

We found it fascinating to learn about the Government’s clear vision for the future”, Executive Secretary of the UN ECA “



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*The Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) has conducted a three-day visit in Eritrea. Here is a brief interview about the overview of his visit. * * **

Welcome to Eritrea. Would you please elaborate on the mandate and current functions of the ECA?

It’s a pleasure to be here in Eritrea as the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). I am honored to see the countries we represent, including Eritrea. The ECA was established in 1958 by the United Nations to support all African nations in their economic development, and this has been our mission: to assist all countries, Eritrea included.

The ECA has three primary mandates. First, we serve as a think tank, conducting necessary research to inform policy decisions across member countries. Second, we engage in operational work, providing on-the-ground support to the member states. Third, we possess convening power, coordinating discussions among Finance Ministers, planning officials, development leaders, and Central Bank Governors to address economic issues. We also connect other relevant Ministers depending on the topics at hand.

In addition, we work closely with the African Union (AU). This collaboration has enabled the ECA to support the establishment of institutions like the African Development Bank (ADB). We follow the guidance of Heads of State, aligning our efforts with the AU's Agenda 2063; the ten-year program; and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). This framework aims to create a unified market across the continent, removing trade barriers so that all countries can benefit from greater economic integration.

What is the main takeaway from your visit to Eritrea, and what common financial challenges have you identified among African countries regarding their development programs?

During our visit to Eritrea, our primary objective is to support the country in its development endeavors. Earlier this year, we met in Zimbabwe with Finance Ministers from various African nations to understand the challenges they face in financing development initiatives. We discovered that many African countries are adversely affected by an unfair international financial architecture compared to nations in other regions. One major concern is the lack of long-term concessional resources for development efforts. Traditionally, countries have relied on loans from international financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the ADB to implement their development programs. Unfortunately, current resources are insufficient. While countries are growing, the increase in available resources has not kept pace with their development needs.

Moreover, many nations struggle with low credit ratings, which are a requirement for securing loans from international lenders. Currently, only two African countries, Botswana and Mauritius, hold investment-grade ratings. This makes it challenging for most nations to borrow effectively, leaving them with inadequate support for their development efforts.

Another critical issue is the rising debt levels across the continent, which have reached approximately \$1.1 trillion—about 66% of GDP. Countries are paying nearly \$163 billion annually to service this debt, a figure that places immense strain on their financial stability and development initiatives.



Additionally, climate change poses a significant threat to all African nations. The impacts of climate change are costing these countries up to 5% of their GDP each year. For instance, Mozambique has experienced damages equivalent to 15% of its GDP due to climate-related issues. This situation calls for urgent action and a new approach to development.

Our visit to Eritrea is primarily a learning mission. Earlier this year, our team visited to identify areas for potential cooperation. They studied several sectors where we could begin collaborating. One key area we agreed to focus on is data collection. Accurately gathering statistical data is essential for understanding social and economic conditions, enabling us to make informed decisions. We aim to support the Eritrean government, particularly the Ministry of Finance, in implementing programs that enhance their data collection capabilities.

If proper data collection is not established, external parties may provide information that does not accurately reflect the country's realities. Therefore, it is crucial for Eritrea to lead this process for sustainability. Our role is to provide support and guidance, helping them gain exposure and experience from other countries that have successfully implemented similar initiatives. This collaborative effort is vital for ensuring sustainable development in Eritrea.

From your meeting with the President and the different Ministers, what have you learned are some of the notable initiatives Eritrea is undertaking in its efforts for sustainable development?

During our meeting with the President, we found it fascinating to learn about the Government's clear vision for the future. To achieve this vision, the country requires support that enables it to lead its own development efforts. The challenges he highlighted regarding access to finance align with what we've observed across the continent.

We were particularly impressed by what we saw in his region, including a dam and solar panels that pump water to elevated tanks, irrigating farms below the reservoirs. This integrated farming approach demonstrates tangible benefits. The President noted that the entire project was executed by local young engineers, from the dam construction to the solar installation, showcasing homegrown expertise.

Additionally, we observed a larger dam and various water conservation schemes in place. Around 800 water reservoirs of different sizes have been constructed, which I believe is a model that other countries should follow to enhance food security and promote environmental sustainability. In the face of increasingly unpredictable climate conditions, such innovative strategies are commendable. Expanding irrigation farming, rather than relying solely on rain-fed agriculture, is essential, and Eritrea has effectively increased its water capacity while adopting sustainable agricultural practices.

We are eager to collaborate with the Eritrean government on energy initiatives, particularly in renewable sources like solar, wind, and geothermal energy. This can not only meet the country's energy needs but also allow for surplus energy exports, given Eritrea's vast potential. We have already begun this collaboration and formulated a plan for the coming months. Our meetings with various Ministers and government bodies have been productive, and we are excited to move forward together.



Based on your discussions, what specific plans have you agreed to support the country’s initiatives and programs?

We agreed on the importance of compiling statistics by the end of this year. We have a tight schedule to ensure that, by this year’s end, Eritrea can bolster its own statistical processes. Additionally, we aim to complete all technical work and training related to energy—particularly in geothermal and solar—by then, allowing us to assess the next steps.

While we continue to learn about agriculture and other sectors, we plan to work closely with the Government, following their guidance to ensure our support is complementary. We also want to assist them in developing innovative financing mechanisms, especially in relation to climate initiatives.

Furthermore, we aim to support trade and value-addition, particularly in the mining sector. Eritrea is rich in resources like copper, potash, gold, and zinc. As this sector grows, it’s crucial to focus on value addition so that jobs remain in the country and it benefits fully from its resources, rather than just exporting raw materials. We believe Eritrea has the will and capacity, and the Government is prepared to lead this process effectively.

What lessons or best practices from Eritrea’s approach could be beneficial for other countries in the African region, and how can Eritrea learn from the experiences of others?

First of all, we want to encourage other countries to learn from the establishment of water reservoirs and integrated farming practices. A significant portion of GDP in African countries depends on agriculture. Despite this, we are importing \$120 billion worth of food annually, which needs to change. That's why we emphasize that Eritrea provides a strong example in irrigation, a key component for food security and productivity. Through south-south cooperation, countries can learn from one another, with Eritrea both teaching and learning from the experiences of others.

In one of our meetings, we discussed new innovations in various fields such as agriculture, health, transportation, education, and more. We also recognized that some countries are implementing AI-driven solutions. To facilitate this exchange, we have created a platform where individuals can log in to explore innovations across different sectors. This enables users to connect with companies or countries to learn how to adapt these innovations to their own contexts. Our aim is to compile successful practices from each country so that nations can discover what is happening elsewhere and pursue learning opportunities from each other

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