Strengthening Africa's Geopolitical Agency and Trade Resilience in a Multipolar World

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Opening Remarks

Co-hosted by the OECD, the African Development Bank and UNDP

Distinguished ministers, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you to the African Development Bank for such a warm welcome to Abidjan- we are delighted to be partnering with you and UNDP for this important conference.

It is a privilege to open this conversation on Strengthening Africa's Geopolitical Agency and Trade Resilience in a Multipolar World.

We meet at a moment of real change. The certainties that shaped international co-operation for decades are being tested. Power is more dispersed. Old alliances are shifting. And the rules of trade, investment and development finance are being rewritten in real time and high uncertainty.

The conflict in the Middle East is the latest in a series of global supply chain shocks that has dampened economic growth and deepened fragmentation.

Earlier this month, the OECD revised down its global growth projections to 2.8% for 2026. The impacts are expected to be particularly severe for developing economies, which have less fiscal space and face higher costs for energy and food. The impacts are real for millions of people in in this region – more food insecurity and rising poverty.

In this new context trade, aid and investment are not separate agendas – they are different pieces of the same puzzle – building economies that create jobs, reduce dependency on external resources, and strengthen resilience to shocks.

However, the impacts on development finance are particularly significant, severe, direct and distinct – especially in sub-Saharan where there ODA accounts for relatively high shares of GDP in some countries.

In 2025, official development assistance fell by 23% — the sharpest drop since the OECD began tracking this data in 1960 — a decline of USD 41 billion. We project a further fall this year. For sub-Saharan Africa and least developed countries projected levels in 2026 are lower than seen since early 2000s. Multilateral channels are not expected to fill the gap.

For many partners, aid is no longer a reliable, growing source of finance. That reality is sobering, but it should sharpen, not weaken, our resolve. We must find the best ways to protect and priorities ODA and make better use of all forms of development finance - ensuring that all flows maximise their developmental potential. Business as usual is no longer possible. We are challenged to innovate and meet the moment.

My ask of you all is to show us what this innovation and change should look like and shape the future allocations of concessional finance and the multipolar system on terms that work for Africa, not just around it.

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Because Africa's story is not only one of shrinking aid. It is also one of extraordinary potential as you heard Secretary General Cormann reflect on. The continent holds a large share of the critical minerals the world needs for clean energy and digital transformation. It has the world's youngest and fastest-growing workforce. And through the African Continental Free Trade Area, it is building one of the largest single markets on earth.

Trade can help to convert that potential into resilience — creating jobs, adding value at home, diversifying partnerships, and reducing dependence on any single market or donor. But trade policy must also keep development front and center. The joint OECD/WTO Aid for Trade initiative shows what is possible: in 2024 alone it mobilised USD 51 billion, nearly a fifth of all development assistance, to help countries participate in and benefit from trade.

Turning potential into agency also demands new ways of working and learning together.

At the OECD we host the Global Network of Chief Economists of International Development Agencies and Finance Institutions — a space where the world's development institutions test ideas, share evidence, and challenge assumptions in development policy and practice. Yesterday, we held our a meeting of the Network as part of the AEC and the day before met with members of the Africa Chief Economist Network the day before. The exchange was energetic, candid and full of practical ideas and solutiosn showing the value of peer exchange.

Networks like these bring international, regional and national expertise to bear on the most pressing challenges governments are facing. Not to prescribe answers, but to bring evidence, tools and partnership to a conversation Africa is leading.

We are privileged to be part of this conversation and I look forward to the coming exchanges.

Thank you.

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