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Economic Commission for Africa
Committee of Experts of the Conference of African
Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development
Forty-second meeting
Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe (hybrid), 28 February–1 March 2024

Item 7 of the provisional agenda*

Date, venue and theme of the fifty-seventh session of the
Economic Commission for Africa

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Note by the secretariat

I. Introduction

1. The present document sets forth suggestions by the secretariat for the consideration of the Committee of Experts. The Committee may wish to consider the dates and a theme for the fifty-seventh session of the Economic Commission for Africa, to be held in 2025, and to provide the secretariat with guidance in that regard.

II. Date and venue

2. The secretariat proposes that the fifty-seventh session of the Commission be held at its headquarters in Addis Ababa in March 2025. Alternatively, the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development may decide otherwise, upon an invitation by a member of the Commission to host the said session, under the condition that, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 40/243, the Government issuing an invitation has agreed to defray the actual additional costs directly and indirectly involved with holding the meeting away from the headquarters of the Commission.

III. Theme

3. The secretariat submits the following potential topics for the consideration of the Committee of Experts:

* E/ECA/COE/42/1.



(a) Option one: “Digitalization and technology to advance economic transformation in Africa”;

(b) Option two: “Investing in food security and energy transformation: pathways towards swifter achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa”;

(c) Option three: “Advancing the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area: proposing transformative strategic actions”.

A. Background

4. Africa stands at a crucial juncture, at which addressing food and energy challenges is not only a necessity but also a catalyst for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As the continent grapples with such issues as climate change, its rapidly growing and urbanizing population, and economic and technological change, innovative solutions will be essential in order to revolutionize the food and energy sectors on the continent. The impact of such solutions will be maximized by the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area and by technological breakthroughs. Such major global shocks as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the war between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, and the crisis in the Middle East have exposed widening fault lines in the global value chains that many used to argue were engines of economic development. Therefore, widely accepted development strategies need to be adapted to the major changes in the global economy, geopolitics, technology, climate change risk and regional megatrends.

1. Option 1: “Digitalization and technology to advance economic transformation in Africa”

5. Driven by advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of things, blockchain technology, genetic engineering, quantum computing and other technologies, the fourth industrial revolution will fundamentally transform the industrial and service sectors and will reshape all aspects of economic development. The African digital economy is projected to grow to \$180 billion by 2025 and to \$712 billion by 2050. The future of Africa in the increasingly digitalized global economy rests on closing critical gaps in digital skills, data generation and utilization, innovation and network infrastructure. While various countries have enjoyed isolated breakthroughs and progress, Africa remains, overall, the continent with the least available and affordable access to information and communications technologies. For example, in 2022, only 36 per cent of the regional population had access to broadband and, where such access was available, a data-only broadband package would cost three times more than the global average, driving up the transaction costs of businesses, entrenching digital divides and limiting the development potential of the continent. In addition, African countries scored between 1.8 and 5 on the 2021 Wiley Digital Skills Gap Index, far below the global average of 6; in order for the demand for digital services on the continent to be met, 650 million workers would need to be trained or retrained in digital skills by 2030.

6. If chosen, option one would offer a timely reminder that Africa is at a pivotal juncture, with the global digital and technological landscape currently representing both challenges and opportunities. It would spur institutions to enhance their infrastructure investment policies and their regulatory frameworks, with a view to improving Internet affordability and penetration, digital connectivity, information security and the adoption of new and emerging technologies by various industries. At the same time, it would entail taking a people-centred, forward-looking approach to finding ways to address gaps in digital literacy and skills, in particular for young people and women, so that the transition to digitalized, technology-driven African economies will be just, inclusive and sustainable.

2. Option 2: “Investing in food security and energy transformation: pathways towards swifter achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Africa”

7. Gaps in food security and access to energy are interlinked obstacles to sustainable development in Africa. Climate crisis and external shocks pushed an additional 60 million people into malnutrition and undernutrition between 2019 and 2022, while more than 600 million Africans currently lack access to electricity, with only 4 per cent of global electricity being generated on the continent. Low levels of access to electricity limit productivity and hamper agro-industrialization, while high energy costs are associated with high food prices. Reversing these trends will require a coordinated policy response, with a focus on expanding the access of the agricultural sector to reliable sources of renewable energy; investing in research and development and the adoption of technologies in the agricultural and energy sectors; and developing policies and infrastructure for the transportation of agricultural products and for energy connectivity.

8. If chosen, option two would entail analysing the complex relationship between food and energy systems. In addition, it would involve recognizing the nexus between food and energy systems, on the one hand, and climate change, on the other. Option two would also encompass examining the potential synergies and challenges inherent to that nexus. As Africa becomes increasingly urbanized, the central issue in relation to regional food security and food systems is the increasingly blurred line between urban and rural areas, with shifts in consumption behaviour that shape the production, processing, distribution and procurement of agricultural products and, ultimately, food security. In this regard, option two would involve exploring innovative approaches, with a view to tapping the potential of Africa and boosting investment in agricultural processing and modernization, in emerging renewable energy resources and in the intraregional connectivity both of agricultural value chains and of electric power transmission. The purpose of such innovation and investment would be to drive transformative change in food and energy systems, thereby making a significant contribution to the wider sustainable development agenda.

3. Option 3: “Advancing the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area: proposing transformative strategic actions”

9. Intra-African trade is still low, at 13.2 per cent of total trade in 2022, compared with other regions of the world: intra-Asian trade accounts for 55.0 per cent and intra-European trade 70.0 per cent. Global shocks have led to major disruptions in international supply chains; in particular, geopolitical tensions have prompted a move towards nearshoring and friendshoring. This has led to even greater and deeper trade fragmentation. The African Continental Free Trade Area offers a unique opportunity to enhance African resilience to global shocks and to take advantage of changes in global supply chains. There has been notable progress in the implementation of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area: milestones that have been reached include the ratification of instruments, the resumption of cross-border trade and the launch of pan-African payment systems. On the other hand, significant challenges remain, either limiting or delaying enjoyment of the benefits of the Area by States parties to the Agreement. The challenges include failure to incorporate provisions of the Agreement into domestic law and effect necessary regulatory reforms; non-tariff barriers; connectivity problems; the high cost of doing business; and geopolitical impediments.

10. If chosen, option three would entail focusing on potentially transformative measures to enhance implementation of the Agreement. Such measures include using digital technologies to expedite cross-border payments, optimizing transport logistics to reduce costs and making the regulatory changes that are necessary for frictionless trade. In addition, consideration would be given to strategies for using the African Continental Free Trade Area to establish essential carbon credit markets. The intention is that, by discussing such critical issues, participants would obtain actionable insights, learn strategic lessons and propose robust solutions that could

catalyse the full impact of implementing the Agreement, thereby propelling Africa towards greater economic integration and growth.

B. Previous themes

11. For reference, a list of the themes of previous sessions of the Commission that have been held since 2000 is provided in the annex to the present document.

Annex

Themes of previous sessions of the Commission

<i>Session</i>	<i>Joint annual meetings of the Economic Commission for Africa and the African Union Commission</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Theme</i>
Fifty-fifth	N/A	2023	Fostering recovery and transformation in Africa to reduce inequalities and vulnerabilities
Fifty-fourth	N/A	2022	Financing Africa's recovery: breaking new ground
Fifty-third	N/A	2021	Africa's sustainable industrialization and diversification in the digital era in the context of COVID-19
Fifty-second	N/A	2019	Fiscal policy, trade and the private sector in a digital era: a strategy for Africa
Fifty-first	N/A	2018	African Continental Free Trade Area and fiscal space for jobs and economic diversification
Fiftieth	Tenth	2017	Growth, inequality and unemployment
Forty-ninth	Ninth	2016	Towards an integrated and coherent approach for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development
Forty-eighth	Eighth	2015	Implementing Agenda 2063: planning, mobilizing and financing for development
Forty-seventh	Seventh	2014	Industrialization for inclusive and transformative development in Africa
Forty-sixth	Sixth	2013	Industrialization for an emerging Africa
Forty-fifth	Fifth	2012	Unleashing Africa's potential as a pole of global growth
Forty-fourth	Fourth	2011	Governing development in Africa
Forty-third	Third	2010	Promoting high-level sustainable growth to reduce unemployment in Africa
Forty-second	Second	2009	Enhancing the effectiveness of fiscal policy for domestic resources mobilization
Forty-first	First	2008	Meeting Africa's new challenges in the twenty-first century
Fortieth	N/A	2007	Accelerating Africa's growth and development to meet the Millennium Development Goals: emerging challenges and the way forward
Thirty-ninth	N/A	2006	Meeting the challenge of employment in Africa
Thirty-eighth	N/A	2005	Achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Africa
Thirty-seventh	N/A	2004	Mainstreaming trade policy in national development strategies
Thirty-sixth	N/A	2003	Towards greater policy coherence and mutual accountability for development effectiveness
Thirty-fifth	N/A	2002	Accelerating Africa's progress and performance: the challenge of the New Partnership for Africa's Development
Thirty-fourth	N/A	2001	Implementing the Millennium Partnership for the African Recovery Programme: compact for Africa's recovery
Thirty-third	N/A	2000	The challenges of financing development in Africa