



**Concept note
and
Call for papers**

AFRICAN ECONOMIC CONFERENCE 2020

Africa beyond COVID-19: acceleration towards inclusive sustainable development

8-10 December 2020

Virtual Conference



African Development Bank Group, Economic Commission for Africa, United Nations Development Programme

I. Introduction

1. The 2020 edition of the African Economic Conference, jointly organized by African Development Bank (AfDB), the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is planned to be held virtually from 8 to 10 December 2020.

The theme of this year's conference is "Africa beyond COVID-19: accelerating towards inclusive sustainable development". This theme, coming at a time when African countries are struggling with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, will bring together various stakeholders, including policymakers and researchers, to examine the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 and the measures that are needed to mitigate and recover from the ill effects of the shock. In particular, the conference will focus on how African countries can build resilience and be better prepared to deal with future shocks. With the lingering negative impact of COVID-19 as a backdrop, researchers, policymakers and other participants will be urged to conduct analysis, learn from best practices from Africa countries and elsewhere, and provide policy recommendations on how African economies can accelerate progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

2. The theme also reflects the consensus among the conference organizers that COVID-19 has exposed significant structural weaknesses in Africa's development architecture. If those weaknesses are not addressed, African countries are likely to experience a reversal in the development gains already achieved and will be unlikely to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and the aspirations of Agenda 2063. The consensus also underscores the importance of integrating a long-term perspective into current recovery efforts, by continuing to promote access to technology and infrastructure, good governance and regional integration, with a view to increasing productive capacities and creating the foundation for equitable and sustainable economic transformation.

3. Conference participants will identify enablers of, and obstacles to, a robust recovery from COVID-19, with a special focus on mitigating socioeconomic impacts, promoting a transformative recovery and accelerating progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals while leaving no one behind. Participants will also be asked to examine the roles of technology, innovation, entrepreneurship, economic and social infrastructure, accountable and inclusive governance, trade and regional integration in Africa's transformation to a brighter future. The conference, therefore, offers a unique opportunity for participants to assess the capacity of countries to prepare for and deal with future emergencies, and to offer recommendations on how African countries can do a better job in rebuilding their economies and returning to a sustainable development path.

4. Diverse perspectives will be represented at the conference, which will be attended by researchers, policymakers, health professionals, development practitioners, young people and women from Africa and from around the world. The conference will provide a platform for established academics and young researchers to present their solution-oriented research to policymakers and decision-makers. It is expected that at the end of the conference, policy recommendations will be made on strengthening Africa's response to emergencies, enhancing

resilience, expediting recovery from shock, and building back better within the framework of the United Nations decade of action for the Sustainable Development Goals.

II. Context

5. COVID-19 has spread across the world since its presence was first reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019. By 12 June 2020, 418,294 COVID-19-related deaths and 7,420,520 laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 cases had been registered globally, reflecting not only the alarming pace of the spread of the virus, but also its severity. In Africa, the situation has been less acute, with 3,700 deaths and 155,762 confirmed infections in 52 countries as at 12 June 2020.¹ The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020.² With its far-reaching geographical spread, the pandemic is projected to have devastating effects on the global economy, as attested by the projection of the International Monetary Fund in April 2020 that the world economy would contract sharply by 3 percent, and that the economy of of sub-Saharan Africa would contract by 1.6 percent in 2020.³ Furthermore, ECA has projected that, in a worst case scenario, economic activity for Africa as a whole would contract by 2.6 per cent, with negative impacts on the employment rate, and that estimated that four out of five businesses in Africa would be significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ AfDB predicted an economic contraction for the continent of 3.4 per cent.⁵

6. African countries responded to COVID-19 later than countries in other parts of the world owing to the fact that the arrival of the coronavirus on the continent occurred later than it did elsewhere. African countries have implemented a number of containment measures to curb the spread of the virus, including closing schools, restricting domestic and international travel, promoting the use of protective gear and hand hygiene, and imposing curfews and lockdowns.⁶ These measures have affected African economies in various ways and have disrupted air travel, tourism, trade, business operations and global supply chains.

7. Consequently, the containment measures have adversely affected livelihoods and resulted in declines in government revenue and economic growth. Workers in informal sectors have seen their income drop substantially, thereby increasing poverty and deepening inequality. In addition, trade disruptions have limited government access to supplies of personal protective equipment and medical supplies such as test kits, which has set back efforts to track and stem the spread of the virus, protect front-line workers and the general public and reinforce containment measures. The

¹ World Health Organization, (2020). “Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) situation report -144”. Available at https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200612-covid-19-sitrep-144.pdf?sfvrsn=66ff9f4f_2.

² Ibid. “WHO Director General’s opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19”. Available at <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

³ International Monetary Fund (2020). “World economic outlook, April 2020: the Great Lockdown”. Available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>.

⁴ Economic Commission for Africa (2020). “COVID-19 in Africa: protecting lives and economies”. Available at www.uneca.org/publications/covid-19-africa-protecting-lives-and-economies.

⁵ African Development Bank (2020) “African economic outlook 2020 amid COVID-19: supplement”.

⁶ Economic Commission for Africa (2020) “COVID-19: lockdown exit strategies for Africa”. Available at https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/ecarprt_covidexitstrategis_eng_9may.pdf.

pandemic has also exposed capacity limitations and gaps in African countries, such as extremely limited supplies of ventilators and fragile health-care institutions. Moreover, declining export revenue and the need to immediately acquire medical supplies using borrowed funds have heightened the vulnerability of African countries to debt distress.

8. The pandemic has also created a crisis for the continent's already fragile education systems. School closures for extended periods have resulted in lost learning time and the disruption of learning habits. While several African governments have put in place distance-learning systems to ensure continued access to education during primary and secondary school closures, they have paid less attention to the needs of students pursuing vocation training and other forms of higher education. In sub-Saharan Africa, around 89 million young people between 12–24 years of age are out of school; in the next decade, an estimated 40 million more will drop out and face an uncertain future without adequate work and life skills.⁷ If new policies and innovative approaches to education and training are not put in place, the consequences will be increased inequality in access to learning and livelihood opportunities.

9. An ECA survey of COVID-19 responses across the continent underscored some enduring development challenges and structural problems, including the poor state of infrastructure, the unreliable supply and/or high cost of energy, and limited access to water and sanitation.⁸ It also showed that countries struggle with the high cost, unreliability and limited reach of Internet service, along with skewed patterns of trade and industrialization. Furthermore, the survey has revealed that African countries need to industrialize with a view to boosting intra-Africa trade. They also need to exploit the potential role of the fourth industrial revolution to, *inter alia*, innovate, manage and facilitate governance processes. The shock brought on by the pandemic has led to liquidity constraints in a number of African countries. African governments and institutions have called for a stand-still in debt repayments so that funds that would have been used for debt servicing can be redirected to the acquisition of medical supplies and personal protective equipment. The survey exposed the inefficient responses to the crisis by some countries owing to weak governance processes, deep-rooted inequality and a lack of social probity.

10. African countries face a number of challenges in the implementation of measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, including the inability to provide targeted services to the poorest and the most vulnerable owing to a lack of clarity regarding their place of residence. Moreover, in the light of the poor quality of services provided at government-approved isolation centers, many of those experiencing COVID-19 symptoms have chosen not to seek treatment at those centers; that has increased the likelihood of infections spreading among households. Further challenges include poor distribution mechanisms and infrastructure and unreliable access to and insufficient supplies of energy and water. The situation is even more dire for people with disabilities, whose needs have often been forgotten in respect of COVID-19 containment measures, such as social distancing and self-isolation. Little has been done to to maintain the health, safety, dignity and independence of persons with disabilities during the pandemic.

⁷ World Bank (2020). "Youth in sub-Saharan Africa are out of school". Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/publication/out-of-school-youth-in-sub-saharan-africa>.

⁸ Economic Commission for Africa (2020). "COVID-19: lockdown exit strategies for Africa".

11. In cases where governments were able to mobilize financial resources, the procurement and distribution of supplies have been disrupted by systemic corruption, lack of transparency, lack of effective awareness-raising, and uncertainty in distribution of government-supplied relief goods and services.⁹ Moreover, long-standing perceptions regarding corruption on the continent and the lack of transparent economic governance may have limited the willingness of donors to provide financial assistance to African countries in their response to the pandemic. The large informal sector, which dominates the employment market in most African countries, has limited the reach stimulus measures better suited to formal-employment channels. In addition, in informal settlements in urban areas, which house up to 60 percent of the urban population and whose residents are largely unregistered, governments have found it difficult to provide relief services aimed at easing lockdown-induced hardship.¹⁰

12. Remittances have long since become a critical form of financing the balance of payments in African countries, accounting for half of all private capital flows into the continent. Remittances rose from an average of \$38.4 billion for the period 2005–2007 to \$64.9 billion for the period 2014–2016. According to the World Bank, remittance flows to sub-Saharan Africa will fall by 23.1 percent to \$37 billion in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19-related economic crisis.¹¹ The pandemic has also made it more difficult for migrants to remit money to countries in that part of the continent since most payments are still in cash and many money transfer operators have closed during the lockdown. The cost of sending money to recipients in sub-Saharan Africa remains the highest in the world, even though the World Bank recorded a fall in the cost of sending a \$200 remittance to 8.9 per cent in the first quarter of 2020, compared with 9.25 per cent a year earlier. Leveraging financial technology systems and regulatory frameworks to promote competition and eliminate money-laundering will be critical in supporting Africa’s recovery from the pandemic.

13. The socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on African countries has been extensive and is still unfolding. Massive job losses and foregone income for self-employed workers are expected. Underlying inequality in access to resources and technology have amplified the impact of the crisis on certain segments of society, including those living in informal settlements and those in vulnerable employment. It is estimated that the number of people living below the poverty line will rise by 29 million.¹² According to UNDP estimates, 86 per cent of children enrolled in primary school are now effectively out of school in countries with low levels of human development, compared with just 20 percent in countries with very high levels of human development. The

⁹ See, for example, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/ea/Ugandan-officials-arrested-for-inflating-relief-food-prices/4552908-5519676-qxf2y1/index.html>; and <https://www.africanews.com/2020/04/29/uganda-president-criticises-mps-for-coronavirus-payment/>.

¹⁰ United Nations Human Settlements Programme (2020). “COVID-19 response and recovery strategy for sub-Saharan Africa”. Available at https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/04/un-habitat_covid19_response_recovery_strategy_for_africa_version_10_april_2020.pdf.

¹¹ World Bank (2020). “World Bank predicts sharpest decline of remittances in recent history. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/22/world-bank-predicts-sharpest-decline-of-remittances-in-recent-history>.

¹² United Nations (2020). “Policy brief: impact of COVID-19 in Africa”. Available at https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/PublicationFiles/sg_policy_brief_on_covid-19_impact_on_africa_may_2020.pdf.

pandemic will have erased the progress made over the past six years in terms of health, education and income in Africa and across the world.¹³ Promoting greater equity with respect to capacity and access to resources and technology during the recovery phase has the potential to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic and build resilience to future shocks.

III. Objectives

14. The 2020 edition of the African Economic Conference responds to a growing call for action to improve Africa's capacity to respond to, and recover from, emergencies and return to the path of inclusive and sustainable development. The conference is now the leading forum for discussing key issues in Africa.

15. The specific objectives of the conference are as follows:

- To promote knowledge management as an important driver of analysis, with a view to effective policy formulation, dialogue, implementation, monitoring and evaluation;
- To foster dialogue that promotes the exchange of ideas and innovative thinking among researchers, development practitioners and policymakers;
- To encourage and enhance evidence-based research on environmental, socioeconomic and policy issues related to the development of African economies;
- To provide an opportunity for young African researchers, Africans in the diaspora, and organizations to share knowledge with policymakers;
- To reflect on the importance of human capital and skills development for the continent and to build a road map for creating resilient, innovative and foresight-driven education systems;
- To serve as a platform for researchers, policymakers and private sector operators to meet and build consensus on modalities for regional and continental integration as a means of accelerating Africa's inclusive and sustainable development.

16. Since its inception in 2006, the conference has fostered dialogue and the exchange of knowledge on a variety of issues and challenges that Africa has faced. The themes of the conference in previous years have been as follows:

- **2006** - Accelerating Africa's development five years into the twenty-first century
- **2007** - Opportunities and challenges of development for Africa in the global arena
- **2008** - Globalization, institutions and economic development of Africa
- **2009** - Fostering development in an era of financial and economic crises
- **2010** - Setting the agenda for Africa's economic recovery and long-term growth
- **2011** - Green economy and structural transformation in Africa
- **2012** - Fostering inclusive and sustainable development in Africa in an age of global economic uncertainty
- **2013** - Regional integration in Africa
- **2014** - Knowledge and innovation for Africa's transformation

¹³ United Nations Development Programme (2020). "COVID-19 and human development: assessing the crisis, envisioning the recovery". Available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>.

- **2015** - Addressing poverty and inequality in the post-2015 development agenda
- **2016** - Feeding Africa: towards agro-allied industrialization for inclusive growth
- **2017** - Governance for structural transformation
- **2018** - Regional and continental integration for Africa's development
- **2019** - Jobs, entrepreneurship and capacity development for African youth

IV. Format

17. The conference will be based on three pillars, under each of which four sessions will be held in parallel. The three pillars are as follows:

1. Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 - Under this pillar, conference organizers will solicit papers that analyse the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 in African countries, at both macro and micro levels, on various segments of society in diverse country contexts (including fragile, landlocked and/or small island States), in countries with varying levels of income, and in countries with diverse typographies, such as natural resource-dominated economies, net food importers, and tourism-dependent economies. The papers will contribute to the analysis of: the underlying factors that have dampened or exacerbated the impact of the pandemic on African countries; the effects of the pandemic-induced shocks across the social spectrum; and implications for the environment and economic transformation and outcomes.

2. Response to, recovery from, and building back better after COVID-19 - Papers under this pillar will examine how well African countries have responded to the shocks caused by the pandemic, drawing on the lessons learned from the deployment of stimulus packages and the imposition of lockdowns to inform strategies for more effective responses in the future. They will explore the extent to which African countries were prepared for the shocks to their health-care, economic and political governance institutions, with a view to drawing lessons for the future. Papers are also expected to provide options for African countries to build back better, with an emphasis on equality and sustainability, by supporting African research and development, strengthening good governance and promoting economic diversification and inclusion.

3. Acceleration towards inclusive and sustainable development - Papers under this pillar will analyse the innovative strategies that must be adopted by African countries in order to accelerate progress towards the achievement of inclusive and sustainable development. They will analyse how African countries can leverage the innovations and digital space created by the fourth industrial revolution to respond to emergencies and spur inclusive growth. Papers will provide guidance on how economic transformations can be accelerated through strategic investments in health, water, energy, transport, and information and communications technology infrastructure and through investments in effective e-governance. They will also explore how the continent can leverage the African Continental Free Trade Area to rekindle transboundary cooperation in research and development and to develop inclusive value chains and industries (in particular the pharmaceutical industry), while boosting high-value-added intra-African trade and regional markets. They will also explore innovative models for financing high-priority regional projects in Africa.

V. Paper submission guidelines

18. Interested authors must submit their papers both through the website www.uneca.org/aec2020 and by email to aec2020@un.org. Only full papers addressing the theme of the conference will be considered for presentation. We also encourage the submission of policy- and solution-oriented papers that demonstrate strong empirical analysis. The conference shall give priority to solution-oriented papers.

19. Participants and experts submitting papers for the conference must adhere to the key deadline dates indicated in the table below.

Annotated timeline

Description	Deadline date
Deadline for submission of papers	11 September 2020
Notification of final acceptance	26 October 2020
*Participants registration opens	October 2020
Conference dates (if held in Addis Ababa)	8–10 December 2020

*Registration details to be provided shortly.

20. Given that one of the objectives of the conference is to provide young African researchers with opportunities to share their work with a broader audience and expand their networks, young African female and male researchers are especially encouraged to submit papers.

21. All papers will undergo a professional, blind peer review by the co-organizers. Those that are deemed to be of high quality and to make significant contributions to the aims of the conference will be accepted for presentation at the conference and publication in various associated journals.

22. A distinguished panel will assess the papers presented and award one prize to a young author for the best conference paper. The winner will be announced at the closing ceremony.

VI. Expected outputs and outcomes

23. The outputs of the conference are expected to include:

- A conference report
- A compilation of the proceedings of the conference, incorporating relevant comments and feedback from a peer review and from conference participants (may be issued after the conference)
- Inclusion of selected papers in special issues of the *African Development Review* and the *Journal of Africa's Transformation*
- Policy briefs

VII. Sponsorship

24. Participation in the conference is free-no paper submission or registration fees.