

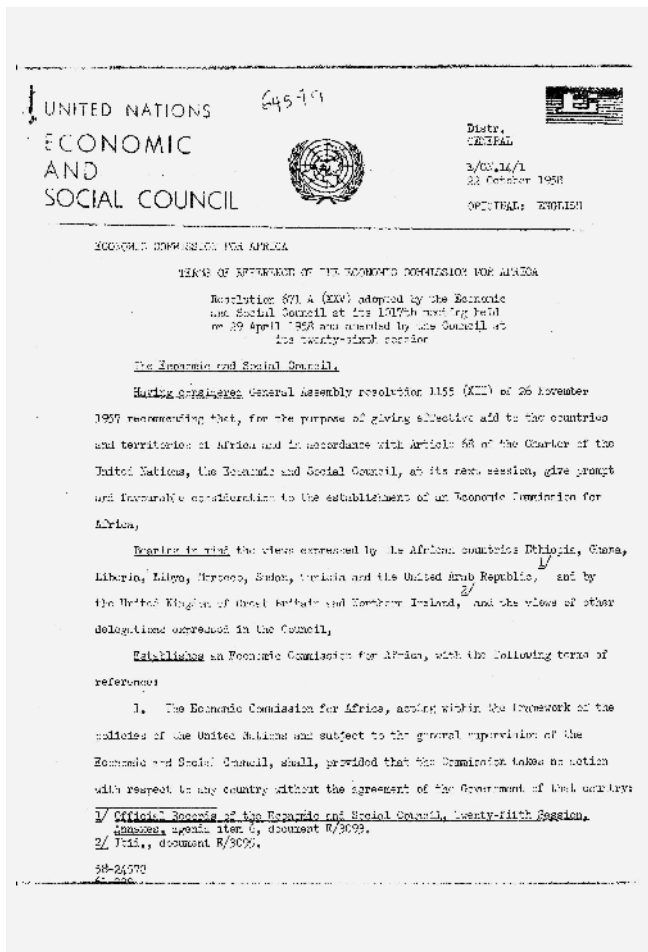
Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, greeting Emperor Haile Selassie I in Addis Ababa, 29 December 1958, ahead of the inaugural session of the Economic Commission for Africa. At centre back is the first ECA Executive Secretary, Mekki Abbas. Photo © ECA

1 | ECA COMING TO BIRTH





FIRST SESSION OPENS:
Emperor Haile Selassie I
delivering his speech to
open the first session of
the Economic Commission
for Africa in the parliament
building in Addis Ababa,
29 December 1958.
Photo © ECA



Resolution 671A (XXV-1)
adopted by the Economic
and Social Council at its
1017th meeting held on 29
April 1958 and amended
by the Council at its
twenty-sixth session.

1.1 GENESIS

On 29 April 1958, the United Nations Economic and Social Council convened in New York for its twenty-fifth session to deliberate on a favourable consideration to supporting African Governments, in their efforts to raise their economic activity, bettering the living standards of their citizens and maintaining the economic relations of the countries both among themselves and with the rest of the world. During that time, most African countries were still under colonial rule but on the verge of gaining independence. In that meeting, the terms of reference of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) were established under resolution 671A (XXV) and the ECA was officially born. This came after the Council considered views expressed by the already independent African countries – Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia – whose views were supported by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) and after a protracted campaign in the General Assembly.

A decade earlier during the fourth session of the Economic and Social Council in 1947, an Indian delegate introduced a draft resolution with the first formal initiative to establish a special Economic Commission for North Africa and Ethiopia, marking the day when the first traceable bid for the initiative was made. The Indian proposal was rebuffed because of its limited geographical scope.

Upon gaining independence and participating in the General Assembly for first time, Ghana rekindled the idea of having an Economic Commission for Africa. Ghana sponsored a draft resolution, which 28 other countries supported, for the establishment of ECA. It was later adopted by the General Assembly under resolution 1155 (XII) on 26 November 1957. In accordance with the instructions in the resolution, the Economic and Social Council finally established ECA on 29 April 1958. The Commission held its first session at its new headquarters in Addis Ababa, from 29 December to 6 January 1959, which was attended by the then Secretary-General, Mr. Dag Hammarskjöld.

On its inception in 1958, its membership was extended to 15 States, 8 of which were independent African States: Ethiopia, the United Arab Republic (modern day Egypt), Ghana, Liberia, Morocco, Sudan and Tunisia. The remaining 7 member States were the colonial powers – Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, the United Kingdom and the independent white settler colony, the Union of South Africa.

On top of being the regional arm of the United Nations Secretariat in Africa, ECA was also Africa's first international, continent-wide organization. For five years, from its establishment to the founding of the Organization African Unity in 1963, it was one of the regional forums for waging critical battles for economic progress on the continent and against colonialism, racism and racial exploitation.

Sixty years on, ECA has continued to advance its commitment to promoting the economic and social development of its member States. The Commission targets African Governments and places special focus on collecting up-to-date and original regional statistics on various economic and social aspects in order to help African Governments to base their policy research and advocacy on clear and objective evidence.

1.2 MANDATE AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

ECA was given a broad initial mandate, which was adopted during the first session of the Commission by the then Secretary-General, Mr. Dag Hammarskjold, in which ECA was expected to be an institution that would:

1. Serve as a centre for consultations in which Governments could freely define and elaborate the form of their cooperation;
2. Ensure the economic needs of the African people would be expressed and that actions designed to meet those needs would be initiated and stimulated;
3. Provide a body of technical services for the study and exploration of common problems and ensure that countries, regional and subregional groupings have access to those services;
4. Endeavour to be a well-organized clearing house for the exchange of information and experiences, and provide analysis and critical appraisal of this information;
5. Establish close relationships with the various programmes of the United Nations, including the substantive work of the specialized agencies

Sixty years later, the mandate to promote the economic and social development of African countries through international cooperation remains relevant, while the landscape for its contribution to Africa's development continues to be shaped by continental priorities.

The dual role of ECA, as a continental arm of the United Nations and as a significant pillar of the continental institutional landscape in Africa, endows it with unique comparative advantages that enables it to make distinct and valuable contributions to its member States and support them in their efforts to tackle the challenges they face. Its strength derives from its role as the only United Nations agency mandated to operate in Africa at both regional and subregional levels and to harness resources and bring them to bear on Africa's priorities. This comparative advantage is also reflected in the leadership role of ECA as the strategic coordinator of the Regional Consultation Meetings in United Nations system, in support of Africa's development priorities.

The Conference of African Ministers of Planning and Economic Development is the regional legislative organ of the Commission, which holds its meetings on an annual basis and reports to the General Assembly through the Economic and Social Council. The conference is supported by its own technical committee of experts, several sectoral technical committees and the Inter-Governmental Committee of Experts of the five subregions. The sectoral technical committees meet on a biennial basis.

ECA has five subregional offices which shape the Commission's agenda at the subregional level, promote and support specific subregional priorities and programmes for socioeconomic transformation of the subregions. The subregional offices remain as the Commission's conduit for advisory services to member States, regional economic communities and other stakeholders in the development of the subregions. They have acted as facilitators of economic cooperation, integration and development; advocates for gender equality; generators and disseminators of knowledge for the use of member States and ECA; and facilitators of the integration activities of other agencies of the United Nations system in their respective subregions. The subregional offices are based in Yaounde, Cameroon (Central Africa) Kigali, Rwanda (Eastern Africa) Rabat, Morocco (North Africa) Lusaka, Zambia (Southern Africa) and Niamey, the Niger (West Africa).



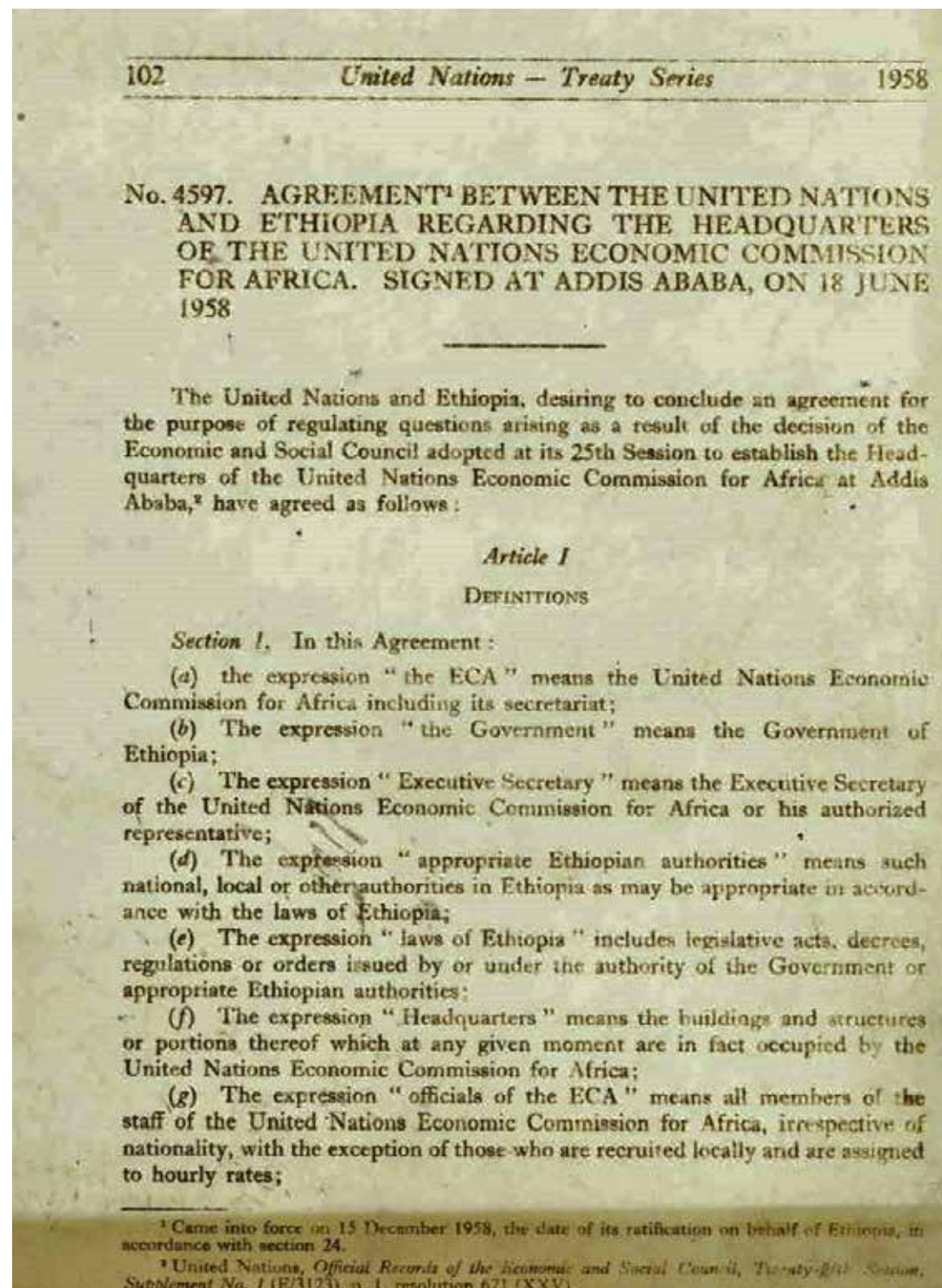
The second ECA Executive Secretary, Robert K.A Gardiner of Ghana, demonstrating the model of the ECA Building to Emperor Haile Selassie I. Photo © ECA

1.3 ADAPTABLE PROGRAMME ORIENTATIONS

While its basic mandate has not changed substantially over the years, ECA has undergone considerable changes in order to carry out its mandate as a regional commission of the Secretariat, guided by and adapting to the changing development realities and requirements of its member States. It has gone through many a transformation, with its evolving and dynamic programmes reflecting the hopes expressed by the Secretary-General at the inaugural session of the Commission, that there was a need for "the existence of some flexible institutional arrangement such as the Commission can provide..."

Since its creation, ECA has undoubtedly shown a strong commitment to Africa's development. It is noteworthy that with the exception of the eight founding members, all the other member States of ECA gained their independence after the Commission was established, showing that its history is intrinsically intertwined with that of post-colonial Africa. It can therefore be said that ECA has been shaped by the recent history of Africa and that it has, at the same time, contributed to shaping the Africa of today.

Memorandum of understanding-Ethiopia-United Nations: The memorandum of understanding agreement signed between ECA and the Ethiopian Government on 18 June 1958 regarding the establishment of the Commission's Headquarters in the country's capital Addis Ababa. Photo © ECA





Subregional presence: Official opening of the ECA Subregional Office for Central Africa (SRO-CA), Léopoldville, Democratic Republic of the Congo on 16 April 1966. Shown cutting the symbolic ribbon is President, Mobutu Sese Seko. Photo © ECA



Secretary-General, Dag Hammarskjöld, inspecting the Guard of Honour at the Addis Ababa Airport, 28 December 1958, ahead of the inaugural session of the Economic Commission for Africa, which was held on 29 December 1958. Photo © ECA