The UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Over the half-century of its existence, this unique body has worked tirelessly, if often behind the scenes, in helping to shape the region’s destiny. African Business editor Anver Versi pays tribute.

### Fifty years of leadership in Africa

In 1945, at the end of World War II, most of Europe lay in ruins. There was an urgent need to revive economies and reconstruct the devastated nations. The newly formed United Nations, which had been established after the War, set up the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as an umbrella body to coordinate reconstruction in all its manifestations.

One year later, in 1946, ECOSOC resolved to establish the Economic Commission for Europe to provide effective aid to European countries whose economies and social structures had been laid low. Other regional commissions followed swiftly. In 1947, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East was set up and a similar one for Latin America followed. But all attempts to create a regional commission for Africa floundered. Most of Africa was still under colonial rule and the colonising powers had no intention of giving up their control over the continent. Even requests to create limited commissions in Africa – for example for North Africa and Ethiopia – fell on deaf ears and it was not until 1958, when developing countries could make their voices heard and votes count in the UN General Assembly, that ECOSOC agreed to establish the Economic Commission for Africa. In a reflection of the times, at the outset only eight of the first 15 full members of the ECA were African states: Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and the United Arab Republic (Egypt). Guinea joined a little later. The non-African members were: Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK. The Union of South Africa was in a class of its own. Because of its apartheid policies, South Africa was later suspended until the onset of majority rule in 1994. Today, all 53 African countries are ECA members.

The aims of the organisation were laid out by the UN Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjold, at the first session of the ECA. The ECA was to be a centre of consultations between governments and a clearing house for the free flow and analysis of information and experiences. It would discuss the economic needs of Africa and how those needs could be met. It would provide technical services to study, explore and hopefully resolve common problems. It would also act as a link between members and various agencies of the UN.

### ECA’S PARTNERS

The ECA works with five main groups of partners:

- African intergovernmental organisations
- UN bodies and specialised agencies
- Donor countries
- African universities and research institutions
- African civil society groups.

ECA headquarters in Addis Ababa.
Despite these noble aims, the realities on the ground facing the ECA pointed to a different agenda. It demonstrated its commitment to the emancipation of Africa through a series of measures. During the early years, the organisation gave overwhelming priority to issues such as fighting colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and apartheid in Southern Africa. It also became the forum where African leaders debated critical ideas such as the relationships between African countries and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries and the structures of pan-African solidarity.

New realities
As the winds of change continued to blow with increasing velocity over Africa and more countries became independent, so the ECA adapted to the new realities. It was the first continent-wide organisation and paved the way for the founding in 1963 of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union.

The ECA was also behind the emergence of some of Africa's most enduring landmark organisations. It was instrumental in setting up the African Development Bank (AfDB), now the continent's leading multilateral development financier. It facilitated the establishment of several sub-regional organisations such as: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern Africa (PTA) which is now the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).

The ECA has built some 30 technical institutions encompassing fields such as technology, banking and finance, minerals and remote sensing, and planning and management. Notable among these is the African Institute for Economic Planning and Development (IDEP). It also articulated major economic strategies such as the Lagos Plan of Action and the Cairo Agenda for Re-launching Africa's Development.

ECA's new direction
Over the past 50 years, the ECA has used its unique advantage as the only UN body mandated to operate at the regional and sub-regional levels to harness resources and bring them to bear on Africa's priorities. This has given it a dual function – it is a regional arm of the UN and an intimate part of the institutional landscape in Africa. Given a rapidly changing global environment and Africa's shifting position within it, the executive secretary of the Commission, Abdoulie Janneh, established a task force in March 2006 to help shape new directions for the institution. It would take into consideration the transformation of the OAU into the African Union and the role of NEPAD in accelerating African growth.

Following consultations and reviews, the ECA was repositioned to focus on:
- Promoting regional integration in support of the African Union's vision and priorities
- Meeting Africa's special needs and emerging global challenges.

The first area reflects the consistently stated desire of African countries for greater integration within the continent and with the global economy. The second will ensure that the ECA continues to place emphasis on issues such as poverty eradication as well as the need to position African countries on the path of sustainable growth, while accelerating the empowerment of women.

Since the AU and the ECA work on both regional and sub-regional levels, they complement each other and generate considerable synergies. Similarly, the ECA and the AfDB can work hand-in-glove, sharing and pooling knowledge and expertise on development projects. In striving for the greater integration of African economies, the ECA works with sub-regional organisations such as the East African Community, ECOWAS and others. This involves encouraging intra-African trade, monetary and customs unions, the building of transnational infrastructure such as roads and railways and on other programmes that promote greater regional integration.

Through its research and advocacy capacity, it provides Africa with the knowledge it needs to refute the continent's marginalisation and instead make its voice count in international forums.

The ECA also acts as a link between various UN agencies, donors and multinational organisations on the one hand and African governments and regional and sub-regional bodies on the other. The prime focus is helping Africa attain as many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as possible within the agreed time-frame. Over the last 50 years, the ECA in its various capacities, including as an invaluable storehouse of knowledge, has been an integral and vital part of Africa's unfolding development. As Africa adapts to a rapidly changing world of new technological, economic and political forces, the ECA is poised, once again, to lead the way. ■
Africa is once again at the crossroads. Instead of being marginalised, Africa is now firmly on the international agenda through its own initiatives like the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) as well as other international initiatives such as the Outcome of the 2005 World Summit in which global leaders pledged to support Africa in meeting its special needs.

We are also experiencing the best period of economic growth in the continent for a generation and the overall economic performance of Africa continues to improve strongly with a 5.7% growth rate in 2006. The 2007 Economic Report for Africa, which is published jointly by ECA and the African Union Commission, indicates that growth in the continent is expected to remain high over the next two years.

We have consistently maintained that regional integration is imperative for Africa to meet its development challenges and to overcome the limitations of Africa’s small, fragmented economies as well as giving it a greater say in the management of global economic processes.

Indeed, closer integration reflects the aspirations of most Africans for the continent to become one strong, robust, diversified and resilient economy supported by a first-class trans-boundary infrastructure and a highly skilled, flexible and fully employed workforce living in conditions of political stability.

To achieve this desirable objective, Africa needs to act together to scale-up efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); address obstacles to improving trade and investment flows; tackle infrastructure related challenges; manage its natural resources and above all ensure conditions of peace and security for the African people.

Africa also needs to act as one in the area of trade, especially in negotiations at the World Trade Organisation and the Economic Partnership Agreements with the European Union. The objective in both negotiations should be to seek development outcomes that favour Africa.

While there is visible evidence of increasingly strong collaboration between African countries and the regional groupings in these negotiations, there is still a need to do much more. At the end of the day, the clout and bargaining power that will enable favourable outcomes depend to a large extent on economic size as well as the offers being brought to the table.

Global trade opportunities
Increased intra-Africa trade is therefore necessary to enable the continent to take advantage of global trade opportunities. This would, in turn, require overcoming the challenges that impede the flow of goods and services within the continent as well as the diversification of Africa’s production structures.

Trade facilitation is closely tied to the need for affordable, efficient and sustainable physical infrastructure to support economic activities and the provision of basic social services. Of particular importance in this regard is transport infrastructure such as roads, rail, air, and port services, which need to be rehabilitated and expanded. Integration is also an important means of managing shared water resources, which have a vital role to play in the transport of goods and people.

Moreover, Africa needs to develop energy infrastructure such as electricity grids and oil and gas pipelines that will facilitate cross-border energy supplies thereby enhancing security and reliability of energy supply.

Regional solutions are also important in
the sustainable management of Africa’s vast natural resources in areas like governance, institutional capacity, ownership, and the environment.

In addition to the positive and determined effort to evolve a peace and security architecture for the continent, there is evidence of the increasing use of African Union structures and mechanisms for resolving conflicts and managing peace.

However, more remains to be done especially in places like Darfur and Somalia which require concerted action by the African Union and its partners. There is a need at the same time to help consolidate peace and security in countries emerging from conflict; taking a regional perspective can help mobilise international support for such efforts.

The promotion of good governance lies in turn at the heart of ensuring peace and stability in Africa because it gives voice to marginalised communities and promotes fair access to resources and opportunities for development. The United Nations is well positioned to continue its support for Africa’s regional integration agenda especially in the context of UN-AU Framework for the 10-Year Capacity Building Programme for the African Union. The commitment to integration in Africa is quite clear and the case for it was established long ago. The evidence abounds in the establishment of the African Union and the adoption of Nepad, which has a continent-wide agenda. It also abounds in the various sectoral initiatives as well as the long-standing existence of regional economic communities. Nevertheless, it is now time to move from ideas to action and from institutional architecture to actual mechanisms and specific programmes for tackling trans-boundary challenges.

In this regard, I would urge that adequate attention be given to how to accelerate integration through actual projects and the removal of obstacles to coherent integration. Africa must make the best use of existing regional economic communities which are the building blocks of continental integration.

I know that this generation of Africans is capable of rising to meet the challenge of actualising the ideal of pan-African integration. For its part, ECA will use the opportunity of its 50th anniversary celebrations to determine how best we can continue to centre stage Africa’s development agenda.

Sub-regional offices and programmes

The ECA works at both the regional and sub-regional levels. Sub-regional offices are based in: Niamey, Niger, for West Africa; Yaounde, Cameroon for Central Africa; Kigali, Rwanda, for East Africa and Lusaka, Zambia for Southern Africa.

These offices strengthen the Commission’s presence and intervention at the sub-regional level. The operational capacities of the sub-regional offices are being strengthened to enable them to operate greater levels of technical assistance to member states, regional economic communities and intergovernmental and civil society organisations.

This takes the form of advisory services, the organisation of workshops and seminars, field projects and as vital linkages to other ECA programmes both at national as well as sub-regional levels. To achieve its objectives, the ECA collaborates closely with the African Union, the African Development Bank and regional economic communities.

Some of the ECA programmes include the African Centre for Statistics which aims at providing improved and integrated statistical databases – a vital tool for economists, planners and business journalists. The Division helps African countries to link food security, population, environment and human settlements to achieve sustainable development and assists countries to utilise science and technology to achieve their aims.

The objective of the African Centre for Gender and Social Development is to influence the direction of economic and social policies so as to make them more gender sensitive. It also formulates policies and programmes to reduce poverty and integrate human and social dimensions in the development process.

The main aim of the Governance and Public Administration Division is to upgrade capacity in both disciplines. The ECA’s flagship biannual publication, the African Governance Report assesses and monitors progress towards good governance in Africa. This division also provides support for the Africa Peer Review Mechanism process and promotes Peer Learning to encourage the sharing of good practice in development.

The ECA’s ICT, Science and Technology Division is an integrated information service and resource centre for Africa. It makes quality information on Africa accessible globally. It also assists member states to build capacity in the use of information and communication technologies.

The Trade, Finance and Economic Development Division focuses on macro-economic analysis, trends and macro-micro linkages. The Division helps African countries address the major challenge of reaching and sustaining high levels of economic growth. TFED leads ECA’s work in producing the annual Economic Report on Africa, which has become a key instrument for tracking the continent’s economic performance.

The Nepad and Regional Integration Division promotes economic co-operation and strengthens the process of regional integration. Emphasis is placed on infrastructure and natural resource development.