

Statement by Ambassador Bagher Asadi, Chairman of the Group of 77 (Islamic Republic of Iran), at the High-level Segment of the Substantive Session of 2001 of the Economic and Social Council: “The Role of the United Nations system in supporting the efforts of the African countries to achieve sustainable development”

Geneva, 17 July 2001

Mr. President,
Honourable Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour for the Chairman of the Group of 77 to have the opportunity to address the ECOSOC High-level Segment, particularly on such an important topic: the role of the United Nations system in supporting the sustainable development of Africa. We find the report of the Secretary-General for this segment a very good, rich and useful document. We listened with keen interest to his comprehensive and quite perceptive opening statement yesterday. It should augur well for the UN’s future work on Africa. Moreover, what we have already heard since yesterday morning, from yourself, Mr. President, and from heads of the IMF, World Bank and WTO, do not but indicate that there is a good analysis of the African situation, in fact, the African predicament. And I fully agree with the suggestion made yesterday that there is no need to engage in an analytical exercise, much less a competition in analysis. Africa has heard for far too long far too many words – and I grant, as beautiful and even exotic as an African Safari. The reality of the situation faced by so many millions of people and in the bigger part of the continent is grim enough and only calls for real, serious and comprehensive approach, policy and action on a scale and magnitude commensurate with the situation itself.

Let me seize the opportunity right here at the outset to reiterate, on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, our full solidarity with Africa and the African countries, including the LDCs, all of whom without fail belong to our developing family – a quite extended family indeed.

The Group of 77 and China would like to invite Secretary General to take the necessary measures to ensure an effective and coordinated response of the UN system to the New African Initiative, recently adopted by the Organization of the African Unity in its Summit in Lusaka. From our point of view, action in this regard should not be pending upon the evaluation of UN-NADAF, which would not only provide a further opportunity for a comprehensive intergovernmental review of developments in Africa over the past decade but would as well help the adjustment of policies and practices in the light of the lessons learnt. This Initiative, along with MAP and OMEGA Plan, are clear indications of the serious approach of African leaders to the questions related to reform and governance. Equally, they are also reflective of the fact that African countries have recognized their primary responsibility for the development of their own continent and their own countries, and this indeed, a happy, welcome development.

Mr. President,

Much has been said, and written, about conflicts in Africa and their devastating impacts on the overall development of the continent, including in the opening session yesterday. There is hardly any need for any of us here to further attempt to enumerate the causes or the real ingredients in the repertory of tragic local conflicts gripping Africa. It is rather high time for the international community, in its entirety and of course, first and foremost, Africans themselves, to put an effective end to the involvement of foreign companies and governments in fomenting and protracting these deadly conflicts. Beyond such meddling, however, the real long-term culprits remain to be the state of underdevelopment and lack of democracy.

We believe that development is the best contribution to peace. They are simply indivisible. Therefore, achieving development, and in a very practical, tangible sense, economic growth and poverty eradication, should be at the heart of conflict prevention strategies. At the same time, there should be a coordinated and comprehensive approach towards combining peace building, emergency assistance and longer term development support measures, including as pertains to the destruction of weapons and reconstruction of economic, social and physical infrastructure. Creation of United Nations sub-regional offices to assist the UN system in setting integrated policies and strategies is another useful step, also serving to help harmonize activities and lend support to national and sub-regional peace building efforts as well as to support sub-regional integration. In this particular connection, the Group of 77 and China support the Secretary-General's proposal for the establishment by the General Assembly of an ad-hoc advisory group on countries emerging from conflict, with a view to assessing their humanitarian and economic needs and elaborating a long term programme of support for implementation that begins with integration of relief into development.

Mr. President,

Let me now turn to development. It is here that we should look for the savior angel, the one that we all call on to exterminate the evil of underdevelopment and the long catalogue of associated and attendant ills. Looking at Africa and judging from various indices one cannot but arrive at the rather inevitable conclusion that despite a large number of wide ranging efforts and initiatives of the past the overall economic and development situation of the continent as a whole and most of its member countries are disquieting, to say the least. These efforts and initiatives have simply failed to deliver. Figures on Africa's share of the world trade and foreign direct investment (FDI), meager average annual rate of growth of GDP and sustained rates of growth of various African economies, rise in the level of poverty across the continent, and low levels of savings and investment, to mention only a few, speak for themselves and for the saddening state of general, and yet, perpetuating underdevelopment. Worse still, due to lack of investment, transport infrastructure in Africa has seriously deteriorated in the past 20 years, thereby seriously hampering international competitiveness. Many African countries remain dependent on the export of raw materials for their export income. And it is most unfortunate that their terms of trade has suffered substantially during the past two decades. Added to this, the HIV/AIDS pandemic is taking a catastrophic toll on many African societies, paralyzing their economies and ruining their social fabric.

Official Development Assistance (ODA) has, much to our chagrin, shrunk to historically low levels, representing less than one-third of internationally agreed targets. Do we need to emphasize the imperative of increase in the ODA, which, of course, needs to be combined with a set of other policy measures.

Meaningful progress towards sustaining development in Africa would require, among others, writing off the unsustainable debt of African countries, both to bilateral and multilateral donors. Reaching the target of reducing poverty in half by 2015 would require a growth rate, on average, of 7-8 percent per annum in Africa. Given the inadequacy of domestic savings in the short and medium term, achieving this rather high rate of growth calls for a number of measures towards mobilizing the external resources.

With the Special Session of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS already behind us, all of us in the international community should be acutely, if not ruefully, aware that only much more substantial collective effort, including a global response in the order of several billion dollars a year, is needed for effective prevention, care and impact mitigation of the deadly pandemic. Now that there is growing awareness of the tragedy and its ruinous impact, what is badly needed is real, genuine political commitment and commensurate provision of the requisite funds and programmatic response to the pandemic.

In the area of trade, African countries, like many other developing countries, continue to grapple with the implementation issues in the context of the commitments undertaken during the Uruguay Round and continue to face a host of measures limiting their access to developed markets. Without prejudice to what is required in

this area for developing countries in general, let me just focus here on the African situation. There is a need for a review of current agreements and practices with a view to assessing their impact on African development and also as regards broadening and extending the existing provisions for special and differential treatment and to translate them into explicit obligations. There is also need for a genuine improvement in market access for agricultural products and in the implementation of the Agreement on Agriculture, including in meeting core development concerns such as food security, poverty eradication and rural development, as well as the implementation of special measures in favour of LDCs and net food importing countries. Improved market access facilities should be supported and supplemented by specific capacity building programmes to help these countries to diversify their exports and improve competitiveness.

As for diversification of African economies, much will depend on the capacity of Africa to eventually compete in international markets, both in processed agricultural goods and manufactures. Better access to markets will of course help in this process but there is a fundamental need for investment in the productive capacity of the African countries. In this connection, investment in human and physical infrastructure will bring along with it the required private capital flows, both domestic and foreign, in order to improve such capacity and to help Africa integrate beneficially into the world trading system.

As far as environment is concerned, we recognize the importance of addressing in an interrelated and mutually supportive manner the three dimensions of sustainable development. Along this line, the Group of G77 and China strongly call for strengthened measures by and enhanced assistance to the African countries in their fight against land degradation, drought and desertification and by multilateral and bilateral donors and through public and private partnership.

The Group of 77 and China also calls for strengthening of South-South and triangular cooperation across the continent. This is an important area with huge potentials for expansion. For these potentials to be realized, however, such cooperation needs to be supported. To this end, African countries should be provided with technical assistance in areas such as information and communications technologies (ICT), education, professional training, health and capacity building.

Mr. President,

Coming to the end of the statement, let me turn to the bigger picture again. What Africa needs at this very critical juncture in the midst of this still unfolding globalization process and all its attendant tumult and uncertainty is a renaissance. The African renaissance, the rebirth we all have been talking about in recent months and these days, cannot but be initiated and undertaken in all earnestness by African themselves, by African countries, individually and collectively. And there is, of course, a role for others, the rest of the international community, inclusive of the United Nations system. As far as the UN system is concerned, it should undertake to integrate all its various plans, programmes and initiatives into a comprehensive policy framework, comprising of all political, economic and social components, and with clear, well-defined roles and mandates for the relevant executing agencies and departments.

Yes, there is a way forward for Africa. Let us all seize the moment and the opportunity and start trekking along that road forward. Here and now, with hindsight, we should fare better than previous gatherings, even as recent as in mid-May in Brussels.

Thank you very much, Mr. President.