



United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

16th Brand Africa | Africa's Best Brands

Keynote Address

By

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Excellencies,

Mr. Thebe Ikalafeng, Founder and Chairman of Brand Africa,

Brand Leaders,

And Friends of Africa:

Good evening.



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It is an honour to join you on Africa Day, here in Africa Hall, a place of profound continental memory and purpose.

Sixty-three years ago, the founders of the Organisation of African Unity gathered in this very room with a bold vision: a free, united, self-determined Africa. They understood that political liberation without economic transformation would remain incomplete.

Today, as we celebrate the 16th edition of Brand Africa, we are reminded that the next chapter of Africa's transformation will be shaped not only by governments and institutions, but also by ideas, innovation, enterprise, and brands.

To gather here again, in 2026, is to connect the founding agenda of 1963 with the economic and commercial agenda of our time.

Because the struggle today is not only about how Africa governs itself. It is also about how Africa is perceived, how Africa competes, and how Africa creates value in the global economy.

And that is why tonight's conversation matters.

"Africa's image is Africa's brand. And Africa's brand is Africa's economy."

This proposition is not a slogan. It is an economic reality.

A continent whose products are trusted, whose companies are admired, and whose stories are compelling attracts investment on better terms, commands stronger market share, retains talent, and generates greater prosperity for its people.

For sixteen years, Brand Africa has measured something deeply important: the relationship between belief and behaviour.



Their data tells us that 68 percent of consumers believe in Africa, yet only 18 percent actively buy African brands.

That 50-point gap is not simply a branding problem.

It is a development challenge.

It represents lost opportunities for intra-African trade, unrealised industrialisation, forgone jobs, weakened value chains, and constrained competitiveness.

It tells us that belief alone is not enough.

Consumers must be able to find, trust, access, and choose African products easily and consistently.

And that requires structural transformation.

This is why the work of the Economic Commission for Africa is deeply connected to the brand agenda.

Through ECA's support for the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area, we are helping create the conditions for African brands to scale across borders.

When ECA supports standards harmonisation, customs modernisation, logistics reform, digital trade systems, and regional value chains, we are helping African businesses become more competitive and more visible.



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When ECA supports the strengthening of data systems and consumer intelligence, we are helping policymakers and businesses understand the markets they serve.

The AfCFTA is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing process that requires patience, strategic planning, coordination, and political will. It requires transformative action to deepen regional integration, remove barriers to intra-African trade, strengthen regional value chains, invest in digital infrastructure and skills, and empower Africa's youth through entrepreneurship and innovation.

These priorities are directly connected to the future of African brands.

Because free trade alone does not automatically create demand.

The AfCFTA provides the policy architecture. But brands provide the emotional connection, market confidence, and the demand-side engine that converts opportunity into commercial reality.

This is why ECA continues to work with member States to develop tailored national AfCFTA implementation strategies. These are strategies that help countries identify their comparative advantages, strengthen their unique selling propositions, and position themselves competitively in regional and global markets.



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In an increasingly uncertain global landscape, where investment flows are tightening and development finance is becoming more constrained, Africa must rely more intentionally on itself.

We must trade more with one another.

Invest more in one another.

Build more for one another.

And believe enough in ourselves to buy from one another.

Last year, at the Brand Africa launch, Executive Secretary Claver Gatete outlined five pathways through which ECA would help integrate African brands into the continent's development agenda.

These included investing in youth-driven innovation and creative industries; strengthening regional value chains under the AfCFTA; mainstreaming African brands into trade and investment strategies; developing real-time data systems on consumer sentiment and competitiveness; and advancing partnerships to help finance and globalise promising African enterprises.

I am pleased to say that meaningful progress is being made.

ECA is strengthening its role as a convening institution for implementation-focused development solutions.



United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

That is why ECA is launching the Africa Development Impact Forum — ADIF — as a flagship platform designed to close the persistent gap between policy design and implementation.

ADIF is built on a simple but urgent principle: Africa does not lack ideas. Africa does not lack evidence. Africa does not lack innovation.

What we too often lack is scalable implementation.

The Forum will bring together policymakers, the private sector, researchers, youth innovators, development partners, and practitioners to move from dialogue to action.

Its focus on implementation pathways, accountability, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and measurable outcomes reflects the same challenge we are discussing tonight: how to turn belief into practical economic transformation.

Because ultimately, African brands cannot succeed in isolation.

They need ecosystems that work.

They need infrastructure that delivers.

They need financing systems that understand African realities.

They need policy environments that reward innovation and support scale.



United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

And they need consumers who trust the quality and value of African products.

This is also why conversations around African-led credit rating systems, digital transformation, youth entrepreneurship, climate-smart industrialisation, and regional manufacturing matter so profoundly. These are not separate conversations. They are part of one integrated continental project.

A project to build an Africa that produces competitively, trades confidently, innovates boldly, and tells its own story with authority.

Allow me now to congratulate Brand Africa and its founder and chairman, Thebe Ikalafeng, for sixteen years of consistent and independent work measuring and advancing Africa's brand landscape.

To sustain a continental measurement platform over sixteen years requires vision, persistence, and institutional commitment.

We commend you for helping to ensure that Africa's commercial narrative is measured, debated, and elevated year after year.

I also wish to acknowledge the significance of this being the second consecutive year that Brand Africa is hosted here in Africa Hall. That choice is symbolic and deeply meaningful.

It reminds us that Africa's economic future is inseparable from the founding aspirations of unity, dignity, and self-determination envisioned in this very room.



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I extend warm congratulations to the inaugural Africa CMO 100 — Africa's 100 Most Influential Chief Marketing Officers and brand leaders across the continent and the diaspora. These are the men and women shaping Africa's commercial narrative every day.

Their work is not separate from Africa's development agenda.

It is central to it.

And tonight, we also celebrate the 2026 Brand Africa 100 honourees — the brands that continue to earn trust, inspire confidence, and demonstrate excellence in increasingly competitive markets.

You are helping to redefine how Africa sees itself — and how the world sees Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 50-point gap between belief in Africa and buying African brands will not close on its own.

It will not close through optimism alone.

It will close through deliberate policy.

Through investment in quality and innovation.

Through stronger regional value chains.



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Through implementation discipline.

Through leadership.

And through institutions willing to work together across sectors and borders.

Africa's founders gave us the political vision of unity.

Our responsibility now is to build the economic reality that sustains it.

The time has come for Africa's brands to give the world — and Africans themselves — something impossible to ignore, impossible to overlook, and impossible not to choose.

ECA stands ready to play its role — and together, we can turn belief into lasting economic transformation.

Happy Africa Day, everyone.

I thank you.