

2016 African Transformation Forum In Review



Consensus Paper

Forum highlights and key points of consensus



Participants Embrace 'Unity of Purpose'

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The inaugural African Transformation Forum, jointly organized by the African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET) and the Government of Rwanda, convened March 14-15, 2016, at the Serena Hotel in Kigali, drawing 270 participants from around the world, a diverse group of development leaders unified in their eagerness to accelerate Africa's economic transformation. The forum concluded with the official launch of the Coalition for Transformation in Africa – a broad network of experts that will join forces and work across sectors to drive policy and institutional reforms in support of transformation strategies.

"The ideas are there, and we've come up with the visions," said Claver Gatete, Rwanda's Minister of Finance and Development Planning, during the introduction of the Coalition at the forum's closing session. Now, he added, it's time "to take them forward, to learn from them, and to learn from the experience" of other countries.

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Rwanda President Paul Kagame, a passionate advocate of African transformation, set the stage earlier in the day with an inspirational message of working together to improve the lives of citizens and reform policy for sustainable development. Drawing on Rwanda's remarkable two-decade turnaround, Kagame said the key challenge to successful transformation "is not technical; it is political and social, because it's about people. It's about developing a mind-set of urgency, ownership, responsibility, and service, as well as, quite frankly, money-making and long-term investing."

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Kagame said the launching of the Coalition for the Transformation in Africa promised to be an innovative and promising outcome of the gathering. "No institution or individual has all the resources or answers," he said. "The right strategy is to use our limited means to send clear signals to the market and to partners about how best to allocate and utilize these resources. Working together, with an understanding of the strategic environment, we can speed up progress."

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A Broad Mix of Experts and Knowledge

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The 2016 African Transformation Forum attracted a broad mix of public and private sector officials representing almost three dozen countries across four continents – Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Among African attendees, 20 countries were represented. Participants hailed from every major transformation stakeholder group: government leaders, national policymakers, business executives, entrepreneurs, and civil society, as well as international development organizations, global foundations, and leading African institutions.

In addition to top government officials and ministers from Rwanda and other countries, the forum featured a diverse array of influential African experts, including Carlos Lopes, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa; Makhtar Diop, Vice President for Africa at the World Bank; Antoinette Sayeh, Africa Department Director of the IMF; Ibrahim Mayaki, CEO of the New Partnership for Africa's Development; and Emmanuel Nnadozie, Executive Director, African Capacity Foundation.

K.Y. Amoako, ACET's founder and president, joined Claver Gatete and Carlos Lopes in opening the forum by describing the "remarkable consensus, both within and outside Africa, that economic transformation holds the key to sustained growth and prosperity." Transformation is now endorsed by the African Union, African Development Bank, Economic Commission for Africa, and African Heads of State and Government as the continent's leading development paradigm.

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Lopes, Gatete, and Amoako all emphasized that transformation could not take place without committed and ethical government leadership, and that strong state oversight, in conjunction with smart private investments and peer learning, were central to the process of accelerating transformation. "Knowledge cannot just be transferred," Lopes said. "It has to be acquired, reinvented, and practiced."

The opening session was followed by video messages from Reeta Roy, president and CEO of the MasterCard Foundation and Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, co-conveners of the forum. The Coca-Cola Company and Overseas Development Institute (ODI) acted as presenting partners for the forum.



Commitment Around Key Issues

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While there is no set formula for economic transformation in Africa, there is general agreement on the most pressing issues. The deliberations over two days and during more than a dozen sessions at the 2016 African Transformation Forum aimed to broaden awareness of those issues, produce workable solutions to the challenges they pose, and build consensus around ways in which countries can gain more knowledge, acquire more tools, and collaborate more effectively on the path to transformation.

The robust discussions and comments shared during the four plenaries, seven breakouts, featured addresses, and opening and closing sessions, all point toward a cohesive understanding: that coordinated, collaborative, and committed action is needed at the country level and across borders to address Africa's most urgent transformation issues. Participants agreed on the need to:

- Improve the quality of basic education to upgrade skills among African youth to generate long-term employment and meet future labor demands.
- Increase access to finance for SMEs and smallholders, particularly among women, so that entrepreneurs are able to grow their businesses and create jobs.
- Improve trade facilitation to take full advantage of Africa's regional markets and to strengthen Africa's global export competitiveness.
- Raise agricultural productivity, which is central to all successful transformation strategies, and modernize agricultural practices.
- Boost industrialization, particularly the expansion of manufacturing production and exports, to seize investment opportunities and expand industries.
- Promote local content and value addition strategies as a means to increase the value of Africa's abundant extractive resources.
- Close Africa's power gap through innovation and public-private collaboration.

It was also clearly understood that to seriously pursue economic transformation, African countries must start with a clear transformation vision and strategy that is supported and informed by the public. A transformation strategy should be considered a national project, directed by the government but informed by a wide array of stakeholders that all contribute their respective expertise, knowledge, and insights.

According to President Kagame, all citizens must be included in the decision making process, because they bear most of the risks to achieve the most gains. "Success comes from what they do every day," he said.

Kagame also underscored the need for countries to remain adaptable and flexible on their individual pathways to transformation. "Mistakes will be made and money wasted, but that should not be the end of the road," he said. It all serves a purpose to discover the most effective approaches and "to build public understanding and unity of purpose."



Moving Forward and Looking Ahead

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To harness the unity displayed at the 2016 African Transformation Forum, participants welcomed the introduction and launch of the Coalition for Transformation. In closing the forum, K.Y. Amoako outlined how the Coalition will capture the energy and enthusiasm on display over the previous two days by incorporating Africa's existing knowledge and diverse expertise into a mechanism to foster transformation strategies and innovations. "It's a movement that involves all of us taking the next step," he said.

The Coalition will comprise like-minded governments, private sector entities and development partners, organized by Chapters that are each focused on specific issues raised during the forum: agriculture, skills and youth employment, regional integration and trade, manufacturing, local content and value addition, and financial inclusion. Chapters will identify one country as its champion for its organizing issue. They will meet at the regional level to share experiences, but their work will be carried out on a national scale. The African Center for Economic Transformation will serve as a secretariat for the Coalition but will work in conjunction with other continental institutions such as the Economic Commission for Africa.

In the short term, the Coalition will get off the ground with a few pilot Chapters that will provide lessons on which future Chapters can draw. These Chapters will then come back and report on their activities at future transformation forums.

"This forum is not just another meeting," Amoako said. "We came here to agree on the issues, the challenges, and the ways to move forward. Given the nature of the challenges and issues to be addressed, we need a variety of methods to move the transformation agenda."

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Officials announced that the second African Transformation Forum will reconvene in Kigali in March 2017 to ensure momentum is not lost, but that subsequent forums would take place every two years to allow the Coalition Chapters ample time to make notable progress in between forums.

Contact Details

Address: Castle Road, Ridge PMB CT4,
Cantonments Accra, Ghana

T: +233 (0) 302 210 240

E: info@acetforafrica.org