

Africa Day at 63: Why Africa's unity is critical for our moment

Africa sits at an inflection point between hope, opportunity, and a global reset.

Asymmetrical trade deals are being challenged, debt architecture is under pressure, and the institutions that once entrenched colonial-era hierarchies are wobbling. But windows like this do not remain open for long.

Sixty-three years ago, on May 25, Africa's founding fathers understood this and chose unity at the moment it mattered most. On Africa Day this year, that same choice is being demanded again. The US-China rivalry is reshaping global supply chains, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) gridlock is forcing new trade arrangements, and the Bretton Woods institutions—anchored in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—are under pressure to reform. At the centre of these shifts sits Africa, with over 30 percent of the world's critical minerals required for the just energy transition.

The question is not whether the world needs what Africa has; that is already settled. The question is whether, during this latest scramble, Africa will position itself to extract maximum value. With vast mineral wealth, a unified market of 1.4 billion people, and a GDP exceeding \$2.8 trillion, the continent holds the weight to demand fair terms. But this is only possible if it negotiates as one on debt and finance, climate change, critical minerals, and trade.

The institutional architecture already exists through the African Union (AU) and the Africa Free Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), yet sovereignty concerns and competing bilateral relationships continue to limit cohesion. AU reform—towards pre-negotiation at AU level, stronger mandates for AU negotiators, and meaningful inclusion of civil society and the private sector—would be critical. There is growing recognition that Africa's solutions lie with its young people. With a median age of 19, Africa is the youngest continent in the world,

at a moment when youth, technology, and digital transformation are converging. Prioritising young people is, therefore, not a social obligation, but a strategic imperative.

By 2050, the United Nations estimates that the youth population will double to

ABOUT THE DAY

Africa Day is celebrated every year on May 25 to commemorate the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the African Union. On May 25, 1963, leaders from 32 African countries met in Addis Ababa to establish the OAU with the aim of promoting African unity, ending colonialism and supporting liberation movements across the continent.

more than 830 million, while the working-age population will rise to 1.56 billion, accounting for 85 percent of the global workforce. The economic case is equally compelling. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), strategic investments in local processing and manufacturing in the minerals sector alone could unlock \$24 billion in GDP annually and create approximately 2.3 million jobs. This underscores a central truth: diversifying Africa's economies to create jobs at scale begins with industrialisation.

The East Asian Tigers did not emerge by chance. Their transformation required decades of State-led investment, protection of infant industries, import substitution, and patient capital. Ironically, these are the very policies the World Bank spent decades discouraging across Africa in favour of free-market prescriptions that often served creditors more than citizens. Africa must take note, and more importantly, take charge of its

own development model—rooted in its realities, its humanity, and its knowledge. At the same time, Africa must recognise that neither State intervention alone nor private sector forces alone can deliver transformation. What is required is a functioning social contract built on trust, accountability, and the centring of citizens' needs and voices, while upholding constitutionalism. Stable and democratic institutions remain the foundation of inclusive economies. Unity without democratic legitimacy is hollow and short-lived.

Young people are not waiting; Africa must move with urgency to address the demands of the present moment and reverse historical injustices that stand in the way. The rupture of the multilateral system signals both challenge and opportunity.

Rumbidzai Masango, Nancy Muigei and Ichumile Gqada serve as programme managers for Open Society Africa.