

Aftermath of Covid-19 requires Africa to be bold in its path to recovery

Speaking during a recent African Youth Ministers consultative meeting on Covid-19, Vera Songwe, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), said that tackling the ongoing coronavirus pandemic effectively to ensure Africa grows back and builds back better in the aftermath of Covid-19 requires boldness never before seen on the continent.



Vera Songwe, executive secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

Quoting the late American civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., Songwe said Africa needs to remain awake and help find solutions to the pandemic as restrictions put in place to curtail the virus begin to be eased.

“This is a time to be bold. It is a time when we need to come together to ask if we are responding to the call of the youth,” she said.

Adjust to new ideas, remain vigilant

“Today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change. No time ever in our history have we been at such a crossroads where we have both a health pandemic and an economic recession on the continent.”

Songwe said 51% of Africa's growth is in the services sector and requires technology, raising the need for member states to move with speed to address crippling internet issues across the continent.

"We cannot grow back and build back better without enough access to technology for our youth who are the innovators. They are the ones who will find the solutions for tomorrow for us. My plea to you as ministers of youth is please join us, work with us and together let us implement the African Digital Transformation Strategy and increase access, affordability, stability and reliability of the internet system so that many other things can begin to fall into place," she said.



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Participation in decision-making processes

Songwe said recent consultations with African youth had revealed clearly their hunger and thirst to participate in decision-making processes so they can help bring change through innovation.

"But they need our institutions to come along and to respond to them and to ensure that together we can deliver this future that we have so long wanted – an Africa that we want," she said.

Songwe implored the youth ministers to work with their colleagues in ICT and education ministries to ensure curricula is in line with the job market, inequalities in access to school are removed, and that broadband internet access is available for all.

"The cost of internet across Africa is very high. It cannot be what creates the jobs for our youth. We need to be able to provide the youth with access to affordable, accessible and reliable technology that works," she said.



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Free movement of persons

Songwe also implored African leaders to sign the protocol on the free movement of persons, saying this would greatly aid the youth who want to move across the continent, especially to innovative hubs in countries such as Kenya or Rwanda.

"We do not want our youth to continue to die in the oceans. We want them to find relief and fulfilment on our own continent. So hopefully as we work with you ministers of youth, you can help us help the African Union build this Africa we want by being part of this group that continues to ask and clamor for better access to technology not because we want access to technology but because with technology, our girls will stay at school instead of getting married; because with technology we can continue to trade our goods even if we cannot travel and because with technology we are able to embrace this new world that we see today," added Songwe.



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Zambia's youth, sport and child development minister, Emmanuel Mulenga, in opening remarks to the meeting said the onus is on African nations to build an environment that will provide the youth with opportunities that support their dreams and aspirations.

"As member states, we need to prioritise our efforts in order to minimise and mitigate the impact of the virus on the young people as they represent the most vulnerable population who have not been spared from the challenges caused by the virus," he said.

"The challenges confronting our young people today will require them to be dynamic, patriotic and having the welfare of their communities at heart."

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