



**Growth through innovation:
harnessing data and frontier
technologies for the economic
transformation of Africa**

Fifty-eighth session of the Economic
Commission for Africa Conference of
African Ministers of Finance, Planning
and Economic Development

28 March, 2026 - 3 April, 2026

SIDE EVENT

Organized by the Pan-African Youth Union (PYU) in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and partners

Continental Youth Symposium: African Youth at the Frontier of Technologies, Innovation, Sovereignty and Jobs in the Digital Age

Background

The Pan-African Youth Union (PYU) in collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), convened a Youth Side Event under the theme “**Making the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Work for African Young People: Opportunities, Challenges and the Way Forward,**” during the Fifty-Seventh Session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Building on the outcomes, lessons learned and momentum of the successful 2025 Youth Side Event, the Pan-African Youth Union is proposing a follow-up Youth Side Event at the Fifty-eighth Session of the Conference of African Ministers (COM 2026), the Continental Youth Symposium in continued collaboration with ECA under the theme: “African Youth at the Frontier of Technologies, Innovation, Sovereignty and Jobs in the Digital Age.”

While the 2025 event focused on trade integration and the AfCFTA, the 2026 side event will shift attention to the digital and technological frontier, recognizing that data, artificial intelligence and

emerging technologies are increasingly shaping Africa’s economic competitiveness, industrialization and employment landscape.

This year’s event will therefore broaden the discussion to include innovation, digital sovereignty, regulation of frontier technologies, resource beneficiation and the future of work for African youth.

African youth remain a critical driver of the continent’s economic transformation, contributing labour, skills, innovation and entrepreneurship. However, despite expanding access to education and digital connectivity, youth unemployment remains a major challenge. Many young Africans are already engaging with frontier technologies through digital entrepreneurship, innovation and creative industries, yet policy and regulatory frameworks have not fully adapted particularly in areas such as data governance, AI regulation, digital public infrastructure and digital sovereignty. Through this side event, the voices and policy perspectives of young Africans will be integrated into discussions on innovation, data and the future of work during the Fifty-Eighth Session of the Economic Commission for Africa.

1 General Assembly resolution 79/1, *The Pact for the Future*, United Nations, 2024.

2 African Union Commission, *African Union Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030)*

3 Economic Commission for Africa, *Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030): Shaping Africa’s Digital Future*.



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Objectives

The primary objective of the side event is to provide a high-level platform between young people, policymakers and experts to engage directly with ECA, African Ministers and development partners on the role of frontier technologies in job creation, digital sovereignty and economic transformation. Young people will be invited to articulate their expectations of ECA and governments, identify key challenges they face in the digital and innovation economy and propose youth-driven policy recommendations.

The main objectives are:

- (a) To provide a structured dialogue between African youth, ECA and African Ministers on how the continent's digital and innovation agenda can better serve young people and promote decent work and entrepreneurship.
- (b) To examine existing policy and regulatory gaps related to frontier technologies, including AI, data governance, digital public infrastructure and cryptocurrency from a youth perspective.
- (c) To explore mechanisms of ensuring Africa's digital sovereignty and existing data infrastructure in Africa across the continent and its implications for continental data governance and technological autonomy.
- (d) draw synergies between frontier technologies, resource beneficiation and industrialization as well as assess their potential for job creation and improvement of the quality of life.
- (e) To generate alternative policy and concrete, youth-led policy recommendations to guide ECA's advisory role to African governments and regional institutions

Expected outcomes

The following outcomes are expected:

- (a) Establishing linkages between industry, experts and financiers to de-risk investment in youth

- startups in frontier technologies and data infrastructure to ensure digital sovereignty.
- (b) Adopt a clear youth driven roadmap on AI governance, data regulation, digital public infrastructure and innovation financing.
- (c) Develop youth mainstreaming policy outlining how governments and ECA should engage with young innovators in shaping Africa's digital future.
- (d) Strengthened dialogue and partnership between African youth, ECA, AfDB, the African Union and governments on innovation-led growth and employment.
- (e) A consolidated Tangier Youth Declaration on Harnessing Frontier Technologies, Innovation and Digital Sovereignty for Youth Employment and Job Creation to be shared with African Ministers of Finance and Planning.

Speakers

In addition to young African innovators, entrepreneurs and youth policy leaders, representatives of the following entities will be invited to participate:

- (a) Pan-African Youth Union (PYU)
- (b) Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
- (c) African Union Commission (AUC)
- (d) African Development Bank (AfDB)
- (e) African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)
- (f) Ministries of Finance, Digital Economy and Planning
- (g) Private sector technology firms and digital innovators
- (h) African civil society organizations working on youth, technology and economic development
- (i) International development partners and financial institutions

Target audience

The target audience includes: Representatives of National Youth Councils, regional platforms, youth



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entrepreneurs and innovators, policy makers and experts attending the fifty-eighth session of the Economic Commission for Africa, representatives of the private sector actors in digital and technology, development partners, including the African Development Bank, the African Export-Import Bank, other international financial institutions, the African Union Commission, the United Nations Development Programme, academia and civil society organizations working on youth, technology and economic development.

Venue and date

The side event will be held on the margins of the fifty-eighth session of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, from 28 March to 3 April 2026, in Tangier, Kingdom of Morocco on March 31 2026 from 8:00am to 18:00 pm.

Further information

For further information, please contact the office of the Secretary-General, Pan-African Youth Union (osg@panafricanyouthunion.org; +212752941302)