

UN Says Key to Africa's Success Is ... Africa

Hi again. Nice to have you with us on As It Is, from VOA Learning English. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Today, Steve Ember will take you to the Venice of Africa. That is, a floating village in Nigeria. Like Venice, the village is in danger of disappearing.

But first, we tell you about a new United Nations report on the African economy.

The UN Conference on Trade and Development is calling on African nations to increase private sector businesses. More private industry and entrepreneurs, it says, will help to strengthen trade between the nations.

Improving regional trade is especially important because foreign companies are operating with few trade restrictions. UN economists say those foreign businesses will control the market if African nations do not trade with each other.

The report says Africa is already behind intra-regional trading groups in other areas. For instance, in Asia, trade among neighbors represented 50 percent of the area's total trade. Europe had an even higher rate. Trade among European countries represents about 70 percent of total trade.

But in Africa, trade among African nations is low. It was only about 11 percent of total trade in 2011.

The secretary-general of the UN Conference on Trade and Development says there are many reasons why trade among African nations is low. One is the lack of services and infrastructure, such as roads and electricity. Supachai Panitchpakdi also says that African companies are usually very small. As a result, he says, it is hard for them to be competitive.

What is not small is Africa's informal sector. In other words, jobs that are not taxed or controlled by the government. Mr. Panitchpakdi says Africa's large informal sector is hurting efforts to increase trade among African nations.

"Most of the policies from the government or the kind of the formal support that would come from the economic policies of the government are not reaching into these informal sectors and so it would be difficult to give them the right kind of support, particularly in the areas of training."

The UN report also found that African nations produce and export only a few kinds of goods. Most are commodities, such as oil, natural gas, and metals. The report says African nations do not trade with each other partly because they are not making and selling enough different kinds of things.

UN economists say Africa must become more productive. To do this, they say, countries need to improve their infrastructure and give workers better skills and education. Economists also want African nations to help business people.

Taffere Tesfachew works for the UN Conference on Trade and Development. He deals with countries that are the least developed. Mr. Tesfachew says one immediate opportunity for Africa is agriculture. He says African nations could trade food products with each other right now.

“There are about 37 African countries that are net food importers ... These 37 African countries, when they import food, where do they import it-- interestingly less than 15 percent they import it within Africa. Most of it comes from outside. So, there must be an opportunity for intra-African trade.”

But UN economists say the most important thing for Africa is to remain peaceful and stable. Without security, they say, the continent will not prosper and trade among African nations will decrease even more.

The village of Makoko in Nigeria is sometimes called “The Venice of Africa.” It floats on a lagoon in the center of Lagos. But unlike Venice, houses in Makoko are built on sticks. Canoes are the main kind of transportation. The government is fighting in court to tear down the village, which some call a slum. But the community is fighting back. Steve Ember has Heather Murdock’s report from Makoko.

Makoko is believed to be more than 100 years old. The wooden houses look like they are about to fall down. To make money, people sell fish under the bridges of Lagos' busy roads. Hundreds of local children do not go to school. Those who do cannot fit into the village's one schoolhouse, which is slowly sinking into the water.

David Shemedede is chairman of the local Community Development Association. He says the government calls Makoko an illegal shantytown, or slum. Officials have been seeking to tear it down, he says.

Emmanuel Shemedede is David Shemedede's brother. He is also Makoko's traditional chief. Emmanuel Shemedede says last year the government told villagers they must leave in 72 hours. But villagers refused to go. One person was killed in the clashes. Now, village residents and city planners are fighting about Makoko in court.

Emmanuel Shemedede says he wants the government to help fix the village's old buildings and connect it to the city's water and electricity. But if that is not going to happen, Emmanuel Shemedede says, he wants the government to leave the community alone. He does not want anyone to destroy their homes.

But people in other areas say that when the government destroys slums, it replaces them with cleaner, safer homes. It connects the new homes with city services.

Friday Oruerio lives in another part of Lagos. He says city planners have built schools, developed transportation systems, and made the city safer for everyone over the past few years.

“They see any building that’s getting old and has a crack on that building they pull that building down to save lives. Because so many buildings have collapsed and so many people have lost their lives.”

But here in Makoko, villagers say destroying their homes would also destroy their way of life. After all, they say, a fish cannot live on land.

I’m Steve Ember.

And I’m Kelly Jean Kelly. See you next time on As It Is. If you would like to reach us, send an email to learningenglish@voanews.com.