

Time for Africa to stop managing poverty and start managing development

Cristina Duarte of the Republic of Cabo Verde is the new special adviser on Africa to the UN secretary-general. A former minister of finance and planning in her country, she intends to bring to her role a renewed strategic narrative of 'Africa by Africa' to help the UN better deliver on the continent.



Cristina Duarte, new special adviser on Africa to the UN secretary-general

In an interview with UN News' Elizabeth Scaffidi, Duarte lays out her vision and the policy focus needed for the continent's sustainable development.

Elizabeth Scaffidi: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came into this role?

Cristina Duarte: I have quite long experience in leadership positions. I started very early. I had the opportunity to exercise leadership in the private sector, international financial system, multilateral organisations and then in the government.

Scaffidi: What are your priorities for the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa here at the UN?

Duarte: I have been in the office for about 60 days. The Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA) is a small but powerful team of 30 people. As a strategic position, it is close to the secretary-general, deputy secretary-general, the African Group and key strategic policymakers in Africa, not only at the government level, but also at the African Union and the regional economic commissions level.

OSAA has a unique nature because it is the only one in the UN system to be a special office on regional affairs, in this case African affairs. So, the combination of these intangible assets makes OSAA better leverage African priorities within the UN system.

Today, OSAA is in a position, and will be in a much better position in a couple of months, to help the UN secretary-general and the deputy secretary-general in reshaping Africa's narrative within the UN system - a narrative that comes from Africa for Africa, where the SDGs are merged with Africa's Agenda 2063 - as well as support the African Group, the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), and the African Union Commission.

Africa has a vision, a clear strategy, and there is an action plan that has been a milestone for the continent, particularly for the African Union. It is important that the UN system delivers what is supposed to be delivered in Africa.

Scaffidi: What are some of the challenges that you foresee?

Duarte: Everybody has been talking about sustainable development and I just wrote a paper a few months ago where I defended a very simple position. To tackle or to succeed in terms of sustainable development, policymaking in Africa should first address, almost as a precondition, sustainable financing. If we do not address this, we will always be equating managing poverty to managing the development. These are two different animals. We have been managing poverty. It's time for Africa to switch from managing poverty to managing development and adjust policymaking accordingly.

Policymaking in Africa should be concentrated on fighting illicit financial flows, domestic resource mobilisation, and putting human capital at the centre of policymaking. For example, discussing intellectual property barriers that have been preventing Africa from accessing technology and innovation, green growth, green industrialisation, and the continental free trade area.

Scaffidi: How has Covid-19 affected the continent?

Duarte: It is an emergency and a tragedy, not only from the health dimension but also the economic impact. The lockdowns, first worldwide and then in some African countries, have pushed Africa into the first socioeconomic crisis in 25 years, exactly at a time when Africa was getting ready to clearly takeoff with the [African Union's] Agenda 2063.

But Covid-19 in Africa is more than an emergency, it is also a development situation, because it has been disruptive. I believe that Covid-19, despite its tragic dimension, offers some opportunities and we need the tools to adjust our mindsets in order to grab them.

Scaffidi: How can international action play a positive role in achieving OSAA's goals?

Duarte: OSAA is not an operational entity per se but is instrumental to operational entities in the UN system. OSAA is key in providing pertinent, on-time analysis of African issues, meaning that it is in some way a need-driven entity.

We deal with a quite diversified set of stakeholders within the UN system and also externally, including the African Union, African governments, strategic partners of Africa, etc. So, OSAA is supposed to deliver work that is meaningful and impactful to the stakeholders. The idea is to set up a strategic agenda so that these relationships between OSAA and the stakeholders are strategically guided with a focus and a purpose.

Scaffidi: Are there any recent UN events that have helped you to propel your

objectives?

Duarte: I have been here for about 60 days. It is my first function in the UN. What I can tell you is that despite being here only that short period, in 30 days, I met more than 34 African ambassadors on an individual basis. We discussed issues, I presented proposals and they made suggestions and advised me. I presented concept notes to the African Group about how to restructure our relationships through a strategic agenda and I got full support from the [African] group.

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