Africa’s Achievements and Challenges

Africa Day article

Opinion by Dr Ibrahim Mayaki, CEO of the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD

1. **What should African countries reflect on this year as we commemorate Africa Day?**
   The commemoration of Africa Day this year comes at a rather difficult time when all the world’s attention has shifted to the fight against the COVID-19.

   During this unusual period, I wish to emphasise that we need to think in terms of our own regional value chains because the global value chains are being disrupted. National solutions will not be able to adequately respond to people’s needs, be it in food security, health or social and economic stability. The call I am making therefore is for countries to rally together and invest in regional value chains.

2. **What are some of the major achievements African countries have made since the inception of the AU?**
   The achievements are many. I will only but, mention a few.
   The 1960s saw the greatest number of African states gaining independence. Since then, some African countries have experienced impressive growth owing to the leadership of strong African Governments, the African Union and Regional Economic Communities.

   One of the greatest achievements on the continent has been creation of the Continental African Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) endorsed at the African Union Summit in Niamey, Niger on July 7, 2019. The AfCFTA will be the world’s largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organization.

   Another milestone by African countries has been the adoption of an African-led and owned agenda for its growth trajectory – Agenda 2063. Agenda 2063 embodies a renewed commitment by Africa’s political leadership to achieving the pan-African vision of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the global arena. This year, the First Continental Report on Implementation of Agenda 2063, Africa’s framework for development, shows the continent Africa has made some remarkable progress towards attaining the goals defined in Agenda 2063’s First Ten-Year Implementation Plan. Significant progress has been made especially under the aspiration for “A peaceful and secure Africa,” with a performance of 48% against the 2019 target. There is relatively good progress under the aspiration for “An integrated continent, politically united and based on the ideals of Pan-Africanism and the vision of Africa’s Renaissance,” with a score of 44%.

3. **What are some of the challenges facing Africa countries and how could we manage them?**
   Since the formation of the AU, some African countries have emerged among the world's top fastest-growing economies. According to the World Bank’s 2019 Doing Business Index, five of the ten most-improved countries globally, are in Africa, with six of the world’s 10 fastest-growing economies on the continent.
Nontheless, while African countries have been enjoying notable social and economic progress, the gains made in this realm have, in most cases, not cascaded down to alleviate everyday problems such as us improved healthcare systems and the creation of the much needed jobs from Africa’s youths.

However, in my view, Africa has two major advantages. The continent is still endowed with a wealth of natural resources of which the rest of the world cannot do without. Secondly, it has the youngest population in the world. Without more deliberate and concerted efforts to address the challenges faced by the continent’s youths, especially unemployment, and lack of meaningful economic opportunities which rank high, Africa faces the real risk of frustration from the youth leading to a spike in instability and civil conflicts.

4. **How do you think African countries can work together to tackle the COVID-19?**

At continental level, the African Union has acted swiftly to establish a Coronavirus Fund with commitments already totalling USD20 million. At national level, most African countries are implementing lockdowns, testing (of suspected cases) and contact tracing. The downside of these lockdowns, if prolonged, is their negative impact on socio-economic activities. In this regard, the AUDA-NEPAD short-term response and support to Members States is geared towards slowing down the pandemic, knowing more about how COVID-19 is spreading and lessening the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

The AUDA-NEPAD COVID-19 Response Plan of Action, a comprehensive, proactive and multidimensional plan is helping to tackle both the current Covid-19 challenges and post-pandemic repercussions at regional and country levels.

Therefore, together with countries, our COVID-19 Response Plan of Action focusses on the following seven thematic areas, through which countries can remain stable both during and post COVID-19 pandemic: Health Service Delivery; Human Resources for Health; Research & Development Innovation and Local Manufacturing; Education and Training; Skills and Employability; Food and Nutrition Security; and Financing.

6. **Is the current COVID-19 challenge not going to affect the operationalisation of the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement?**

The AfCFTA paves the way for Africa, with 1.2 billion people and a cumulative GDP of $2.5 trillion – to become the world’s largest common market. But with the coronavirus hitting the global economy, a worldwide recession is looming. The crisis is bound to have destabilising effects on our economies as the health crisis worsens.

Against this backdrop, there is a pressing need to reduce the continent’s high trade dependence on non-African partners. Maximizing the possibilities of the AfCFTA will be an effective shock absorber as long as the pandemic, and uncertainty about its course, keeps the global economy depressed. It will also make Africa an attractive proposition when the global economy turns around. Even though COVID-19 poses challenges on the operationalisation os the AfCFTA, the continent has no time to lose. In the current global uncertainty, we need to increase trading within our regional markets, otherwise we will not tackle our development challenges. Hopefully the AfCFTA will be operational soon.
7. **What does the continent need to do to quickly recover post COVID-19?**

Even though we do not know yet, what the full economic impact of the pandemic on the continent will be, we need to be fully prepared. It is reported that Africa might lose 30 million jobs, while a third of the continent’s countries are at risk of debt distress (Ikouria, 2020). At the same time, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa estimates that the continent could lose up to half of its GDP growth, down to 1.8% from 3.2%. Therefore, in order to prepare we need to increase our fiscal space so that we can take adequate measures.

However, the biggest realisation is that the impact of COVID-19 is not just on financial capitalisation but is equally on burdome on various social sectors. Livelihoods at individual, household, community and business (formal and informal) levels are being disrupted daily. Therefore, while there might not necessarily be a quick win solutions, the continent’s medium- to long-term responses need to be centred in five key priorities that are aimed at strengthening (1) Health Systems, (2) Food Systems (3) Skills Development and Employment, (4) Education and (5) National Planning and Data Systems. Therefore, the appropriate actions to take should be prioritized and resources mobilized to cover the full scope of work.

8. **You message to the citizens of Africa as we commemorate Africa Day?**

As a continent, many are the challenges that we face as a people. However, history has shown that we emerge victorious when we come together to resolve our differences and work for the benefit of all our citizens. Solidarity for regional integration is the key.

As the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD, we take cognisance of the need to continue to push for increased regional integration, through which the challenges that we face on the continent can be best tackled. We recognise that the ideals and aspirations for ‘The Africa We Want’ will only be realised if we strongly believe that Africa is capable of achieving the vision of an integrated, prosperous and peaceful continent, driven by its own citizens. We therefore call on each and every African to play their part in shaping our continent for the better.

As the African Union’s first ever development agency, we at AUDA-NEPAD aim to deliver on the development priorities articulated by the continent’s citizen’s through the African Union. We shall do this through **harnessing knowledge to deliver the Africa we want**. Through our new mandate, we are ready to support the continent’s transformation.