

Pre-ADF Symposium: Youth and Governance
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Opening Statement

By

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Madam chair,

The Representative of the African Union Commission,
His Excellency, the Minister for Youth,
Esteemed colleagues [there will be someone from UNICEF
on the panel – don't know how they should be greeted],
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to this Symposium
on Youth and Governance on the occasion of the Fourth
African Development Forum (ADF-IV).

Youth represent more than 50% of our continent's population.
They are our future. And yet they face huge problems. They
suffer greater unemployment than their elders; their literacy
and enrollment in school is low and they carry a
disproportionate burden of poverty.

As if that were not enough, young people are facing massive
health challenges. The current HIV/AIDS prevalence rate of
young people between the ages of 15-24 continues to rise.

By the year 2005 HIV/AIDS would have claimed the lives of
over half a million of this age group.

We should not be surprised if, against such a background, Africa's youth are disillusioned by the seemingly unending political and economic problems of their countries and are skeptical about their leaders. They have good reason to doubt that improvements in their lives can be achieved.

And yet there are targets in place. We are all pledged to try and meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015, which require us to make sure all young people at least get a primary education, that we dramatically cut the number of children dying before the age of five and above all, that we halve extreme poverty and hunger within the next decade.

We must act now. Today's young people are tomorrow's leaders. If we do not act, the consequences will be too grave to contemplate.

It is the ECA's recognition of the critical importance of these goals and the enormous challenges they pose that persuaded us that today's meeting is necessary.

We want to provide young people with a platform so that they can hold a dialogue with each other on how to move forward, on the key strategic actions that need to be taken.

But we also wanted to provide a forum in which the youth could identify common positions and go on to make their voices heard in the African Development Forum over the coming week.

It is of course for you to decide what should come out of this symposium. But we hope you will use this opportunity to

identify some of the weakness in national policies on youth around the continent.

We are convinced that the youth can play a key role in advancing debate and policy making – particular in areas that are important to them, such as education, employment and HIV/AIDS.

You may also want to use today's meeting to discuss ways to mobilize young people for the transformation of existing governance structures so that the youth is increasingly included and represented. We need to see young people participating in political life.

However you approach your discussions today, we are honoured to host you and applaud your energy and commitment in joining the debate.

I wish you fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.