

Leapfrogging to innovation in Africa requires leadership, persistence

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia - Innovation is key to supporting Africa's transformation, said Vera Songwe, Economic Commission for Africa's (ECA) executive secretary in Dakar, Senegal. Trade, ICT and climate smart industrialisation, she said, were a few areas that represent Africa's efforts to leapfrog through innovation.



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Investment in innovation is critical if Africa's new industries, especially in the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector, are to play a crucial role in promoting the continent's structural transformation, said Vera Songwe, who was speaking at the 3rd Investing in Africa Forum (IAF), also known as the China-Africa Forum.

Speaking on the theme of the Forum, *Africa Leapfrogging through Innovation*, Songwe said Africa is already leapfrogging in many areas, but noted that this required leadership and persistence.

Trade, ICT and climate smart industrialisation, she said, were a few areas that represent Africa's efforts to leapfrog through innovation. The ECA, she added, is providing assistance through various ways, in particular the formulation of supportive policies to create adequate legal frameworks, as well as capacity building.

"Leapfrogging requires leadership and persistence. Today, we all cite Rwanda and how innovation is driving the country towards a great future but the ECA began working with Rwanda in 1998 to develop its first ICT for development strategy. It

did not happen in a day. It took leadership.”

She highlighted the Continental Free Trade Area (CFTA) agreement which seeks to create a single continental market for goods and services, promote free movement of business persons and investments and expand intra-African trade, and said Africa was creating a governance system around markets which should allow for more and better trade.

“The CFTA provides an opportunity to advance the continent’s agenda through discussing agreements on services and ICT as well as issues of copyright,” she said, and added that ECA will continue to support African countries to enact policies that support innovation and growth on the continent, as well as data that enables evidence-based research.

'Path to emergence'

Referencing the analysis in the ECA’s 2016 edition of the Economic Report on Africa, whose theme was *Greening Africa’s Industrialization*, she called on African countries to continue to leapfrog the business-as-usual carbon-intensive methods of growth and pursue pathways to green industrialisation.

“In this report, we look at the benefits of climate smart industrialisation and we assure member states that industrialisation and energy efficiency, as well as water efficiency are not in competition. Africa can industrialise while improving its climate indicators.” She urged.

For his part, President Macky Sall of Senegal touched on his country’s new development model to accelerate progress towards its emergence. He noted that on the “path to emergence”, African countries should transform productive systems, bearing in mind the need for sustainability.

He said that the process of transformation involves innovation and a shift that reflects a real willingness to break with established ideas, practices and habits. In short, he stressed that, “it is a question of breaking away from business as usual, as our English-speaking friends would say.”

Sall also called on public authorities to be the first to support innovation as they seek to serve the public in a better way, adding this would “inspire confidence in citizens and partners alike”.

“If we want to achieve progress through innovation, we must adopt a new way of thinking,” he underscored, stressing, policies to support innovation should be sound, stable, transparent and predictable.

The Investing in Africa Forum (IAF) was established in 2015 as a global platform for multilateral cooperation and promoting opportunities to increase investment in Africa.

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