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UN SECRETARY-GENERAL URGES MORE SUPPORT FOR AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

‘Tangible progress’ made during first half of UN New Agenda, but greater effort needed from Africa and international community

To consolidate and extend the significant economic and political gains that have been achieved in Africa over the past five years, the continent’s reform process requires greater commitment by both African governments and the international community, says UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali.

In a new report on the UN New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s (UN-NADAF), the Secretary-General notes a marked improvement in Africa’s economic performance over the first half of the decade. In 1995, he reports, 12 African countries registered a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 6 per cent or more, UN-NADAF’s recommended target, while in 1992 only three countries had reached that level. Although citing this and other “signs of tangible progress,” the Secretary-General also points to shortcomings, including a stagnation in external aid to Africa, with net flows of official development assistance to the continent declining from \$25 bn in 1992 to \$23 bn in 1994.

The report was prepared for the UN General Assembly’s Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole, which will conduct a week-long review of the implementation of UN-NADAF, beginning on 16 September 1996. The review will hear assessments of the efforts made to meet the objectives of the New Agenda by African countries and by the international community, including the UN system. It will also hear proposals for enhancing UN-NADAF’s implementation over the next half-decade. The views of governments, non-governmental organizations, multilateral institutions and regional bodies such as the Organization of African Unity will be considered.

“At this critical point,” the Secretary-General’s report says, the international community should “accelerate its support to these countries in order to sustain the momentum leading to recovery and sustainable development.” In particular, he argues, the international community must improve the level and scope of aid and take “additional and decisive mea-

asures” to resolve Africa’s debt crisis. It also must take concrete steps to help African countries adjust to the new global market environment.

In response to the particularly difficult development challenges facing the African continent, UN-NADAF was adopted by the General Assembly in December 1991 as a framework of consensus and partnership between Africa and the international community. It outlined complementary actions to be taken by both African countries and their international partners in the 1990s, in order to meet priority development objectives. African countries agreed to intensify efforts in such areas as economic management, regional cooperation, democratization, investment promotion, social services, agriculture, environment and population. The continent’s external partners pledged to reinforce these efforts with the necessary financial and technical support, especially through higher net resource flows including deeper debt relief, and improved market access for African exports.

SIGNS OF PROGRESS

In his report on UN-NADAF implementation, the Secretary-General finds that “the great majority of African countries have consistently taken appropriate actions to achieve sustained and sustainable growth and development.” These actions include a range of political and economic reforms which have brought signs of progress:

- In addition to an increased number of African countries with GDP growth rates of 6 per cent or higher, the number with negative growth dropped from 19 in 1993 to three in 1995.
- A growing commitment to regional and sub-regional economic cooperation and integration.
- Marked progress in democratic and constitutional reform, with a dramatic growth in multiparty elections and intensified efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts. Non-governmental organizations also have increased their role in national development

programmes, emphasizing community participation and self-help efforts.

- Greater promotion of the domestic and foreign private sector in economic development.
- Reforms to boost agriculture and improve access to food by the poorest groups, as well as programmes to safeguard the environment and address population issues.

CRITICAL ISSUES FOR AFRICA

The Secretary-General devotes a significant portion of his report to a series of recommendations to both Africa and the international community, with the aim of enhancing the implementation of UN-NADAF over the next five years. The primary responsibility, he affirms, rests with Africa, and the continent's leaders must acknowledge that "Africa's future is in their hands."

To consolidate the democratization process and improve governance in Africa, the Secretary-General recommends that African countries provide for wider popular participation in decision-making, encourage the emergence of a strong and vibrant civil society, ensure the independence of the media and adhere to the rule of law, with an objective judicial system. They should also create mechanisms to promote political stability and to prevent or resolve conflicts.

Turning to capacity-building, African countries need to improve health care systems, intensify efforts towards universal primary education and literacy, integrate population policies into their development strategies, address problems of unemployment and empower women to participate fully in the development process.

On domestic resource mobilization, the Secretary-General suggests that measures should be taken to improve taxation, control public expenditures, increase private savings and attract domestic and foreign investment. And to raise the continent's earnings, African economies need to boost external trade and diversify away from dependence on a limited number of primary commodities. Efforts should also be made to strengthen African regional and sub-regional institutions.

Noting that UN-NADAF emphasizes the principles of "shared responsibility and full partnership" between Africa and the international community, the

Secretary-General also highlights a number of areas in which the continent's development partners should reinforce their support for Africa.

During the first half of the UN-NADAF period, financial flows to Africa had "stagnated at a level below what was expected," the Secretary-General observes. But there is a "strong case" for increasing both the volume and the concessionality of development assistance to Africa, he argues, given that the economic difficulties of many African countries make access to private funding impossible. In addition, the Secretary-General suggests, donors should re-channel aid to Africa's key development priorities, switch to non-debt creating forms of assistance, link humanitarian and development assistance and better coordinate their various aid programmes.

PROGRESS NEEDED ON DEBT AND TRADE

While there has been some progress in resolving the international debt crisis, the Secretary-General notes, this has been less marked for low-income countries, especially in Africa, where external debt servicing claims nearly one-fifth of average savings. He recommends that commercial banks be encouraged to accept deeper discounts in buy-back operations and that more resources be provided to the World Bank's debt-reduction facility for low-income countries. The Paris Club of official creditors should be encouraged to improve its terms for reducing official bilateral debt, while the World Bank and International Monetary Fund should be encouraged to implement recent proposals on relief of multilateral debt, which now accounts for nearly half of Africa's debt servicing obligations.

The Uruguay Round agreements on international trade offer long-term possibilities for African products to gain greater access to world markets, says the Secretary-General, but in the short term they may have negative effects as African countries lose their trade preferences in European markets and face higher food import bills. He therefore urges support for appropriate compensation, including further tariff reductions on African products, as well as assistance with food imports. In addition, the Secretary-General urges donor countries to help finance the preparatory phase of commodity diversification programmes in African countries. ■