



## ECA POLICY BRIEF

# Africa's progress in achieving sustainable development during the COVID-19 pandemic: implications for development planning

## 1. Introduction

In 2020, the world saw great disruption in the supply and demand dimensions at both the global and national levels due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which led to contractions in economic growth, incomes and employment (owing to the imposition of lock-down measures), low external demand, a fall in commodity prices, the collapse of tourism and reduced remittances (ECA, 2021a; United Nations, 2021). The pandemic and other disasters will have an adverse impact on the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals, set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the aspirations set out in Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want.

Although Africa has made strides in poverty reduction and economic growth in the past few decades, the pace of poverty reduction has been slow, and economic growth has not only been inadequate but also lacklustre in generating employment and promoting green development. In addition, African economies are vulnerable to shocks and disaster risks, triggered by both man-made and natural factors that ultimately have a negative effect on livelihoods and growth performance. The pandemic has uncovered and exacerbated the systemic vulnerability of

economies that have little capacity to cope, in particular those in Africa.

The present policy brief provides a succinct summary of Africa's progress in sustainable development, focusing on economic growth, poverty, food security and the environment in the time of COVID-19, and draws implications for development planning.

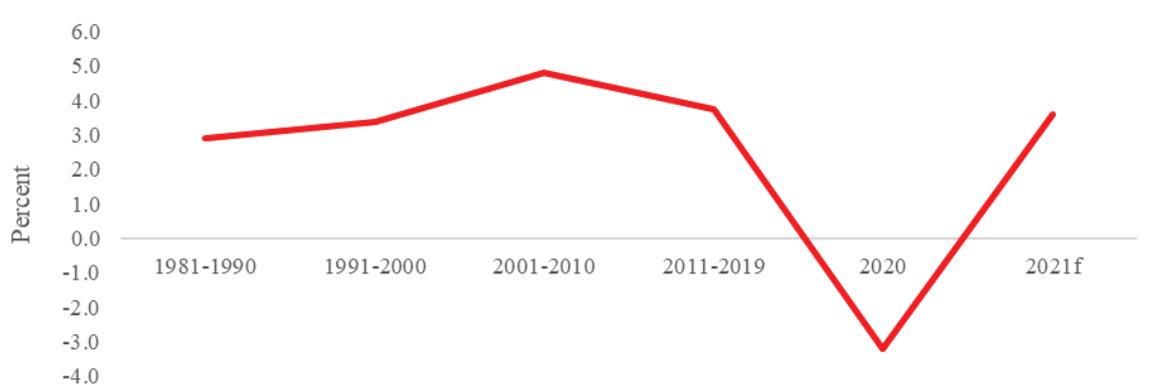
## 2. Africa's performance vis-a-vis the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063

### 2.1 Snapshot of growth performance

Africa's economic growth rate has not only been inadequate but also volatile (figure I). Over the period 2011–2019, Africa grew on average by 3.8 per cent per year, less than the rate required to meet Sustainable Development Goal 1 (to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030).<sup>1</sup> The pandemic has further slowed down Africa's economic growth, with real GDP contracting in 2020 and projected to grow by only 3.6 per cent in 2021 and 3.8 per cent in 2022 (ECA, 2021a). If growth continues along that trajectory, Africa will remain off track to meet the Goal 1. In addition, Africa's economic growth remained employment-poor due to limited development of labour-intensive industries and a non-enabling business environment. Estimates indicate that between 1.3 and 3 million jobs are lost every year because of the hostile business environment created by administrative hurdles, corruption, inadequate infrastructure and poor tax administration, among other challenges (AfDB, 2019). On top of that, the pandemic has caused significant job losses. A recent study of 15 African countries indicated that a third of the working-age

<sup>1</sup> Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, African countries have failed to sustain the target annual growth rate of 7 per cent that is a pre-requisite for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in developing countries.

**Figure I: GDP average growth rate, 2011–2021**



**Abbreviation:** f, forecast.

**Source:** ECA (2021a) and ECA (2021b).

population had lost their jobs during the pandemic (AfDB, 2021).

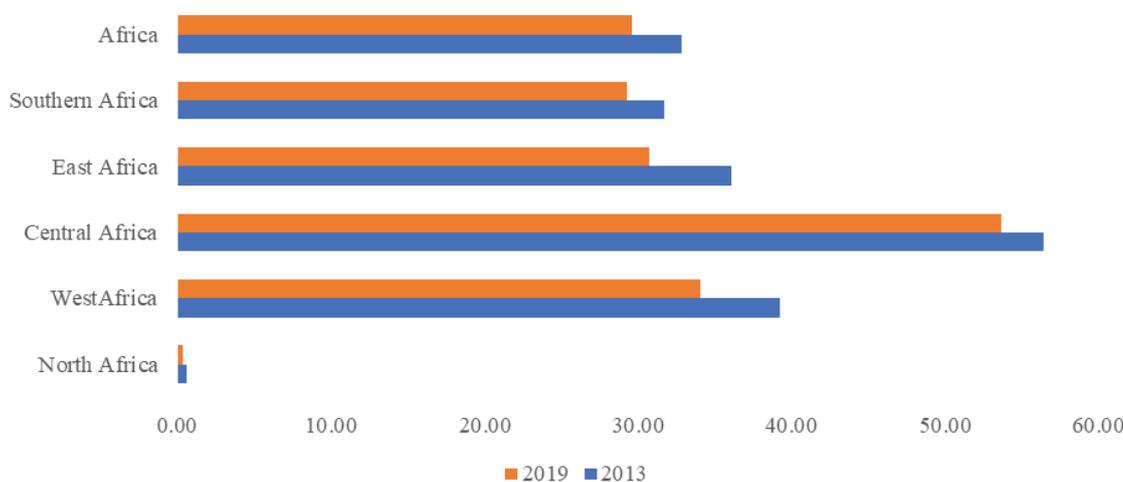
## 2.2 State of poverty in Africa

During the period 2000–2019, Africa's progress towards sustainable development was mixed. Although Africa has seen progress on poverty reduction during the past few decades, that progress has been sluggish, with a third of the continent's population living in poverty in 2019. With the exception of North Africa, all subregions fell significantly short of the target, and the prospect for achieving the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 have become even more remote due to the pandemic (figure II). In addition, the pandemic has affected progress towards each of the Goals

and aspirations directly or indirectly, thereby making the path to achieving the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 ever more challenging. Recent estimates indicate that COVID-19 has caused an increase in global poverty by pushing 71 million people into extreme poverty in 2020, with a significant impact on Africa.<sup>2</sup> Recent estimates indicate that about 38.7 million more Africans could slide into extreme poverty in 2020 and 2021 (AfDB, 2021). Thus, the current pace of progress is inadequate for the continent to achieve the Goals of the 2030 Agenda and the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal1#targets\\_and\\_indicators](https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal1#targets_and_indicators).

**Figure II Proportion of employed population below the international poverty line (US\$1.90 per day) in Africa (percentage), 2013–2019**



**Source:** ECA (2021b).

### 2.3 Progress on hunger and food security

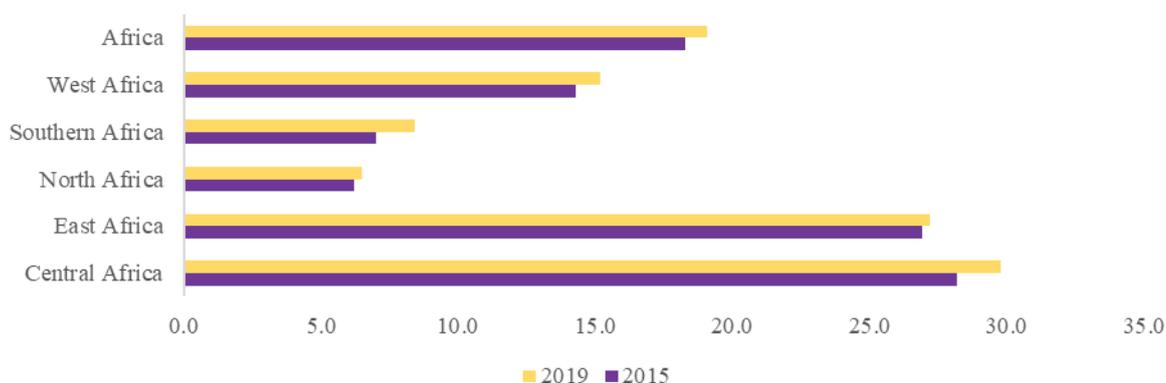
The number of people suffering from hunger has been on the rise in Africa, accounting for about 36 per cent of the global undernourished population in 2019 (FAO and others, 2020). The prevalence of undernourishment in Africa increased from 18.3 per cent in 2015 to 19.1 per cent in 2019, which is more than twice the world average (8.9 per cent). Both Central and East Africa accounted for a large share of the undernourished population (figure III). The pandemic also exacerbated the food insecurity situation of the continent, which was already worsening before the onset of the pandemic. West and Central Africa have seen a 135 per cent increase in the number of food-insecure people since the pandemic began (United Nations, 2021). Another study estimated that 97.7 million Africans were at risk of severe hunger and malnutrition in 2020 due to the pandemic and other disasters such as conflicts and extreme weather events (Global Network against Food Crises, 2021). Thus, the pandemic and other

disaster have aggravated the food insecurity situation on the continent, and a large segment of the population has been left without social protection systems.

### 2.4 Environment, vulnerability and disasters

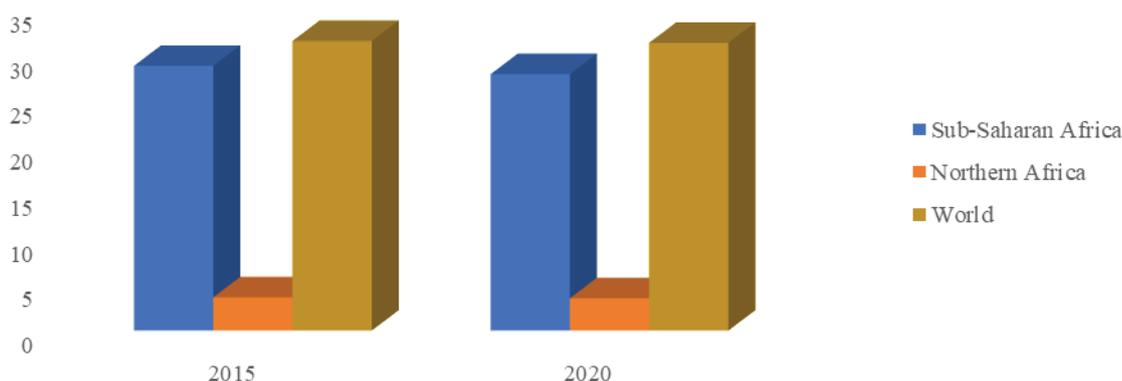
Climate change continues to increase the risks of weather-related disasters and vulnerability on the continent (e.g., through more frequent and more severe floods and drought), which adversely affect growth, poverty and food security. Of the 15 countries in the world that are most vulnerable owing to their low adaptation capacity, the majority (11) are in Africa (Behlert and others, 2021). In 2020, a total of 80 disasters were recorded in Africa, with floods affecting seven million people (CRED and UNDDR, 2021). The share of population affected by disaster increased in 2020 compared with the average over the period 2000–2019. Between 2008 and 2018, over 157 million persons were directly or indirectly affected by disasters across 44 African countries, largely owing to

**Figure III:** Number of undernourished people in Africa (millions), 2015–2019



Source: FAO and others (2020).

**Figure IV :** Trends in the share of land covered by forests



Source: United Nations (2020).

natural hazards (UNDRR, 2020). In addition, only 12.9 per cent of the continent's population was covered by at least one social protection systems in 2016, thereby leaving a large segment of the population vulnerable to economic, health and other shocks.

Africa's progress on land and biodiversity has been inadequate, with only 41 per cent of key marine biodiversity areas given protected-area status. Unsustainable exploitation of fisheries has contributed to dwindling fish stocks. Africa has also experienced the largest annual rate of net forest loss of any continent (figure IV), which has undermined well-being, increased the risk of extinction of species and exacerbated climate change (United Nations, 2020). Key drivers of land degradation included deforestation, unsustainable agricultural practices and urbanization, as well as land-tenure insecurity and widespread poverty.

Overall, the evidence presented so far indicates that Africa's progress on economic, social and environment dimensions has been both inadequate and far from resilient, as reflected by increased vulnerability to multiple shocks and disaster risks.

### 3. Conclusions and implications for development planning

The continent's potential for economic growth and transformation is challenged by natural and human-induced factors, such as pandemics, environmental degradation, climate change, conflict, and other phenomena. These make African economies vulnerable to the risk of frequent disasters that set back development gains and slow the pace of continent's transformation. One of the key lessons drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic is the need to make development plans resilient and inclusive. Sustainable development cannot be realized without resilience, and the latter cannot be achieved without sustainable development.

The present policy brief highlights the following key issues in the context of fostering durable and sustainable development on the continent:

- The continent has seen increased vulnerability to multiple shocks and disaster risks, as witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mitigating the shocks and risks will allow African economies to achieve sustainable development. Doing so will require strengthening their resilience by factoring vulnerability and disaster risks into development planning at all levels and across various sectors, in accordance with the national context in each country;
- To strengthen and maximize the resilience-sustainable development nexus, there is a need to improve development planning by recalibrating development priorities through the use of new development planning tools. The design of resilient and inclusive development plans should be informed by adequate evidence to guide the prioritization, sequencing and implementation of an integrated set of development interventions, with a view to building resilient and sustainable development;
- In the era of sustainable development, a new generation of development plans need to be resilient, inclusive, and coherent. This can be achieved by accounting for disaster risk and other development needs in national development policies, strategies and plans. This can be facilitated through the use of integrated development planning tools, such as the Integrated Planning and Reporting Toolkit, to align sustainable development interventions with national aspirations and priorities;
- There is also a need to continuously build the capacity of development planners in Africa through training to improve the knowledge and skills necessary to design resilient and inclusive development plans and applications using integrated planning, approaches and tools.

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