

THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK GROUP

"GENERATING AFRICA'S OWN VOICE, OWNED PERSPECTIVE"

THE ROLE OF THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

OPENING STATEMENT BY

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**AT THE AFDB INAUGURAL ANNUAL
ECONOMIC CONFERENCE**

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***Your Excellency the Guest of Honour,
H.E. Slaheddine Jemmali, Secretary of State for Maghrebian, Arab and
African Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Distinguished Panelists, Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,***

1. I am very pleased to welcome you to Tunis, our Temporary Relocation Agency for this inaugural conference. Let me, on behalf of the African Development Bank Group (AfDB) and in my own name, thank you for accepting our invitation.

2. My appreciation too goes to the Governments of the Republic of Korea, Norway and Canada, for their generous financial support that has contributed to making this Conference possible. Equally, our gratitude goes to our partner the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), which has brought on board its vast experience in organising such events, and made its network of experts accessible, renowned men and women in the field of African development. Thank you all distinguished economists for being here. Let me also express my appreciation to Dr. Kasekende, the Chief Economist and his staff, for the careful planning that has gone into this exercise.

3. During the proceedings of the “Blair Commission”, our distinguished colleague, Trevor Manuel, is quoted as saying that “until the lions have spoken the only story to be told, will be that of the hunters”. That is what brings us here today, to bring together Africa’s leading economists, and their colleagues abroad who have made Africa their passion to deliberate on pertinent issues of the day, and provide Africa’s own expertise.

4. We at the African Development Bank are making use of our considerable convening power, but this is your platform. We want to encourage ownership of this event and its by-products. We want the staff of the ADB, think-tanks, universities, research institutes networks,

as well as development centres outside Africa, to consider this Conference as your opportunity, to interact, exchange, scale up our understanding of Africa's challenges and consolidate 'the lion's voice'. Our intention is to make this an annual event, working in close collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa. You may wish to take advantage of your presence here to share ideas on how we can entrench this ownership.

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

5. Since its founding in 1964, the African Development Bank has contributed enormously to mobilizing and deploying resources for the socio-economic development of Africa. It has financed projects and programs across a whole range of sectors – education, health, governance, capacity building, infrastructure, agriculture, and so on. It has progressively stepped up its budget support operations where conditions prevail for this type of support. This year alone, we hope to commit close to 3.2 billion dollars, excluding debt relief operations. Our countries want us to do more, in volume and quality, both in public and private sector interventions. But we cannot of course do everything – nor should we.

We are scaling up our efforts to do more, but selectively; to develop excellence in a few key areas and looking at working closely with partners – some of whom have more resources than ourselves.

Your Excellencies and Friends,

The beginning of this new Millennium has ushered in unprecedented prosperity in the world. Massive expansion of trade, investment and dramatic decline in poverty in some of the major economies of the world.

7. As Africa's premier financial institution, yet a relatively modest development agency – in comparison to other major donor agencies operating in Africa – we are currently challenged, engaged in an internal exercise to determine how best we can decisively canalize the various partners, efforts – and Africa's own – in contributing to enable our continent meaningfully, participate in this growing global economic prosperity. There are no easy answers – no quick fixes but clearly part of our contribution must be to promote a healthier investment climate, reduce the risks and costs of doing business in Africa and investing to unlock those bottlenecks that impede Africa's competitive position, such as infrastructure, skills etc.

But beyond our role as a channel of development financing, there is another critical contribution which our countries desperately need – and that is not resources, but policy advice support on how best to do things, on economic reforms, private sector development; how to best “exercise ownership”.

They want Africa's own Development Bank to provide another perspective; or to use the “jargon” to provide “knowledge”. This is a domain in which our countries, our shareholders, clearly expect the Bank to deliver more.

It is not a domain which has received adequate attention in the past. The vacuum has very much been filled by other partners, but even they have not been satisfied by the muted presence of the African Voice. This is what we – and you – would like to change.

8. Within the last year, through our policy of building a “knowledge-based institution”, we have embarked on an expanded program of creating this capacity at the Bank.

It is to this end that the Board has approved the establishment of the Office of the Chief Economist – under whose auspices this Conference is being held - to serve as a focus - to generate and disseminate the Bank's

intellectual products that help to develop a distinct take on African Development.

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

9. We make no pretence of attempting to be a monopoly on this voice, nor to be the sole depository of this type of capacity in Africa; far from it. We want this to be a shared agenda. The Bank is making use of its rallying potential to provide a forum for you, to exploit the considerable knowledge and lessons it gathers from its operations, its economic and sector analysis to understand Africa better. I must reiterate that the Bank alone is not expected to address all the key development issues, neither will it try to do so. We will work in complementary and integrated ways with your think-tanks and institutions across Africa and elsewhere.

The African Economic Conference must remain a shared endeavour. We will all stand to gain by establishing and consolidating solid research linkages, and dissemination agendas which are reinforcing and improving year after year, both upstream and downstream.

10. The scope and depth of areas we need to address extend over a wide horizon, ranging from macro-economic issues, micro-economic ones, proper management of natural resources, the investment climate, sectoral issues, trade and finance, human development, the role of science and technology, climate change ... to name just a few. It is our capacity to pool our energies and networking opportunities that will offer our thinkers and development practitioners, an opportunity to pool their intellectual capacity; that is what will enable the lions to “tell their story”

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

11. Since the Millennium Summit six years ago, the international community has focused on Africa in an unprecedented way. Many initiatives have been launched in response to Africa's own domestic agenda. What has to be done within Africa by Africans themselves is well known; and the expected support by partners, well argued and articulated. It is the political will for the "big push" that must now be galvanized; and that necessitates calls for an even stronger African voice – but that can only be based on our sound knowledge of Africa, its economies, its politics, its potential, and its promises.

*Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

12. Although this is only the inaugural conference – a first attempt, I am very impressed by the caliber of participants and the quality of the papers.

13. I salute many non African colleagues who are here and who will be making presentations, from partner institutions, universities and research centres. While in the end the ultimate responsibility for the development of Africa rests with us, Africans the challenge of vanquishing poverty – the real human challenge of this Millennium – is a shared endeavour. I want to express my appreciation for committing your time and considerable talent to working on - and speaking for – Africa. Whether it is on Doha and the trade agenda, global warming, learning from Asia, your work is contributing enormously to the African voice; and I want to assure you of our continued partnership.

14. I have often been asked: Why should the AfDB seek to develop its own capacity to generate knowledge on development issues in Africa?

After all, there are other agencies such as the Bretton Woods Institutions, OECD, UNCTAD, doing so already in a capable way. I have always found this quite perplexing! But then I recalled from one of the founding fathers of the Bank, that in 1964, when the idea of creating the AfDB was being seriously explored, some were wondering why we needed a regional bank for Africa when we already had the World Bank. Thankfully, the wisdom of those who believe in strong Regional development banks has prevailed till today. The sister institutions are key partners in bringing in the global perspective and its relevance to Africa. I am certain many of you will now be reading two recent excellent publications from our sister institution; the World Bank, one focusing on the challenges of African growth – or another, “Africa’s Silk Road” by Professor Broadman.

They do a remarkable job in Africa and on African issues, and I am thus very glad to see our colleagues from these institutions here today. Indeed they have always been the first to call for Africa’s own perspective, and indeed supporting us to achieve that outcome. We are Africa’s own development bank; we are supposed to know, and understand more intimately the African condition. We seek no monopoly of thought on Africa development issues. We do not have that pretension, nor is that what Africa wants. Our only aim is to provide African thinkers and development practitioners an opportunity, a platform to provide that perspective, which together with other views from other vantage points, give us a better understanding – a necessary foundation for the “voice”.

Let me conclude by assuring you of the AfDB's, my own and my colleagues' total engagement on this agenda. I look forward to your deliberations.

It is now my pleasure to request H.E. Slaheddine Jemmali, Secretary of State for Cooperation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to solemnly inaugurate our event.

Thank you.