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**UNOAU**

**Statement of  
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African Union and Head of UNOAU**

**“Educate and African Fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong, quality and relative learning in Africa.”**

**Africa Day Virtual Event 2024  
04 June 2024**

Many thanks to our distinguished moderator, Alcinda Honwana, (for giving me the floor). She is doing an excellent job.

Excellencies,  
Distinguished fellow panelists,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to the organizers of this timely event, the Permanent Observer Mission of the African Union to the United Nations headed by my dear sister Ambassador Fatima Mohammed, the United Nations Senior Officials of African Descent Group, and the United Nations Anti-Racism Group.

I came to this event inspired by the story of Loevan Krecoum Niels Samuel-Marie, a 10 years old young Ivoirian, who, a few weeks ago, won the title of world dictation champion in the Paul Gérin-Lajoie international dictation competition, held in Montreal, Canada. Young Krecoum dedicated his victory to his family and country to whom he was grateful for the excellent education he had received. I think we should all congratulate this brilliant student for seizing the opportunity afforded to him and for his hard work.

Loevan Krecoum's story clearly shows that given the opportunity, every child in Africa, particularly the millions left behind, can also succeed and be role models. Currently, more than 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25 <sup>1</sup>, and each of them carries a potential for Africa's development and beyond. All they needed is a catalyst. Education is that catalyst. At its last Summit meeting here in Addis Ababa, the Assembly of the African Union adopted "Educate an African fit for the 21st Century: Building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong, quality, and relevant learning in Africa" as its theme for the year 2024. This is a highly strategic choice, consistent with SDG4 which aims to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all", and the AU's own Continental Education Strategy (CESA 16-25).

This year's theme also builds on the outcomes of the "Transforming Education Summit" convened by Secretary-General Guterres in 2022, and aligns fully with the Incheon Declaration which states that education is "a main driver of development and achieving the other SDGs". The theme of the year also underscores the criticality of education for Agenda 2063 on the "Africa We Want", "an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizen and representing a dynamic force in the international arena".

I concur with UNESCO's view that "the power of education is immense. Education has [indeed] the ability to transform lives, empower individuals and drive social progress. [...] It is a "powerful tool that can change the world for the better". Unquestionably, education is the best tool to develop humanity's most precious asset: human beings, women and men, young and old

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/demographic-dividend-atlas-africa-tracking-potential-demographic-dividend#:~:text=About%2060%20per%20cent%20of,United%20Nations%202017%20World%20Population>

individuals afforded access to knowledge, and the power to free themselves from the bondage of ignorance and servitude.

Yet as UNESCO laments, “Of all regions, sub-Saharan Africa [an expression I don’t like much] has the highest rates of education exclusion. Over one-fifth of children between the ages of about 6 and 11 are out of school, followed by one-third of youth between the ages of about 12 and 14.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

All of us in this room, know far too well that these are critical formative years no one should be missing. It’s just a terrible loss of amazing skills that shouldn’t be put to waist.

I firmly believe that the Theme of the Year resonates with most young Africans, some of whom still embarking on perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea, with the goal of reaching Europe, desperate for opportunities for a good life, and an end to the viscous cycle of poverty, hunger, poor health and despair.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to look at the Theme of the Year from a peace and security lens. Let’s begin by taking a look at Africa’s demographic data.

The continent currently has a population of approximately 1.4 billion people. That number is set to rise to 2.5 billion people by 2050. The median age is currently 19 years old, meaning that half the continent’s population is below that age and half is above it.

Approximately 630 million Africans will live in urban areas, with approximately 62% of those living in slums, according to UN Habitat, which projects that by 2050, 1.2 billion Africans will live in urban areas.

At the same time, the continent has the lowest life expectancy worldwide, at 61 years for men and 65 years for women. Of the continent’s total population, 430 million live in extreme poverty, that is roughly 30% of the continent’s population.

But depending on the measure one uses, that number could be as high as 60%, the result of per capita income growth that has averaged just 1.1 percent a year since 1990, according to the World Bank. 60% of Africa’s youth between the ages of 15 and 17 are not in school.

By 2050, one in two Africans will be under the age of 25, representing more than a billion children and adolescents poised to shape the destiny of not only their countries but the entire world. By 2050, one in three working-age people will live in Africa, and the continent could be the largest consumer market.

These are the numbers, sometimes sobering, which should frame our discussion today, our reflections on the causes of violence and conflict, and policy discourse among African government with respect to planning and resource priorities.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Just last week, on 25 May, I attended the High-Level Colloquium of the Peace and Security Council, to mark 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary the Council and Africa Day. One of the concepts discussed at that meeting is what is referred to as the 'conflict gap' which represents the gap between population growth and urbanization, on the one hand, and economic and social development, and rise in opportunities and livelihoods, on the other.

It was observed, and this is a reality for all to see, that looking at current data, development is not keeping up with population growth and urbanization, hence the widening 'conflict gap' on the continent.

The widening gap will exacerbate existing competition for scarce resources, inter-communal tensions, conflicts, violence, crime and illegal migration.

If you combine these realities with democratic and governance deficits, including vast parts of the continent which are essentially lacking state authority, some are labelling "ungoverned spaces", you will agree with me that the picture is not promising. This is why meaningful education is so vital and, indeed, an absolute necessity. Education can help us close the 'conflict gap'.

Fundamentally, education is transformative. It is both a basic human right and a potential instrument of societal transformation. It can enable us to skill people, grow national economies and household incomes and livelihoods, and thereby lift entire populations out of poverty and despair.

Education is not merely a ladder to personal advancement; it is the engine that propels nations towards sustainable development. Education is therefore a key ingredient of human security. In Africa, where the echoes of a youthful population are heard across the valleys and the mountains, education holds the key to unlocking a future of endless possibilities.

Today, the continent stands at a crossroads, with a burgeoning youth demographic that could become the workforce to drive economic growth and innovation, both on the continent and globally.

This demographic dividend, however, hinges on their nations' ability to provide them quality education that is inclusive, equitable, and relevant to the demands of the 21st century, specifically tailored to attaining the vision of the Africa We Want. It must focus on skills development, ensure a direct link with the job market, and prioritize nurturing of entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity.

## **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In this connection, the education curricula in African countries needs to focus more on developing the skills to ensure value addition for the continent's vast natural resources. This is another way to close the 'conflict gap': value addition of the continent's exports would exponentially increase national and household incomes at a much higher rate than population growth.

[Take the example of the global coffee trade: while Africa accounts for about 12% of global coffee production, it accounts for only 4% of the total global revenues. Another example is cocoa production for which Africa accounts for 70% of production and earns approximately \$7 billion annually, compared to the revenue of the global chocolate confectionery market which is predicted to be \$133.4 billion this year. The same goes for the continent's mineral resources. The real beneficiaries of Africa's raw material exports are those who are able to process and add value to them, more often than not, outside the continent. Africa is not optimizing the value from its exports, and one of the main reasons for this is its lack of an educated and skilled workforce to add value on a massive scale.]

Just imagine, for one moment the transformative effect that a trebling or quadrupling of national and household incomes would have, simply by adding value to the continent's exports of raw materials. Think about what that would do to reduce competition on scarce resources. It would be incredible!

Ultimately, education in Africa is first and foremost a development challenge. As long as the continent will not partake in the global wealth creation enterprise and take its fair share in the global economic growth, its agency on its future will continue to be compromised.

That is why our conversation today cannot be totally disconnected from the ongoing efforts spearheaded by the Secretary-General and other like-minded leaders to reform the prevailing international financial architecture.

The world needs a fairer, level-playing field that benefits all nations, lifts all boats and, ultimately, can contribute to unleashing Africa's immense potential. The upcoming Summit of the Future, Africa's G20 membership and the next FFD conference should all provide meaningful opportunities to advance Africa's legitimate and longstanding demands for justice.

Of course, African governments will have to take the lead through unity of purpose and in mobilizing domestic resources, addressing governance deficits and prioritizing investments in education. Meanwhile, effective partnership underpinned by global solidarity will remain paramount.

**Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Education is a vehicle to build more inclusive societies and promote a culture of peace. Nowhere is this as relevant as in Africa where most societies are richly diverse but exposed to the weaponization of identities for political expediency.

When the foundational curricula has been purposely determined to promote a sense of belonging and valuing one another, education can foster social harmony and co-existence. It can also be an equalizer.

Education for all must be intentional, qualitative and provide equal opportunities to both the boy and the girl child, and progress to the employment world where opportunities are based on both the ability (mindset) and capacity (skillsets/tools) of everyone to be part of change they want to see and experience.

We must embrace innovative methods that go beyond traditional classroom settings. This includes tapping into the huge potential presented by AI and leveraging digital platforms for remote learning, utilizing radio and television broadcasts in areas without internet access, and fostering community-based education initiatives that draw on local knowledge and expertise.

To this end, the Secretary-General's commitment to establish a "Compact that outlines a vision of an Open, Free and Secure Digital Future, anchored in Global cooperation for Human Development and SDG progress, Human Rights and Governance by Humans for Humans" is very pertinent.

This is because education in Africa is not just a priority but a vital strategic imperative.

It is the most potent instrument for asserting Africa's agency on its own future, including by mastering science and technology, advancing regional integration, reducing poverty, improving health, promoting gender equality, fostering peace, and ensuring stability. [The returns on investment in education are vast and indisputably consistent, translating into higher income, better livelihoods, and a more equitable, and potentially more peaceful society.]

So, let's rally around the momentum created by this year's theme to make education a lifetime priority. Let's mobilize to make education the essence of life and the engine of transformative change in Africa for generations to come.

I thank you for your kind attention.

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