



Institutional capacities for country-led development efforts

More than six decades after the first wave of African independence, persistent structural vulnerabilities continue to inhibit sustained economic and social transformation across the continent. While development assistance has contributed to discrete improvements in access to services, it has largely failed to catalyze the systemic change required for long-term sustainable development, resilience and autonomy. One underlying reason is that external flows, particularly Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), have often operated less as tools for endogenous development and more as mechanisms for shaping policy trajectories in ways that reflect donor or investor interests rather than national priorities.

This dynamic has resulted in a misalignment between financial inflows and structural transformation outcomes and has narrowed the policy space of African governments. For example, conditionalities associated with ODA and the regulatory incentives built around FDI have, over time, limited the policy space of African governments, narrowing their capacity to define development strategies responsive to local geographies and socio-economic contexts. The legacy of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPS) and their enduring normative influence continues to shape fiscal orthodoxy in many African countries, often emphasising short-term stabilisation over long-term investment in state capability, institutions, public goods, human capital development, and economic diversification.

Moreover, Africa's economic architecture, historically shaped around extractive sectors and low-value-added production, remains externally oriented and vulnerable to global shocks. This dependency is exacerbated by systemic financial leakages through illicit financial flows (IFFS), redundant tax incentives, weak institutions, and public expenditure inefficiencies. These factors contribute to an estimated \$500–600 billion in financial resources that go unmobilized annually (OSAA, 2023), far exceeding the total volume of incoming ODA and FDI combined. In effect, Africa is a net creditor to the world, though this reality is masked by the dominance of an aid dependency narrative.

Compounding these structural constraints is the fragility of past development gains, as evidenced by the ease with which decades of progress were reversed in the face of global crises such as COVID-19, and climate shocks. Debt servicing now exceeds public spending on health and education in many African countries (OSAA, 2024), crowding out investments in human capital



and long-term productivity. These challenges underscore the urgent need for a new model of development cooperation, one rooted in national ownership, institutional resilience, and policy innovation.

As the President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council emphasised, the future of international cooperation must be anchored in country-led development efforts (March 2025). The central imperative is no longer expanding external support but cultivating national policy ecosystems capable of designing, financing, and delivering development strategies responsive to local contexts. Achieving this shift requires building robust public institutions, strengthening national data systems, enhancing domestic resource mobilisation, and fostering the ability to negotiate and align external finance with national priorities.

To advance this vision, the UN General Assembly, through resolution [A/Res/78/263](#), established the [United Nations African Policy Innovation Fellowship](#). This programme aims to equip a new generation of African policymakers with the tools to craft technically sound, context-sensitive, and fiscally grounded policies. Administered by the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), in collaboration with the UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) Regional Office for Africa and host UN entities, the Fellowship aligns with the UN Secretary-General's [UN 2.0 Strategy](#) and [Six Transitions](#), reinforcing the shift toward evidence-based, implementation-ready policymaking

The United Nations African Policy Innovation Fellowship

Through a structured, multi-phase model, the fellowship enables junior and mid-level government officials to develop and implement data-driven, contextually grounded policy solutions aligned with national priorities. By embedding fellows within both global and domestic policy processes, from UN Headquarters to their home institutions, the programme is structured around a practical, immersive approach that builds national capacity while embedding fellows in global and regional policy ecosystems. Specifically, the Fellowship is designed to enhance policymaking skills in alignment with the Six Transitions, which include:

1. **Food systems**
2. **Energy access and affordability**
3. **Digital connectivity**
4. **Education**
5. **Jobs and social protection**
6. **Climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution**

Achieving these transitions requires radical improvements in the use of science, technology, and innovation, bridging persistent data gaps, and strengthening SDG localization. Accordingly, proposals must be transformative rather than transactional, moving beyond short-term outputs

or funding fixes to address underlying systemic constraints and enable long-term institutional and policy change. This shift also demands governance reforms and policy innovation to mobilize investments and translate design into action. Ultimately, addressing Africa's development challenges requires moving away from aid dependency toward sustainable Integrated National Financing Frameworks (INFFs) and strengthened Domestic Resource Mobilization (DRM).

In this context, the primary outcome of the fellowship will be the development of a policy intervention to advance one of the transitions with the support of the UN system and partners.

Fellowship Structure

The fellowship employs a structured, six-month, three-phase program that combines conceptual training, policy design, and applied implementation support. It aims to equip junior to mid-level African policymakers with the analytical and operational capacities to design data-driven, fiscally grounded, and context-responsive policy interventions aligned with national development priorities and institutional mandates:

1. Virtual Phase (1 Month – Conceptualization)

Fellows begin the programme with a virtual learning phase that focuses on conceptual clarity, diagnostic analysis, and policy design fundamentals:

- Fellows refine their project proposals into actionable policy frameworks grounded in national data systems and institutional realities.
- Interactive sessions are delivered by UN policy experts, development economists, and data specialists, with an emphasis on using administrative data and national statistics for decision-making.
- Fellows receive tailored mentorship on aligning their proposals with national planning frameworks and sectoral strategies.

2. In-Person Phase (3 Months – Policy Development at UN HQ, New York)

- During this residency, fellows are embedded in relevant UN Secretariat departments to deepen their understanding of how international norms, financing instruments, and cooperation frameworks interface with domestic policymaking:
- Fellows are placed within a host UN entity aligned with their proposed policy area (linked to one of the UN Secretary-General's Six Transitions).
- They participate in intergovernmental and interagency policy dialogues, contributing African perspectives to global conversations while refining their interventions in real time.
- Fellows receive technical support to strengthen the fiscal and institutional feasibility of their projects, including methodologies for integrating DRM strategies and climate finance or leveraging SDG-aligned budgeting.

3. Home Country Phase (2 Months – Preparation for the programmatic implementation with UN RCO Support)

- Upon return, fellows enter a phase focused on preparing implementation within their national institutions:
- With support from the UN Resident Coordinator’s Office (RCO), fellows will engage with relevant ministries and stakeholders to assess institutional fit, political feasibility, and financing pathways.
- They will refine implementation plans and conduct preliminary risk and stakeholder analyses.
- Fellows formally present their policy frameworks to national authorities for feedback and alignment with ongoing national development plans and UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks.

4. Implementation

Following the six-month core fellowship:

- Fellows reintegrate into their public sector institutions with the objective to pursue implementation of their project.
- OSAA, in collaboration with the UN Country Team, will maintain structured follow-ups and technical support, facilitating access to UN system capacities and catalytic partnerships.
- Formal monitoring will be conducted annually to assess progress, capture lessons learned, and feed into policy dialogue at national and regional levels.

The programme will operate on a biannual cycle, with two cohorts per year (January–June and July–December).

Governance structure

The African Policy Innovation Fellowship is administered by OSAA, which is responsible for overall programme coordination, strategic alignment, and stakeholder engagement.

- **Host UN entities** will be selected based on thematic relevance and will provide technical mentorship, access to policy resources, and institutional hosting support.
- **Collaborating entities**, including UN agencies, think tanks, and academic institutions, may contribute expertise, data access, joint programming, or thematic alignment support. Donors may also participate as collaborating entities depending on the modality of support.
- A **Steering Committee**, chaired by OSAA and composed of host and collaborating entities, will oversee strategic direction, coherence, and evaluation of the programme.

- **UN Resident Coordinators** in fellows' home countries will be invited to participate in Steering Committee meetings to ensure alignment with UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) and to support national anchoring of the projects.

Application and eligibility requirements:

Prospective fellows must submit a project proposal addressing a national-level policy challenge related to one of the six transitions. The proposal should:

- Incorporate a data inventory outlining available sources and data gaps.
- Demonstrate how national data will be leveraged to develop an actionable policy framework.
- Include a strong financing component linked to domestic resource mobilization fiscal policy coherence, or innovative financing mechanisms (e.g., carbon markets, remittances, SDG-aligned bonds).

Eligibility Requirements:

- **Junior to mid-level government officials** from African countries.
- **Maximum age limit of 40 years.**
- **Supervisor's endorsement letter** confirming support and releasing the fellow for the three-month in-person phase in New York.

Sponsorship Opportunities

We invite donors to partner in this initiative as co-architects of a new development cooperation paradigm—one that invests not in projects, but in institutional transformation, policy autonomy, and long-term capacity. By sponsoring fellows, donors contribute to the creation of a cohort of technically grounded, system-aware African policymakers capable of shaping national strategies in ways that are both sovereign and sustainable.

Donors can engage through the following modalities:

- **Core support:** Contributing to the overall operational and programmatic costs of the fellowship.
- **Fellowship sponsorship:** Funding an individual fellow from a specific country or thematic area of interest.

- **Continental alignment support:** Funding a fellowship extension to include a secondment to the African Union or a regional economic community, to ensure policy coherence across national and continental levels.

For further information or to express interest in sponsoring a fellow, please contact **osaa-fellowship@un.org**.