



AFRICA
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| 16 - 17 FEBRUARY 2026 |

FINANCING THE FUTURE OF AFRICA
Jobs and Innovation for sustainable
transformation



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CONCEPT NOTE



United Nations
Economic Commission for Africa

I. Executive summary

Africa is at a critical economic juncture. It has the youngest and most enterprising population in the world and the future of the continent depends on converting this demographic advantage into productive capital. However, this transition from potential to prosperity is hindered by fragmented financing, structural bottlenecks and unequal access to opportunities. The youth economy of Africa represents the largest unexplored investment frontier in the world. It is a dynamic market of talent, innovation and creativity that could redefine global growth in the twenty-first century if effectively financed.

The ninth Africa Business Forum will be repositioned as the leading platform on the continent for mobilizing partnerships, investments and blended finance to accelerate the youth economy. Under the theme, “Financing the future of Africa: jobs and innovation for sustainable transformation”, the 2026 Forum will be used to spotlight the continent’s capacity to move from capital to impact by driving investments and partnerships that create jobs, foster innovation and unlock creative potential. This repositioning addresses four core constraints: fragmented initiatives without a shared coordination platform; insufficient and poorly channelled capital for youth- and women-led enterprises; inadequate accountability and transparency in tracking commitments; and limited pathways for scaling successful programmes across countries and value chains.

The Africa Business Forum is an essential part of the integrated delivery architecture of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). Its target is to mobilize capital and partnerships in concert with the Conference of African Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, the Africa Development Impact Forum and the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development. Through these four platforms, a continuous policy-to-impact cycle is established to transform the continent’s youth and innovation agenda into measurable results.

At the heart of this reimagined Forum will be a **jobs wall commitment tracker**, a flagship mechanism to ensure visibility and accountability, through which public and private commitments announced at the 2026 Forum can be showcased, tracked and periodically updated, linking financial and partnership pledges to jobs, enterprise growth and related outcomes. The jobs wall will function as a transparent mechanism for monitoring delivery, promoting peer learning and credibility, and supporting sustained follow-up after the Forum, including through an ECA delivery dashboard and the implementation clock of the Africa Development Impact Forum.

During Africa Business Forum 2026, discussions will be anchored around measurable commitments and transparent reporting through the jobs wall. High-level dialogue will thus lead to concrete action, follow-up and delivery.

As one of the featured partner moments during the Forum, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development will release the Least Developed Countries Report 2025. The report is positioned to strengthen evidence, partnerships and practical support for enterprise growth, innovation and job creation.

For development finance institutions, corporate entities, foundations and Governments, the Africa Business Forum provides high-level visibility, access to curated investment pipelines, opportunities to showcase enterprises, and a clear accountability mechanism through the jobs wall and ECA follow-up processes.

II. Background and rationale

Africa is at a decisive moment in its growth trajectory. The continent is home to the youngest and most enterprising population in the world, with over 12 million young people entering the labour market every year. However, only a fraction of these young people can find decent work. This structural gap could lead to greater inequality and the erosion of confidence in public institutions. At the same time, the youth economy of Africa represents the single largest global opportunity for investment, markets and productivity gains. The youth economy is not only a social challenge; it is also an investable asset class.

Throughout the continent, young Africans are starting businesses at unprecedented rates, driving innovation in technology, digital trade, creative industries, renewable energy, agribusiness and services. Unfortunately, such ventures operate in a fragmented terrain: financing instruments are dispersed, infrastructure gaps persist, and many youth-led enterprises continue to operate informally, without consistent access to capital, digital tools, markets and practical risk-management options. As a result of this gap between energy and opportunity, entrepreneurial potential in Africa is undercapitalized and limited in scale.

At the same time, the continent's creative and digital economies are emerging as transformative frontiers. Through ventures in film, music, fashion, sports, the arts and social commerce, millions of jobs and global influence are being generated. Digital entrepreneurs use such platforms as TikTok, YouTube and Instagram as their primary marketplace. However, they remain outside tradi-

tional financing, taxation and protection systems. Recognizing these sectors as high-growth, exportable economic engines is critical to scaling job creation, diversifying economies and positioning Africa along global value chains.

Africa is still beset by major structural constraints, including a persistent annual infrastructure financing gap, limited domestic capital mobilization, low value addition in major sectors and insufficient mechanisms for translating commitments into results. While there are multiple youth and innovation funds managed by development finance institutions, Governments, corporate entities and foundations, the landscape is fragmented, duplicative and poorly coordinated. Africa has no shortage of initiatives. What it lacks are coherence, accountability and mechanisms through which capital can be aligned with delivery.

This is the gap that the Africa Business Forum is designed to fill.

Africa Business Forum 2026 will be moved beyond dialogue to function as the financing and partnership pillar of the integrated delivery architecture of ECA. In collaboration with the Conference of Ministers (policy direction), the Africa Development Impact Forum (implementation and accountability) and the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want, of the African Union), the Africa Business Forum will provide a framework to transform commitments into measurable results.

Africa Business Forum 2026 will be focused on financing the future of Africa through jobs and innovation for sustainable transformation. This focus reflects an urgent continental need for a platform that mobilizes capital at scale; connects Governments, development finance institutions, investors and innovators; and embodies the necessary accountability to ensure that commitments are translated into jobs, enterprise growth and measurable outcomes.

With the introduction of the jobs wall commitment tracker as a prototype and the convening of partners around measurable commitments, the Forum will serve as an opportunity to begin establishing the architecture required to move from capital to impact at scale and with transparency.

III. ECA delivery cycle: positioning Africa Business Forum 2026

Africa Business Forum 2026 will serve as the financing and partnership pillar within the integrated delivery cycle of ECA, as follows:

- The Conference of Ministers will determine the high-level policy agenda and reforms.
- The Africa Business Forum will mobilize the capital, partnerships and instruments aligned with that agenda.
- The Africa Development Impact Forum will support implementation, track delivery and manage the implementation clock for principal commitments.
- The Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development will review progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and the goals of Agenda 2063, on the basis of evidence generated from the Africa Business Forum and the Africa Development Impact Forum.

Through this cycle, the convening power of ECA will be transformed into an operating system that finances the youth and innovation economy of Africa. The ninth Africa Business Forum is therefore strategically different from previous forums in three ways:

1. It is delivery-focused, with success being measured by capital mobilized, jobs supported and partnerships sustained, rather than by declarations alone;
2. It is architecture-based and is anchored in the jobs wall commitment tracker and an integrated follow-up cycle with the Conference of Ministers, the Africa Development Impact Forum and the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, for greater transparency, peer learning and sustained delivery;
3. It is continuous, with periodic partner status updates and reporting milestones that connect one Africa Business Forum to the next.

IV. Jobs wall commitment tracker

This is the flagship delivery and accountability mechanism of the ninth Africa Business Forum. It is designed to achieve the following aims:

- Publicize the commitments made by Governments, development finance institutions, global asset managers, corporate entities and foundations to youth employment, enterprise financing and innovation support
- Structure those commitments according to the thematic priorities of the ninth Africa Business Forum (jobs at scale, innovation economy and creative capital) and, where relevant, according to sector or value chain and partner type
- Track progress on delivery through periodic updates and an annual Africa Business Forum delivery and jobs wall scorecard

ECA will host and coordinate the tracker as part of the broader delivery system of the Africa Business Forum. The mechanism will not be used to enforce delivery or manage funds. Rather, it is intended to provide shared transparency, learning and peer benchmarking, while partners retain responsibility for implementation.

The jobs wall will be updated regularly, with progress recorded through concise indicators such as the following:

- Volume of capital mobilized and disbursed
- Number and type of enterprises supported
- Jobs created or sustained, in particular for young people and women
- Innovations that expand inclusion, manage risk and strengthen enterprise competitiveness

Through the Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division of ECA and the Africa Development Impact Forum, the jobs wall will be linked to an implementation clock, thereby ensuring follow up on major commitments announced at the Forum through a structured cycle of review, adjustment and learning.

V. Programme design and format (main features)

In 2026, the Africa Business Forum will be organized as a concise, high-impact programme designed to translate the theme into measurable commitments, deal-oriented partnerships and sustained follow-up.

Opening plenary. The opening plenary will include welcoming remarks, high-level keynote addresses and a presentation of the theme, “Financing the future of Africa: jobs and innovation for Africa’s transformation”.

“What works” at the centre of Africa Business Forum 2026. The Forum is structured to focus extensively on case studies and success stories. Each major segment will be anchored by brief “What works” spotlights by members of ECA, development finance institutions and entrepreneurs. These segments, each of which will be seven minutes long (a two-minute video, followed by five minutes for remarks), will be used to showcase practical examples of policies, partnerships and business models that have created jobs and improved competitiveness and that can be adapted and replicated across countries and subregions.

Presidential dialogues. Two high-level dialogues will be organized, pairing Heads of State with (i) youth entrepreneurs and innovators; and (ii) development finance institutions and private-sector leaders. The focus will be on scalability, factors that unlock investment and the process through which capital translates into job creation.

The following three thematic roundtables will be organized:

1. Creating jobs at scale: aligning philanthropy, enterprise growth and market expansion in Africa;
2. Financing the innovation economy of Africa through financial technology, agricultural technology, health technology and industrial technology;
3. Afrofuturism: scaling African creativity through investment, partnerships and inclusive markets.

Jobs wall announcement. The major commitments will be publicly presented and the Africa Business Forum delivery and jobs wall scorecard will be introduced.

Closing plenary. There will be a presentation of the main outcomes, headline jobs wall commitments and the next steps for follow-up reporting and delivery under the implementation clock of the jobs wall and the Africa Development Impact Forum.

Additional events such as fireside chats, case highlights and exhibitions will be used selectively to deepen engagement without overloading the programme.

VI. Governance and delivery

Africa Business Forum 2026 will be implemented through a lean but robust governance arrangement as follows:

1. The Gender, Poverty and Social Policy Division of ECA will coordinate the jobs wall, data standards and reporting. It will also ensure their alignment with the broader delivery cycle and inclusion priorities of ECA;
2. An interdivisional task team within ECA will ensure coherence across workstreams in economic and social areas and in subregional offices. The task team will align the Africa Business Forum with the Conference of Ministers, the Africa Development Impact Forum and the Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development;
3. A multi-stakeholder steering group comprising representatives of development finance institutions, private sector partners, foundations and youth networks will provide strategic guidance, validate progress reports and help to shape subsequent cycles of engagement;
4. National and regional focal points will work through the subregional offices of ECA and country mechanisms to support the deployment of follow-up and reporting of jobs wall commitments at the local level and their alignment with national development plans and investment strategies, and engagement with enterprise and innovation ecosystems.

VII. Partner value proposition and expected outcomes

a. Partner value proposition

The ninth Africa Business Forum will provide partners with a strategic platform to shape and showcase their commitments to jobs, innovation and creative capital. These commitments will be backed by a clear delivery and accountability mechanism through the jobs wall and the ECA integrated follow-up cycle (Conference of Ministers > Africa Business Forum > Africa Development Impact Forum > Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development). For development finance institutions, corporate entities, Governments and foundations, the Forum offers the following:

- A high-level platform to announce and shape strategic commitments on youth employment, innovation and creative capital
- Access to curated investment and project pipelines that are aligned with national and continental frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda, Agenda 2063 and the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area
- A delivery and accountability mechanism through the jobs wall and ECA follow-up processes through which visibility, learning and sustained post-Forum reporting will be embedded into every commitment
- Enhanced reporting on environmental, social and governance factors and the Sustainable Development Goals through standardized indicators and the public tracking of results
- An opportunity to develop practical partnerships, curated pipelines and cross-border market linkages through which the continent's young people and the innovation economy can be positioned as a competitive investment frontier

b. Expected outcomes (high level)

The ninth Africa Business Forum is expected to deliver the following:

- Strengthened coordination and coherence in youth-focused financing and investment through the alignment of priorities, pipelines and commitments under the Africa Business Forum and subsequent follow-up by the Conference of Ministers and the Africa Development Impact Forum
- Increased capital mobilization and investment commitments for youth employment and enterprise development, documented and followed up through the jobs wall commitment tracker
- Enhanced visibility and accountability, including an initial Africa Business Forum delivery and jobs wall scorecard to track headline commitments and early implementation
- Policy innovation and institutional learning, synthesized in a concise compendium of policy outcomes
- Stronger public-private partnerships linking development finance institutions, institutional investors, technology platforms, creative industries and youth enterprises

All outcomes will be aligned with the 2030 Agenda, Agenda 2063, the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area and broader global financing discussions. Over time, the Africa Business Forum will evolve into a long-term platform for delivery, through which Africa makes the transition from potential to prosperity through coordinated financing, innovation and measurable impact on youth-led businesses.



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