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Economic Commission for Africa
Eighth African Science, Technology and Innovation Forum

Addis Ababa (hybrid), 26 and 27 April 2026

Concept note

I. Background and mandate

1. The African Science, Technology, and Innovation Forum was established pursuant to resolution 961 (LI), of 15 May 2018, of the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, in which the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), in collaboration with the African Union Commission and other partners, was called upon to take all steps necessary to organize on a regular basis a multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation as an input into the work of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development.

2. In response to that call, the African Science, Technology and Innovation Forum was first convened in 2019 to serve as an important regional consultative platform for sharing knowledge, exchanging national, regional and international experiences and best practices, building partnerships and launching transformative and innovative initiatives and programmes. The main outputs of the Forum inform the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, as well as the collaborative multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals established pursuant to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.[1]

3. Since 2019, the forum has evolved into a major annual event that ensures science and technology are central to the continent's development policies and strategies. The forum was held first in Morocco, then annually in Zimbabwe, the Congo, Rwanda, the Niger, Ethiopia and Uganda, in that order.

4. In 2026 the Forum will be organized by ECA, in collaboration with several organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the African Union and the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation of the Government of South Africa. Additional contributions will be made by the African Materials Research Society, the Technology Bank for the Least Developed Countries, the African Biomedical Engineering Consortium, the European Union and the host country, Ethiopia. Participants in the eighth Forum will address critical aspects of science, technology and innovation performance and explore the ways in which those three tools can catalyse the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goals 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17, which are the areas of focus of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in 2026.

5. Although emphasis may be concentrated on the overall objectives of the Goals, there are specific targets for several of the five selected Goals being reviewed in 2026 to which science, technology and innovation are central. For example, Goal 6, target 6.a, concerns expanded capacity-building for water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies; Goal 7, target 7.a, is focused on enhanced international cooperation to facilitate access to clean energy research and technology; and several targets under Goal 9 relate to enhancements in research and technology infrastructure. Across all

[1] General Assembly resolution 70/1.

17 Goals, there is a recognition that countries must build their scientific, technological and industrial capacity in order to develop, gain access to and apply technologies in their efforts to fulfil their development aspirations.

6. The African Science, Technology and Innovation Forum therefore is a space in which States and their partners can assess their performance in enhancing collaboration and international partnerships; build capacity to develop and harness technologies to meet development aspirations; and share experiences of frontier and emerging technologies and innovations. The Forum provides an opportunity for showcasing emerging trends in technology and innovation, encouraging technical and entrepreneurial skills among African young people and forging long-lasting partnerships. Accordingly, a youth innovation boot camp and an innovation competition have been organized as part of the Forum. The boot camp is intended to attract young people from across the continent and beyond to collaborate on the design and development of innovative solutions and to learn about new and transformative technologies, such as rapid prototyping and additive manufacturing, genomics, robotics, artificial intelligence and nanotechnology, as well as entrepreneurial concepts, competencies and practices.

II. Science, technology and innovation and the Sustainable Development Goals

7. Targeted applications of science, technology and innovation in Africa are driving progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through scalable models: for example, a national drone delivery system in Rwanda has revolutionized medical logistics; a majority of new off-grid solar connections have been made possible in Kenya thanks to the integration of mobile money; a massive solar complex is boosting the potential for renewable electricity and green hydrogen production in Morocco; and the Earth observation capabilities of the African Space Agency are enhancing climate and resource management across the continent.

8. Through centres of excellence in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and science, technology, engineering and mathematics education, and by supporting national digital identity programmes and smart agriculture, ECA is playing a crucial role in helping its members to harness science, technology and innovation in order to drive digital transformation and advance the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union. Furthermore, ECA helps its members to foster innovation, including through the Origin Research and Innovation Labs, in which academic patents are commercialized, and the Alliance for Entrepreneurial Universities in Africa, the aim of which is to reform higher education, with a view to cultivating entrepreneurs and supporting the creation of 1 million start-ups.

9. In addition, ECA organizes the African Science, Technology and Innovation Forum and other events on associated themes. Participants in the eighth Forum will undertake an in-depth review of the Sustainable Development Goals that are the focus of the high-level political forum on sustainable development in 2026 and the corresponding goals of Agenda 2063.

10. Significant disparities persist in Africa in the achievement of Goal 6, on ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all. Despite the continent's vast natural water reserves, official estimates indicate that over 400 million people lack access to basic drinking water, and more than 700 million remain without safely managed sanitation.[2] Addressing the deficit requires a strategic expansion of innovation and technical capacity. Specifically, advancements in purification, storage, wastewater reclamation and desalination are critical to securing long-term water efficiency and security. Some countries in the region, in particular in North Africa, however, have made significant progress. Rwanda is a leader in integrated water resources management: between 2017 and 2023 it nearly doubled its implementation rate from 35 to 68 per cent and established robust transboundary cooperation frameworks for its rivers, lakes and aquifers to safeguard them against environmental degradation and erosion.[3] Ghana has made substantial progress, with 87.7 per cent of its

[2] African Union, "ECOSOCC to hold pre-summit on the 2026 AU theme of the year", 5 February 2026 Available at https://ecosocc.au.int/en/news/updates/2026-02-05/pre-summit-2026-au-theme-year.

[3] United Nations, "Rwanda", SDG 6 Country Acceleration Case Study (2025).

population having access to basic water supply services by 2021.[4] By 2025, some 70 per cent of the population of Zambia had access to improved water sources.[5]

11. Progress on Goal 7, on ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all, remains a challenge in Africa, where nearly 600 million people live without power,[6] and those who have access to electricity face many hours of power outages and high electricity bills. With 60 per cent of the world's best solar resources,[7] Africa could overcome traditional hurdles of centralized power supply by transitioning towards a renewable-first model. The massive green hydrogen projects in Namibia and a revolutionary shift toward solar mini-grids promise to bring clean energy to low-income rural households and isolated communities that are currently too expensive to connect to national grids. Significant investment in renewable energy research, development and deployment continues to be required in order to bring clean energy to all.

12. There has been mixed progress in Africa in relation to Goal 9, on building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialization and fostering innovation, with significant achievements in connectivity but major lags in manufacturing and the implementation of research and development. As a share of gross domestic product, expenditure on research and development remains far below 1 per cent in most African countries, the African Union target, and below the global average of 2.2 per cent.[8] Regarding industrial development, the share of high-tech manufacturing value added in sub-Saharan Africa was only 16.40 per cent in 2022.[9] Special economic zones and innovation hubs, which are rapidly growing across the continent and are attracting high-technology firms in such fields as aerospace, automotives, and green and digital technologies, could, however, drive research and development and the acquisition of technology.

13. In relation to Goal 11, on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, Africa is the fastest-urbanizing continent, with significant growth in health, education, transport and digital technology infrastructure that is making the region's cities safe, competitive and liveable. Some 53.6 per cent of the urban population in sub-Saharan Africa, however, lives in informal settlements with inadequate housing and poor basic services.[10] Technology can help to improve the lives and livelihoods of informal settlers. For instance, the Digital Transport for Africa initiative[11] is aimed at revolutionizing public transport in African cities using open data and digital innovation. In addition, technology can be used to assist environmental efforts, with artificial intelligence and satellite imagery being used to scale up profitable reforestation programmes. A digital tree-tracking project in Sierra Leone[12] and the development of green corridors in South Africa, among other examples, demonstrate the power of digitalization in protecting biodiversity and empowering local communities.

14. There has been uneven progress in Africa towards attaining Goal 17, on strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. Although research and development collaborations between Africa and the rest of the world remain far higher than those within the continent, the region's share of international research collaborations and industrial alliances remains very low. The operationalization of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area, in particular its protocols on digital trade and intellectual property rights, could help to drive partnerships and foster research collaborations among African States.

[4] Sanitation and Water for All, "Ghana: country overview", paper prepared for the sector ministers' meeting, Jakarta, May 2022. Available at www.sanitationandwaterforall.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/2022%20Country%20Overview_Ghana.pdf

[5] Zambia, Ministry of Water Development and Sanitation, "Input for UN Water Conference 2026 interactive dialogues (contributing to Africa's common position on water and sanitation)" (Lusaka, 2025).

[6] International Energy Agency, *Africa Energy Outlook 2022: World Energy Outlook Special Report,* revised ed (Paris, 2023).

[7] Ibid.

[8] United Nations, Economic Commission for Africa, "Towards achieving the African Union's recommendation of expenditure of 1% of GDP on research and development", Policy Brief, No. ECA/18/004 (Addis Ababa, 2018).

[9] See A/80/81-E/2025/62, para. 91.

[10] United Nations Human Settlements Programme, "United Nations Habitat Assembly adopts strategic plan 2026–2029 to advance adequate housing for all", 30 May 2025.

[11] See https://digitaltransport4africa.org/.

[12] See https://earthshotprize.org/winners-finalists/freetown-the-treetown/.

III. Theme

15. The theme of the eighth Forum will be “Achieving progress towards the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 through transformative and coordinated actions in science, technology and digital innovation”. The theme complements the theme of the twelfth session of the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, “Turning the tide: transformative and coordinated actions for the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063”.

IV. Objective

16. The overall objective of the eighth Forum is to conduct the regional follow-up, including a review of progress made on Sustainable Development Goals 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17 and in relation to actions agreed in previous forums, in order to identify potential mechanisms and measures that countries can deploy to scale up action, facilitate peer learning and advance transformative solutions to accelerate achievement of all Sustainable Development Goals and the aspirations and goals of Agenda 2063. Participants will be expected:

(a) To conduct a regional follow-up to, and review of, the implementation of the key messages and recommended measures that were agreed upon at the previous Forum;

(b) To share experiences, approaches, good practices and lessons learned, in order to accelerate implementation of the two agendas;

(c) To identify technological opportunities, gaps and challenges, and institutional voids, with a view to driving innovation and development;

(d) To identify realistic mechanisms for collaboration and strengthen regional and international partnerships and investments in science, technology and innovation, in order to accelerate implementation of the two agendas.

V. Format

17. The eighth Forum will comprise the following activities:

(a) At least two high-level panels and two round-table discussions, involving senior government officials, representatives of the United Nations, private sector leaders, university vice-chancellors and research directors, and members of the technology sector, focused on broad and cross-cutting issues and strategic topics, including opportunities and transformative levers, partnerships and actions for advancing the Goals under review by the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development;

(b) At least five panel sessions addressing each of the Goals under review, in order to assess the contribution of science, technology and innovation to, and the actions needed to amplify their impact on, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063;

(c) Showcase events to demonstrate technologies and innovations developed by leading firms, research and development institutions, start-ups, innovation hubs and other entities;

(d) Special sessions and events organized by ECA and partners that are intended to inform the Forum.

VI. Expected outputs

18. The eighth Forum is expected to generate the following outputs:

(a) Report of the eighth Forum to inform the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development and the multi-stakeholder forum on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals;

(b) Outcome documents from the special sessions and events;

(c) General guidance on special initiatives and their growth, such as the Origin Research and Innovation Labs and the Alliance for Entrepreneurial Universities in Africa.

VII. Expected outcomes

19. The eighth Forum is specifically designed to foster the diffusion of technology and innovation and the scaling-up of policy and operational efforts needed to accelerate the contribution of science, technology and innovation to the fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda. In particular, the following will be the main tangible and intangible outcomes of the Forum:

(a) Establishment of collaborative arrangements and partnerships among African universities and their partners inside and outside Africa;

(b) Platforms for the exchange among public and private partners of information on research, funding, innovations and institutions to accelerate technology transfer;

(c) Opportunities to showcase high-impact technologies, innovators, firms, and research and development institutions that are making significant contributions to development.

VIII. Participants

20. The meeting will be attended by representatives of African States Members of the United Nations, the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank, regional economic communities, civil society, business and industry organizations, academic and research institutions, entities of the United Nations system and other international stakeholders.

IX. Working languages

21. The Forum will be conducted in English and French, with simultaneous interpretation in both languages.

X. Dates and venue

22. The eighth Forum will be held at the United Nations Conference Centre in Addis Ababa on 26 and 27 April 2026.

XI. Contacts

23. For further information, please contact Afework Temtime, Economic Affairs Officer, and Asfaw Yitna, Research Assistant, in the Technology, Innovation, Connectivity and Infrastructure Development Division of ECA, at temtimea@un.org and yitna@un.org, respectively.