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Press Conference

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PRESS CONFERENCE ON LAUNCH OF 'REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF AFRICA'S YOUTH' REPORT

Speaking at a press conference ahead of the launch of the Africa Commission's report -- *Realizing the Potential of Africa's Youth* -- at Headquarters at 1.15 p.m. today, Ulla Tornaes, Minister for Development Cooperation of Denmark, stressed the relevance of that survey's recommendations for the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, particularly as the General Assembly geared up for its high-level review of the status of the Goals' implementation next September.

The press conference was hosted by Carsten Staur, Permanent Representative of Denmark to the United Nations, who explained that the Africa Commission had been launched by his country's Prime Minister in 2008 to help Africans benefit more from globalization.

He said the Commission included key African stakeholders, including the President of the United Republic of Tanzania, the Prime Minister of Mozambique and the President of the African Development Bank, as well as entrepreneurs, researchers and high-level representatives from regional organizations. Drawing on existing data and best practices, the Commission had presented its report in May this year.

Minister Tornaes said that while great progress had been made in the implementation of the Millennium Goals, Africa was lagging behind. Globally, by 2025, one out of every four young people under 25 would be from the African continent, and there was a need to create 10 to 15 million jobs a year to absorb the huge number of young people becoming part of the African labour force. Against that background, the main focus of the Commission's work had been on economic growth, youth and employment.

The Commission had sought to promote African ownership of the solutions to African challenges, she continued. Its five specific initiatives related to benchmarking African competitiveness, access to investment finance and capacity development for small- and medium-sized enterprises, promotion of African entrepreneurship, access to sustainable energy, and encouragement of post-primary education and research. In particular, it had made recommendations to develop a global competitiveness index that would eventually benchmark all African countries against international standards.

Stressing the great potential of small- and medium-sized enterprises in job creation, she mentioned, among other things, the Commission's intention to establish an African Guarantee Fund, in partnership with the African Development Bank, to bridge the gap between microfinance institutions and commercial banks. Furthermore, the Commission would launch a complementary facility for enterprises to improve their business management and technical skills in order to gain access to investment finance. Together with the World Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO), the Commission also intended to promote vocational training.

"We are also going to refocus our own bilateral assistance in a way that would put a stronger focus on growth, employment and youth," Ms. Tornaes continued. Inclusive growth that generated decent work and income was the best way to reduce poverty in Africa.

In 2010, world leaders would recommit to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, while also addressing new challenges, she said. Preparing for the Review Conference in September 2010, her Government had focused on private sector growth and job creation, based on the outcome of the African Commission. It had also emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality and empowerment of women, and stressed the need to address the issues of climate change.

Ambassador Staur also emphasized an extensive engagement by the United Nations system in the work of the Commission, and spoke about the need to integrate the Commission's report into international efforts to achieve the Goals. The fact that the Secretary-General would be opening the discussion this afternoon in the Trusteeship Council Chamber where the report would be launched signaled that he saw the report as welcome input to the ongoing deliberations on those internationally agreed development targets.

On the implementation of the Millennium Goals, Ms. Tornaes said that while work in such important areas as education and health would continue, the Commission had recommended the development of a refocused agenda for international development cooperation with Africa. That agenda should put special emphasis on youth employment, private sector-led growth and competitiveness.

Asked how the impact of the global economic and financial crisis was reflected in the report, Ms. Tornaes said that while the Commission had been launched prior to the onset of the crisis, it had worked throughout the ongoing economic downturn and had produced concrete and achievable initiatives, which were more relevant today than ever before. In particular, the report emphasized not just economic growth, but growth that generated employment on the continent.

In response to a question regarding the requirements for climate change adaptation, she said that in the negotiation process, the European Council had stated that by 2020, there would be a need for €100 billion financing towards that end. On top of that, the European Council had recently identified the need for upfront financing to cover the needs until the expiration of the Kyoto Protocol. The figure mentioned in relation to that amounted to €5 billion to €7 billion immediately after the meeting in Copenhagen.