework for ECA, and its Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division in particular, to advance policy discussions with member States on the issues mentioned above, and agree on the strategies required to build forward together to eradicate extreme poverty in all its forms and reduce inequality in Africa. Specifically, the session will consider the following key policy questions:

- (a) What strategies and policy priorities should member States embrace to build forward together in the light of COVID-19?
- (b) What can member States do to make economic growth more inclusive and resilient?
- (c) What are the emerging opportunities that member States can leverage for inclusive and resilient growth?
- (d) How can ECA support member States in their efforts to build social cohesion, eradicate extreme poverty and reduce inequality?

III. Objectives

12. The overall objective of the fourth session is to review and provide strategic orientation to the work of the Division, in line with its overarching framework for ending poverty in all its forms and reducing inequality within and among countries.

13. The specific objectives are:

- (a) To discuss strategies for building collective resilience in the light of COVID-19 to promote inclusive economic growth, eradicate extreme

poverty and reduce inequality, including policy responses specific to social policy, urbanization, and gender equality and women's empowerment;

(b) To provide an overview for the Committee of the work done by ECA to deliver on its policy mandate in support of member States;

(c) To present to the Committee the Division's proposed programme of work for the period 2022–2023 and its policy relevance to the priorities of member States;

(d) To identify the aspects of poverty and inequality that are of high priority for ECA in relation to its core work on gender equality and women's empowerment, social policy and urbanization.

IV. Expected outputs and outcomes

14. A number of outputs and outcomes are expected from the fourth session, principal among which will be a comprehensive report on the deliberations of the Committee during the session. Specifically, the report will synthesize feedback from member States on the work of ECA in support of member States' policies, with a focus on poverty eradication, inequality reduction, gender equality, women's empowerment and sustainable urbanization. The actionable recommendations that are proposed by the Committee will form the basis for the Division's work for the period 2022–2023. In keeping with the statutory requirements of ECA, the report will be tabled and presented at the next session of the Conference of African Ministers, to be held in March 2022.

15. The following specific outcomes are also expected:

(a) Endorsement of the perspectives and approaches of ECA to extreme poverty eradication and inequality reduction, in line with the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063;

(b) Enhanced understanding of the correlations among the various dimensions of poverty and inequality in the context of COVID-19 and within the broader framework of the work of ECA, and of how to tap into opportunities to unlock the potential of member States to build forward together for inclusive and resilient growth;

(c) Strong commitment by member States to respond in a timely manner to requests from ECA for information and data, and to implement policy recommendations.

V. Format

16. The session will comprise structured plenary and parallel sessions, where delegates and invited experts will actively participate in thematic discussions in order to provide feedback to the Division. A presentation on the theme of the fourth session – Building forward better towards an inclusive and resilient future in the context of COVID-19 – and the accompanying discussions will be the main anchor of the plenary sessions to elicit feedback from delegates.

17. In addition, three parallel sessions will be organized on specific thematic areas related to the overall mandate of the Division – namely, population, social protection and social policy dimensions of poverty; gender equality and women's empowerment; and urbanization and development.

VI. Documentation

18. The work of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender will be informed by several reports on the work of the Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division. Web links to knowledge products and publications, as well as technical materials, will be shared online with participants during the meeting.

VII. Participation

19. The Committee comprises experts from ECA member States drawn from ministries responsible for gender, social development, urbanization and economic planning. Representatives from African regional economic communities, the African Union Commission, the United Nations system, civil society organizations and academia will attend as observers.

20. The Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division of ECA serves as convener and secretariat of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender.

VIII. Languages

21. The session will be conducted in English and French, with simultaneous interpretation.

Annex

Organization of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender

Mandate

The role of the Committee on Social Policy, Poverty and Gender is set out in para. 66 (e) of the report to the Committee of Experts of the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development on the review of the intergovernmental structure of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) pursuant to resolutions 943 (XLIX) and 957 (LI),⁴ which reads as follows:

The Committee on Social Development, Poverty and Gender will meet on a biennial basis at ECA Headquarters to review the work carried out under the subprogrammes on gender equality and women's empowerment and poverty, inequality and social policy. The Committee will provide a forum for analysing the work of ECA as it relates to the African priorities on poverty and inequality reduction, sustainable urbanization, gender equality and women's empowerment, and social policy. The Committee will also provide a policy dialogue and consensus-building forum to strategically direct future work in these important areas of the African development agenda, and more significantly serve as a catalyst for accelerating progress at the national and regional levels in these fields. The Committee will focus on topical and emerging issues of relevance to its identified areas of focus, with a view to also take stock of progress made by African member States in these areas and identify policy directions.

More specifically, the Committee, with its focus on subprogramme 6 (gender equality and women's empowerment) and subprogramme 9 (poverty, inequality and social policy) of ECA:

- Provides guidance and expert advice on the priorities and activities of ECA;
- Reviews past activities and future programmes of ECA;
- Provides recommendations to strengthen ECA programmes to better serve member States and the African regional economic communities;
- Provides policy guidance to ensure the relevance of ECA activities to meeting Africa's development needs and addressing its critical development challenges;
- Advises on priorities for the implementation and review of regional and international policy agendas in relation to the work of ECA;
- Provides direction on ECA partnerships with the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank and other development partners.

Committee members and observers

In addition to the members of the Committee, who are experts from ECA member States drawn from relevant government ministries and departments,

⁴ E/ECA/COE/38/5.

the following categories of stakeholders will be invited to participate in the meetings of the Committee as observers:

- Representatives of African intergovernmental bodies;
- Representatives of United Nations system entities and civil society organizations;
- Representatives of ECA, as convener and secretariat of the Committee.

Role of the Bureau

- The Chair of the Bureau should represent the Committee at the sessions of the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development;
- Each member of the Bureau should attend the statutory meetings of the intergovernmental committees of senior officials and experts that are held in their respective subregions to ensure that gender and social development issues are addressed effectively at the subregional level.

Election of the Bureau

The criteria for the election of the officers is based on the need to ensure equitable geographical representation of each ECA subregion, and will take into account language and gender balance. The Bureau will be elected for a two-year period. Representatives of the secretariat will facilitate consultations among the members of the Committee, who will submit nominations for the constitution of the new Bureau.

The election of the incoming Bureau will be held after the opening of the fourth session.

The composition of the outgoing Bureau is as follows:

Chair:	Egypt (North Africa)
First Vice-Chair:	Lesotho (Southern Africa)
Second Vice-Chair:	Nigeria (West Africa)
Rapporteurs:	Kenya (East Africa)
	Central African Republic (Central Africa)
