Africa–UK High Commissioners and Ambassadors Conference

Delivering Agenda 2063 Through Strategic Africa–UK Partnerships

Church House, Westminster |8th September 2026 | Convened by the African Diplomatic Corps and Development Reimagined

Purpose: to record the priorities, asks and offers raised at the conference. Audience: African High Commissioners and Ambassadors in London, and Development Reimagined.

Overview

The first-ever Africa-UK High Commissioners Africa Day Conference held in London was well attended by approximately 20 Embassies and High Commissions, with approximately 30 organisations attending the discussions in person and virtually. This report summarises the priorities, asks and offers raised across the conference's four sessions: (1) Financing Systems That Deliver, (2) Water and Sanitation as Economic and Resilience Infrastructure, (3) Education, Skills and the Future Workforce, and (4) Trade, Investment and Industrialisation. Opening remarks from the Dean of the African Union (AU) Diplomatic Corps, the UK Minister of State for International Development, Kirsty McNeill MP, and the conference hosts framed the day around Agenda 2063, the UK's 2027 Group of Twenty (G20) presidency, and a shift in the UK's approach "*from donor to investor, from service delivery to system support, from grants to expertise, and from international intervention to local leadership*."

Africa's Priorities

The opening remarks and keynote addresses gave an overview of Africa's priorities going forward; the points below summarise what emerged.

- **Financing sovereignty:** an Africa-led credit rating agency (the African Credit Rating Agency, AfCRA; scheduled to launch on 7 October, headquartered in Mauritius) to correct systematic risk mispricing by the "Big Three" agencies; reform of International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank debt sustainability assessments; deeper local-currency capital markets and diaspora finance.
- **Water and sanitation as economic infrastructure:** reframing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as productivity and resilience infrastructure (not social spending), closing an estimated USD$139–200bn annual investment gap and decentralising utility capacity.
- **Education and skills built for Africa's own needs:** parity of esteem for technical/vocational education, curricula and industrial policy co-designed rather than imported, and stronger African higher-education institutions as alternatives to costly UK study.
- **Value addition and industrialisation:** moving beyond raw-material exports (mineral processing bans in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe, Malawi) into local manufacturing, backed by adequate infrastructure, energy and regulatory readiness.
- **Continental unity over fragmentation:** prioritising the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and African-wide frameworks over bilateral deals that dilute regional integration.
- **Narrative and agency:** more African-owned media to tell the continent's own story internationally (rather than relying on UK/international outlets), alongside African-generated data and credit narratives (including through AfCRA); recognition of African qualifications and professional certification; and redress of historical extraction, including openness to reparations.

Proposals for UK action

- **On debt and financial architecture:** use the 2027 G20 presidency to back IMF quota and World Bank shareholding reform, champion Special Drawing Rights (SDR) rechanneling through multilateral development banks (MDBs) (e.g.

the African Development Bank's hybrid-capital proposal), strengthen the Common Framework, and support faster, fairer debt relief at the 6th African Conference on Debt and Development (AfCoDD VI).

- **On AfCRA:** concrete backing and recognition from the G20 and G7 (Group of Seven) once launched, to give it credibility against the incumbent "Big Three."
- **On trade:** engage Africa as a continental bloc through the AfCFTA rather than country-by-country Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs); extend the Developing Countries Trading Scheme's regional-sourcing provisions; support trade facilitation, digital rules of origin, and non-tariff-barrier reduction via bodies like TradeMark Africa.
- **On investment:** mobilise UK Export Finance, British International Investment and private capital into infrastructure, water, and mineral-processing value chains, paired with technical assistance and project-preparation capacity.
- **On education and migration:** recognise African qualifications on a par with UK ones; redesign visa and post-study pathways to be sector-based rather than employer-locked; reduce the immigration health surcharge; support reciprocal curriculum exchange.
- **On institutions:** back African institutions — including the Alliance of African Multilateral Financial Institutions (AAMFI, the “Africa Club”) and regional development banks — as delivery vehicles, and help unlock the estimated $3tn in assets under management (AUM) held by African pension funds and sovereign wealth funds (cited by Dr Ibrahim Mayaki, AU Special Envoy for Food Systems), rather than relying solely on external development finance institutions (DFIs).

UK policy signals and areas of potential contribution

- **Continued support for AfCFTA:** backing regional institutions and cross-border infrastructure, and amending the Developing Countries Trading Scheme (DCTS) to encourage regional sourcing.
- **A shift in posture:** from donor to investor, with the Minister framing partnership as "a choice of partners, not a partner of choice" and stressing UK humility in an era of more dispersed global influence.
- **G20 presidency (2027) and G7 role:** positioned as leverage points to champion African representation in global financial governance, though panellists were candid that quota/shareholding reform is legally and politically difficult in the near term.
- **Sector-specific expertise:** financial services, professional/legal services (e.g. London Court of International Arbitration links to Kigali and Nairobi arbitration centres), fintech, standards-setting, and education/university partnerships positioned as the UK's comparative advantage, given a shrinking aid budget.
- **Manufacturing Africa and similar programmes:** cited examples include support for pharmaceutical localisation in Ethiopia and higher-value garment manufacturing in Rwanda.
- **Caution and candour from panellists:** UK official development assistance (ODA) is not expected to increase; ODA to water/sanitation and other sectors has been falling; the practical ask is soft power, technical partnership and market-shaping rather than new grant money.

Session-by-Session Highlights

1. Financing Systems That Deliver

- Only 32 of 54 African states hold a public credit rating, leaving the rest priced as high risk by default.
- Panellists called for Africa-appropriate debt sustainability methodologies, recognition of remittance flows in creditworthiness, deeper local-currency bond markets (citing Kenya's shilling bond on the London Stock Exchange (LSE), and de-risking mechanisms for African pension and sovereign wealth funds, which currently allocate under 5% domestically.
- Discussion of SDR issuance/rechanneling, IMF quota reform, and the practical value of a short, sharply worded African policy "ask" for the G20.

2. Water and Sanitation as Economic and Resilience Infrastructure

- 2026 is the AU's Year of Water; framed as an economic (every USD$1 invested returns USD$4, a figure cited by the session moderator), resilience/security, and dignity issue, with a disproportionate burden on women and girls.
- Key barriers cited: risk perception (including by Africa's own pension/sovereign funds), weak project preparation, fragmented local engineering capacity, and the case for local-currency utility financing and decentralised, capacitated utilities (e.g. Bahir Dar, Ethiopia).
- Calls to align with World Bank Water Forward and the December UN Water Conference, and to treat water/food/energy as a policy nexus rather than siloed sectors.

3. Education, Skills and the Future Workforce

- Panellists argued education should be treated as economic infrastructure, tied to a defined industrial strategy, with technical/vocational education elevated to parity with university education.
- Concerns were raised over the UK's non-recognition of African non-medical qualifications, restrictive/employer-locked visas, the high cost of UK study, the underrepresentation of African knowledge in curricula, and the case for reparative and reciprocal partnership.
- Emphasis on African-owned media and narrative, alumni and diaspora networks, and regional strengthening of standout African universities as alternatives to costly UK migration.

4. Trade, Investment and Industrialisation

- Africa's share of UK trade has fallen from 3.1% to 2.9%, and the UK's foreign direct investment (FDI) stock in Africa has dropped from 4% to 2.6% of the UK total, even as absolute trade has grown to roughly £52bn (figures cited by the session moderator).
- Panellists favoured AfCFTA-level engagement over bilateral EPAs (citing the UK–Kenya EPA as a cautionary example), while agreeing bilateral deals still have a role if compatible with continental integration.
- Support was voiced for UK strengths in financial services, standards, legal/arbitration services, and digital trade infrastructure, alongside caution that mineral-export bans need matching processing investment to avoid smuggling and lost revenue.
- Debt, tax justice, and investor–state dispute mechanisms were raised as unresolved structural issues the G20 presidency could address alongside trade.

Closing Note

Closing remarks from Development Reimagined framed the conference as a first step: African High Commissioners and Ambassadors in London were described as the "bridge" for turning the day's ideas - on financing, water, education and trade - into concrete partnerships ahead of the next Africa Day.

This report was prepared by Development Reimagined for the African High Commissioners and Ambassadors in London.