



PRESS RELEASE

Turn 'vision into action,' UN leaders urge

General Assembly meeting on Africa

United Nations, New York, 22 September 2008 — On the eve of the General Assembly's high-level meeting on Africa's development needs, which opens today, UN Under-Secretary General and Special Adviser on Africa Cheick Sidi Diarra urged world leaders to live up to their promises to advance the continent's progress. Rather than issuing new pledges, he said at an 18 September press conference, they should follow through on existing commitments and turn "vision into action."

Mr. Diarra highlighted the main messages of a new report by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (A/63/130), who notes that while most of Africa's economies are now growing more rapidly than they did a decade ago, the continent remains "off track" in its quest to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and other development targets. The Secretary-General's report — a comprehensive balance-sheet of achievements and shortfalls, analysis and recommendations — was mandated by the UN General Assembly for its high-level meeting, in which some four dozen heads of state and government are expected to participate.

The meeting, Mr. Diarra notes, will be an "extraordinary opportunity" for UN member states to thoroughly assess actions taken by Africa, donor countries, the UN and the rest of the international community since African leaders adopted the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) as the continent's main development blueprint in 2001.

The gathering today, Mr. Diarra further observed, takes place at the mid-point of the global campaign for the MDGs, as concerns mount that Africa is lagging behind other world regions. While a number of African countries have made notable progress on some goals, says the Secretary-General's report, no African country is likely to achieve all of the MDGs by 2015, on the basis of current trends. Two-fifths of the African population lives in extreme poverty. Compounding the challenge of persistent and extreme poverty, Africa is also facing several looming problems: a global food crisis, profound climate change and soaring energy prices.

Finding solutions to such challenges are important not just to Africa, Mr. Diarra stressed. "Africa's development problems are everyone's problems." The Secretary-General's report, he explained, examines the initiatives of both Africa and its development partners to overcome such difficulties. How-

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ever, the report stresses, commitments on both sides “remain only partially realized.”

Also today, some 15 seminars and workshops, organized by United Nations agencies and programmes, will take place alongside the official head of state roundtable discussions. These will engage heads of state, business and non-governmental organizations in many of Africa’s priority issues. The schedule is at <http://www.un.org/ga/president/62/ThematicDebates/adnhlm.shtml>.

Aid

In 2005, a summit meeting of the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized countries agreed to double aid to Africa by 2010. By the following year, overall official development assistance to Africa (excluding debt relief) had risen by only 8 per cent, and since then, reports the Secretary-General, “donors are falling behind.” A greater share of European Union (EU) assistance is now going to Africa, reaching 62 per cent in 2006, although in 2007 there was a slight decline in global EU aid commitments. The Secretary-General proposes that external finance for development in Africa reach \$72 bn annually to support achievement of the MDGs.

The Secretary-General also reports that while there have been improvements in how donors deliver aid to Africa, aid programmes still often remain uncoordinated and are directed only partially to recipient countries’ national development priorities. His criticisms do not spare the United Nations, where there has been a tendency “to support a proliferation of Africa-related activities, which creates incoherence.”

Debt

One bright spot has been on the debt front. As of July 2008, nineteen African countries had received major reductions in their official debt to governments and multilateral institutions. As a result, Africa’s total official debt fell from \$205.7 bn in 1999 to \$144.5 bn in 2007. However, the Secretary-General cautions, Africa’s private debt has been creeping up, from \$92.4 bn to \$110.2 bn over the same period. Debt relief should be extended to other African countries as well, he recommends.

Trade

Progress in improving Africa’s trade prospects has been very limited, reports the Secretary-General. The Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations stand “at a critical juncture,” he notes. In particular, African countries have been pressing for a reduction in agricultural subsidies by the EU, US, Japan and Canada, which have totalled \$750 bn since 2001 and which greatly depress the world market prices for Africa’s agricultural exports. The Secretary-General strongly urges a reduction in such agricultural subsidies, as well as other trade reforms to improve market access for African exports.

To better engage in trade, Mr. Diarra commented, Africa needs to improve its infrastructure, including roads, railways, ports and power systems. The continent needs some \$52.2 bn per year in public and private investment to resolve its critical bottlenecks in infrastructure, “a pre-requisite to connect African markets to the rest of the global market.”

Peace and security

To help Africa better resolve armed conflicts, the G-8 pledged in 2005 to train 25,000 African peacekeepers and provide technical support to the African Union’s projected African Standby Force. The US

alone is expected to train some 75,000 troops in Africa by 2010, and the EU transferred €250 mn to the African Union's peace and security efforts between 2005 and 2007. The Secretary-General notes, however, that such G-8 assistance has been provided "on an unharmonized and ad hoc basis."

African actions

African countries themselves need to do more to enhance domestic revenues and improve the productivity of their economies, the Secretary-General argues. To support NEPAD's agricultural development programme, African governments pledged in 2003 to devote 10 per cent of their public expenditures to agriculture and rural development by 2008. So far, only six African countries have met that target. Similarly, African governments agreed in 2001 to increase their health budgets to 15 per cent of public expenditure. But only six countries have reached that goal.

Under NEPAD, a number of African governments agreed to establish a voluntary scheme to review each other's adherence to democracy, human rights and good governance, known as the African Peer Review Mechanism. To date, 29 countries — more than half — have acceded to the mechanism and seven have completed such a peer review. The Secretary-General recommends that African governments, media and civil society groups do more to involve their citizens in the peer review process. He also suggests that African countries embark on a similar peer-review exercise of their activities to achieve the MDGs.

African women have made some political gains, the Secretary-General reports, with the share of women holding parliamentary seats rising from just 7 per cent in 1990 to 17 per cent in 2007. More generally, the Secretary-General recommends that African countries strengthen mechanisms "for participation, inclusion and empowerment of all segments of society" in their political and development processes.

For more information on the meeting, contact:

David Mehdi Hamam
UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa
Tel: (1-212) 963-2645
Email: hamamm@un.org

Julie I. Thompson, Chief
Africa Section, Strategic Communications Division
UN Department of Public Information
Tel: (1-212) 963-2645/(1-212) 963-6857

See also www.un.org/AR (High-level meeting on Africa)

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