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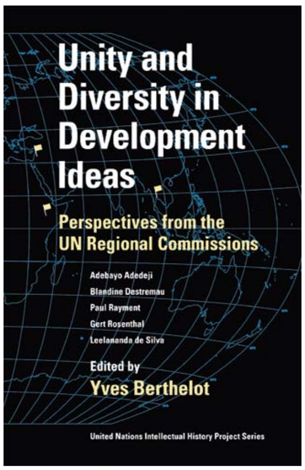
The Economic Commission for Africa: Fighting to be Heard

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) is one of the largest UN regional commissions, yet over its lifetime it has had to work hard for its voice to be heard. Adebayo Adedeji, the ECA's executive secretary from 1975 to 1991 and author of "The ECA: Forging a Future for Africa"—published in the UNIHP volume *Unity and Diversity in Development Ideas* (2004)—notes that the ECA's very creation in 1958 only came about after thirteen years of struggle and the repeated defeat of successive proposals to create a commission along the same lines as those that existed for Europe, Latin America, and Asia. The five colonial powers with territory in Africa were all strongly opposed to the establishment of a commission.



During the 1940s and 1950s, they did not envisage a rapid rise in the number of independent African states. At the time of the UN's founding, there were only four independent countries in Africa—Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa.

With the independence of Ghana in 1957, political change came rapidly. Five more African countries gained their independence in the next two years and seventeen others in 1960. Another fifteen gained independence over the 1960s, and eight more attained statehood over the 1970s. Zimbabwe became independent in 1980, Namibia in 1990, and Eritrea (from Ethiopia) in 1993. After the establishment of majority rule in South Africa in 1994 and the election of Nelson Mandela as president, fifty-three countries were independent and all were members of ECA.

The inaugural session of the ECA at the end of 1958 was the first major gathering of Africans, under the auspices of the UN, to discuss African problems on African soil. The ECA's early years were dominated by political battles against colonialism, racism, and apartheid and preoccupied with the development problems of collective self-reliance, endogenous development, and regional economic integration. Unfortunately, as Adedeji notes, the rapidity with which African countries became independent produced, paradoxically, a negative impact on African solidarity. Independence reinforced boundaries established by the colonial powers and gave new leaders a vested interest in maintaining them. This was a serious problem for development, which Dag Hammarskjöld underlined at the ECA's inaugural session when he pleaded that economic integration should be one of the commission's major objectives. It is a problem that complicates continental unity and cooperation even today.

Most African countries were poorly prepared for statehood but leaders envisioned rapid transformation. Independence gave rise to the dramatic expansion of education and training, the localization of the government administration, economic and social planning for economic growth and development, the construction of physical and transport infrastructure, and data collection and the creation of statistical systems. In all of these efforts, the ECA was closely involved. Unusual for the time, the African-sponsored resolution calling for the creation of the ECA referred to the need to establish a holistic, human-centred approach to development.

The ECA also took a creative lead on other topics. Over the 1960s, well ahead of the other regional commissions, the ECA ran courses and undertook studies to identify gender needs and how best to provide opportunities for women in development. It also established the Institute of Economic Development and Planning in Dakar in 1963, and about a year later, an African Development Bank with its headquarters in Abidjan. By its twenty-fifth jubilee in 1983, the ECA had successfully put in place some forty institutions covering finance and banking services, industrial development, social and economic development planning and management, trade and transport, and five subregional planning and operational centers. Institution building is currently high again on the international agenda for Africa. Perhaps more attention should be paid to the lessons of this side of the ECA's early work, including asking whether the institutions that are now needed were in fact created in ECA's early years only to be later weakened or destroyed in the harshness of structural adjustment programs.

With independence so recent for many countries, Africa in the 1960s was not in a position to participate fully and effectively in determining the strategy, policy framework, and priorities of the UN's First Development Decade. Notwithstanding over this period, the ECA passed 216 resolutions dealing with development over a wide range of subjects. As Adedeji makes clear, this was mostly a "pork-barrel" approach to setting strategy and priorities. Fortunately, by the mid-1970s, the ECA was considerably more advanced, reviewing not only strategies and priorities but more fundamentally the underlying forces and paradigms that influenced development thinking. Again as Adedeji put it, "It took the member states of the commission many years to realize that marching toward the future hand in hand with its colonial monocultural economic legacy held no dignified future for Africa at all. As long as African governments and people continued to nibble at the inherited colonial economic system, they would fail to achieve breakthrough in socioeconomic transformation" (254). This was not only the result of weaknesses within African countries but the fact that, after colonialism, African countries were caught in the political divides of the cold war and pressured intellectually, ideologically, and financially by the major economic powers.

Long-term Trends and the Lagos Plan of Action

In 1976, at the request of the General Assembly, the ECA undertook a Preliminary Assessment of Long-Term Development Trends in Africa. The assessment showed falling rates of GDP growth and declines in agricultural output and commodity exports. It thereby laid the foundation for the subsequent Monrovia Strategy and the Lagos Plan of Action, which together defined a self-reliant strategy for Africa and the priorities for achieving it.

The Lagos Plan of Action for the Economic Development of Africa 1980–2000 was agreed first by a meeting of ministers in Addis Ababa in April 1980 and then at the Lagos Summit of Heads of State. In brief, the key points agreed upon were:

- The importance of domestic, subregional, and regional markets
- The imperative need to build upon Africa's natural resource base
- The need for economic planning in terms of multiple objectives
- The need to strengthen intra-sectoral and inter-sectoral linkages in agriculture, industry, mining, transport, communications, energy, science, and technology.

The plan was reinforced by several visionary pledges by heads of state: to achieve self-sufficiency in food production and supply, to implement a UN program for a transport and communications decade in Africa, as well to cooperate in industrial development, natural resources exploration and extraction, and in the preservation and protection of the environment. Government leaders also looked to the eventual establishment of an African Common Market leading to an African Economic Community.

These commitments were spelled out in the thirteen chapters of the Lagos Plan of Action, which covered the seven major strategic sectors—food and agriculture, industry, natural resources, human resources, transport and communications, trade and finance, and energy—and crosscutting issues such as the environment, science and technology, gender, and the least-developed countries. As Adedeji summarizes, "Throughout all the chapters ran the overarching themes of self-reliance, self-sustainment, the democratization of the development process, and what today is referred to as sustainable human development" (265). But as Adedeji admits, a universal criticism was that the Plan of Action lacked a pragmatic blueprint of how to achieve these admirable objectives, a timetable for doing so, and a price tag. Nonetheless, he adds that "the Plan of Action was a genuinely historic document, representing the first continent-wide effort by Africans to forge a comprehensive and unified approach to the economic development of Africa" (266).

Structural Adjustment and Bretton Woods Dominance

The Lagos Plan of Action largely remained a dead letter, less because of its internal weaknesses than as a result of strong opposition from outside of Africa. Within a year of the adoption of the Lagos Plan of Action, the World Bank had issued "Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Agenda for Action." The report was the antithesis of the Lagos Plan—putting the emphasis on external markets and export-oriented growth as the remedy for Africa's problems and focusing on trade and exchange-rate policies as the key areas for domestic policy change. The World Bank report stirred much criticism at the time. It was unanimously rejected in a declaration by African ministers of African development and planning in 1982. It was also technically rejected by a variety of critics who disagreed with its underlying neoliberal analysis.

Despite strong opposition within Africa, it was the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), with donor support, that prevailed. Most of Sub-Saharan Africa was economically on its knees by the early 1980s—with rising levels of debt and declining exports, both linked to world recession. Severe droughts in some twenty-seven countries compounded these problems. All this opened the way for policies of stabilization and then of structural adjustment, both required by the Bretton Woods institutions as the price for obtaining loans. Conditionalities for borrowing usually required shrinking the size of government as well as cutbacks in government expenditures, often in education and health. The emphasis on increasing exports often led to the neglect of agriculture for food production at home.

In principle structural adjustment had three main objectives—reducing inflation, restoring balance in national and foreign exchange budgets, and increasing economic growth. In practice, only the first of these was generally achieved and the second only rarely. Reviving economic growth, the third aim, was almost everywhere a dismal failure, with the result that most African countries ended the 1980s—and often the 1990s—with significantly lower levels of per capita income than they had achieved in the 1970s. In short, Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole experienced a lost decade in development over the 1980s, with per capita income in 1990 lower than in 1980.

Over most of this period, a fierce debate over adjustment policies raged within the UN and between the UN and the World Bank. The ECA—with the support of UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund) and the International Labour Organization—argued that adjustment policies ignored many realities of African economies and that the swingeing economic cuts were counter-productive to human development and economic recovery. African countries, however, had little alternative to adopting the policies and taking the loans. By 1988, some thirty-five countries of Sub-Saharan Africa had adopted IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies.

Africa's Annual Growth Rates of GDP and Per Capita GDP by Decade, 1951–2000 (in percentages)

Average annual growth of GDP	1951-60	1961-70	1971-80	1981-90	1991-2000
Sub-Saharan Africa	4.0	4.5	2.4	1.4	2.8
North Africa	5.3	11.0	4.1	2.3	3.4
Average annual growth per capita					
Sub-Saharan Africa	-	1.8	-0.4	-2.6	-0.4
North Africa	-	8.2	1.2	-0.3	0.6

Source: World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2000* (Washington, D.C.: IBRD/World Bank, 2000).

Adedeji characterizes this whole period as a battle for the African mind. In many respects it was a battle for an intellectual understanding of national and international adjustment policy in relation to the African *problématique*. Globally, neoliberal ideas were dominant, reflecting the Reagan-Thatcher thinking in the United States and United Kingdom—and the economic power and influence of these countries on thinking and policy in the IMF and World Bank. Moreover, globalization and Washington consensus policies—free markets, trade liberalization, privatization, small government, free capital movements—also matched the interests of developed countries. Africa's part in the global economy was to remain as supplier of raw materials.

In the 1980s, the UN and the ECA made various attempts to develop broader policies. UNPAAERD, the UN Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development, followed the years of drought, and the AAF-SAP, the African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes, was adopted in 1989. Soon after, the World Bank published *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth: A Long-Term Perspective Study*. Each was an attempt to revive a focus on long-term African development. However, the harsh realities of adjustment conditionalities and continuing debt obligations meant that the practical impact of these efforts were limited.

Adedeji identifies three major reasons that led to the 1980s being a lost decade for development in Africa: the failures of structural adjustment; the inadequacies of debt relief; and the widespread violence and pervasive lack of democracy that increasingly engulfed many African countries. Of course, these three failures were not independent but related and often reinforcing. And the consequences for political stability were particularly serious. In less than four decades, Africa experienced more than eighty violent changes of government. Moreover, as Adedeji explains, such statistics do not convey "the full picture of the scope and pervasiveness of violence, brutalization and mass killings in the bloody struggles to obtain or retain power" (275), most notably in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Darfur, and Rwanda. In addition, there were the long, drawn out struggles for independence and majority rule in Southern Africa. Gross corruption has become endemic in a number of countries—Gabon and Guinea Bissau, for example—adding to instabilities and undermining the basis for democracy.

Over the 1990s and in the early 2000s, various modifications were made to structural adjustment policies. Africa and donors came up with UN-NADAF, the UN's New Agenda for the Development of Africa. In 1996, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali launched the UN System-wide Special initiative on Africa (UNSIA). However, a 2001 independent evaluation suggested that neither UN-NADAF nor UNSIA had much effect. Moreover, the same evaluation suggested that there was a proliferation of external initiatives intended to foster development in Africa and that the real need was for genuine partnerships to support African-owned development. Perhaps the most important change came during the 1990s, when the World Bank became more flexible and recognized the need for supporting a broader range of approaches.

Although the ECA was involved in these initiatives, in the 1990s it ceased to be at the forefront of regional African matters. The leadership role had passed to UN headquarters in New York, where two small African economic secretariats were established—the Office of the Special Coordinator for Africa and the Least Developed Countries and the Office of the Coordinator of the UNSIA. In the meantime, the ECA began to focus on establishing mechanisms for dialogue and consultation on development. Three such forums were set up: the African Development Forum (ADF), the "Big Table" of OECD-African countries' consultation on the ECA's partnership program, and a third, on post-conflict reconstruction and development. Several "Big Table" sessions have been held and post-conflict reconstruction and development remains an important focus of the ECA.

By 2008, the ADF had held six forums, covering globalization and information technologies, HIV/AIDS, regional integration, governance, youth and leadership, and gender equality and women's empowerment. The forum on HIV/AIDS held in 2000 was especially important. However, the continued lack of leadership and political will to counter the pandemic made action in most countries "too little and too late." By 2007, 22 million Africans were living with HIV/AIDS—two-thirds of the world's total—while the majority of the 25 million deaths from HIV/AIDS had been in Africa.

Signs of significant economic improvement did not become evident until the new millennium. By then the surge of development in Asia had raised commodity prices and led to an increase in direct foreign investment in a number of

African countries, especially in the development of natural resources. The result was an increase in the economic growth rates of ten to fifteen countries over the first few years of the new millennium. This upward trend, however, was short lived. The global downturn over 2008-09, brought new setbacks in most African countries.

At the time of writing, in mid-2009, no end to the global recession is in sight. Recovery in Africa is also beyond the horizon, and the remedies for accelerated progress are far from clear. Unrestrained and unregulated free markets have been discredited as partly responsible for the current financial crises. In stark contrast to the structural adjustment policies forced on poorer African countries, western governments have channelled billions of dollars, euros, and pounds sterling into Keynesian stimulus policies to jump start their economies. At the more theoretical level, mainstream research based on many empirical studies has made clear that the structural adjustment policies that were applied to Africa and Latin America by the Bretton Woods institutions over the 1980s and 1990s had a significantly negative effect on economic growth. In the words of James Vreeland—who reviewed many of the latest studies in his book *The International Monetary Fund: Politics of Conditional Lending*—“the newly emerging consensus is that IMF programs hurt economic growth” (2007: 90).

This is a terrible indictment of the international system’s efforts to support the world’s poorest continent since the 1980s. Over most of this period, the Economic Commission for Africa advocated a different approach—but the commission’s voice had little power and little influence. The Lagos Plan of Action, endorsed by African ministers in 1980, had set out a broader vision, but it was cast aside by the main players in the international community. After two decades of structural adjustment failures, these same players now accept the view that “African development must be owned by Africans.” Africa’s development trajectory over the past few decades might have been significantly different had this approach been adopted earlier.

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