

“I have no doubt that Brazil can help imprint the type of ambition we need”

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### AMINA J. MOHAMMED

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Ms. Amina J. Mohammed is the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group.

Prior to her appointment, Ms. Mohammed served as Minister of Environment of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, where she steered the country’s efforts on climate action and efforts to protect the natural environment.

Ms. Mohammed first joined the United Nations in 2012 as Special Adviser to former Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon with the responsibility for post-2015 development planning. She led the process that resulted in global agreement around the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Ms. Mohammed began her career working on the design of schools and clinics in Nigeria. She served as an advocate focused on increasing access to education and other social services, before moving into the public sector, where she rose to the position of adviser to four successive presidents on poverty, public sector reform, and sustainable development.

Ms. Mohammed has been conferred several honorary doctorates and has served as an adjunct professor, lecturing on international development. The recipient of various global awards, Ms. Mohammed has served on numerous international advisory boards and panels. She is the mother of six children and has four grandchildren. (Source: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/dsg/index.shtml>)

The following is the interview given to CEBRI-Journal in August 2023.

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**In your 2021 TED talk, you emphasized the urgent need for G20 countries, which account for over 80% of global greenhouse emissions, to take the lead in decarbonizing the world economy by 2050. Additionally, you called upon the G20 nations to cease subsidizing fossil fuels and completely phase out the use of coal. India holds the G20 Presidency, with Brazil scheduled to assume the Presidency in 2024, followed by South Africa in 2025. Given this context, how do you believe Global South countries should spearhead discussions on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the G20 framework? Furthermore, how can they ensure that G20 countries adequately address the unique challenges developing nations face in combating global warming and achieving decarbonization?**

**AMINA J. MOHAMMED:** It is true that the Secretary-General and I have underscored in different opportunities that the battle against climate change can only be won with G20 countries leading the change – from the inside out. We have a unique opportunity in our hands. The consecutive G20 Presidencies of Indonesia and India, followed by Brazil and South Africa, offer an anchor for Global South countries to help raise the ambition within the G20 and reposition sustainable development at the center of the global agenda.

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The imperative is clear to all. Climate action and sustainable development are two sides of the same coin, and countries from the South understand that better than any other group of countries. In the immediate term, G20 economies must adopt an SDG stimulus package that will provide low- and middle-income countries with investments and liquidity, and offer debt relief and restructuring. We are talking about a major injection of investment that can lay the ground for green and just transitions. In the medium to longer term, the G20 must lead the type of reforms to the international financing architecture that will enable green transitions at scale. Regulation alone is not enough.

The Secretary-General's Acceleration Agenda is based on a solidarity pact through which all big emitters make extra efforts to cut emissions, and that wealthier economies support emerging

economies to do so. Under this Agenda, G20 countries must cut emissions by 45% by 2030, meaning developed countries must fast forward their net zero deadlines to as close as possible to 2040 and emerging economies as close as possible to 2050.

It is essential that developing countries receive and access all necessary support to transition their economies to be renewable energy-based and climate-resilient. Among the crucial contributions that G20 countries must deliver is ensuring that International Finance Institutions (IFI) such as the World Bank, all multi-lateral development banks (MDBs), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are equipped with the risk appetite, operating models, and financial capacity so that they can support developing countries in implementing the SDGs and the energy transition.

During my recent visit to Brazil, I saw the high ambition that the government has for its G20 Presidency next year. I had very fruitful engagements with authorities – including Minister Mauro Vieira, Minister Marina Silva, and several officials from the Ministry of Finance. I see alignment of vision and drive to take the global efforts forward. In meeting youth, women, indigenous groups, civil society, and the private sector, I saw the vibrancy and strength of the Brazilian society as a whole.

I have no doubt that Brazil can help imprint the type of ambition we need, building on the Presidencies of Indo-

nesia and India and looking ahead to the South African Presidency. This is a unique opportunity that the G20 simply cannot miss.

**In the same TED talk, you eloquently highlighted the remarkable “Great Green Wall Initiative,” initiated by the African Union in 2007. This ambitious project sets out to restore the degraded landscapes of the Sahel region by creating a sprawling green wall of forests that spans from Senegal in the West to Djibouti in the East. You also emphasized the significant challenge of insufficient funding that hampers the progress of this initiative, urging developed countries to honor their commitment under the Paris Agreement funding. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Global Land Outlook of 2002 shed light on various implementation challenges faced by the Great Green Wall Initiative, which extend beyond funding constraints. These challenges encompass the need for robust political support at the highest levels, improved organizational structures and processes, and the importance of fostering coordination among the diverse countries involved in the project. Given these factors, how can this project – with its promises and difficulties – exemplify Africa’s commitment**

## to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a whole?

**AJM:** The Great Green Wall is arguably one of the world's most inspiring land restoration programs. It is an Africa-led, country-owned initiative that does not just plant trees but transforms lives and livelihoods across large swathes of the continent while helping address the climate crisis and advance the implementation of the SDGs. The vision is to restore 100 million hectares of degraded lands by 2030, sequester 250 million tons of carbon, and create 10 million jobs in a region marked by unemployment and migration.

By virtue of its sheer size and ambition, implementing such a large and complex program in the Sahel, especially as one of the harshest regions on Earth, is no easy task. The fact that the Sahel region is inflicted with interconnected political, social, and environmental challenges certainly complicates operations on the ground and yet makes intervention even more compelling.

A new impetus to the Great Green Wall Initiative was given in 2021 at the One Planet Summit in Paris, with US\$ 19 billion pledged by donors and technical support offered by partners. Two years on, 80% of the funding pledged towards the Great Green Wall Accelerator have been programmed across the 11 African nations that are part of the initiative. However, this still falls short of the US\$ 33 billion needed to achieve the Great Green Wall vision.

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Continued political leadership and country ownership, targeted action at all levels, and strengthened institutional arrangements are therefore imperative to realize the vision of this Africa-led movement.

**In the press conference conducted at the United Nations Commission for Africa (ECA) in 2023, you eloquently presented a compelling argument advocating for a new narrative for Africa that moves beyond the surface-level treatment of domestic problems and focuses on addressing their underlying causes. Central to this narrative is the notion of Africa reclaiming its autonomy in determining its own investments and identifying priority areas rather than being subject to external influences. During the interview, you also emphasized that financing poses the most significant challenge in this pursuit. Many crucial investments needed in**

**Africa today are simply unavailable within the confines of the international financial system. To address this issue, you advocated for implementing flexibility clauses, allowing African countries to utilize Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) during times of crisis. Additionally, you highlighted the necessity for a more adaptable debt framework for African nations contending with the adverse effects of the War in Ukraine. Given the unlikely prospect of significant changes occurring within the international financial system in the foreseeable future, how can one sustain a new narrative about Africa without relying on Western international support regarding financial resources and investments? Are there alternatives elsewhere? Can other Global South countries offer alternatives to African countries?**

**AJM:** The global financial system is facing a crisis, requiring urgent reforms. With the 2030 deadline for the SDGs fast approaching, progress towards these goals is slipping further away each day. Due to the recent global crises, millions of Africans have been pushed below the poverty line, reversing decades of progress on poverty reduction. If we continue current trends, an estimated 30% of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa will still be living in extreme poverty in 2030.

Yet, in the current architecture, countries that need access to finance for investment the most face the highest borrowing costs. On average, African countries currently borrow at four to eight times higher rates than high-income countries. For instance, an investment in clean energy, which might be competitive in a developed country, can be prohibitively expensive in many African countries. The high cost of borrowing also leaves countries with the impossible choice of servicing their debt or serving their people. Many African countries spend more on debt interest payments than on education or health.

Africa also faces many headwinds to effectively mobilizing domestic resources, such as containing illicit financial flows. Africa loses more money in a year from illicit flows (US\$ 89 billion) than it receives in foreign direct investment (US\$ 54 billion). Addressing such issues will require both changes to the global tax architecture, along with technical capacity improvements at the national level and political will.

While reforming the international financial system is challenging, it is not insurmountable. As noted in the *2023 Financing for Sustainable Development Report* (United Nations 2023), the current architecture is in flux, with ongoing discussions throughout the international system, including in informal country groupings, such as G20 and the Bridgetown Initiative. The issues are in the agenda of the World Bank and Interna-

tional Monetary Fund (IMF) boards, as well as in other fora.

Nevertheless, the reforms are not keeping pace with the challenges, and bold and ambitious change is urgently needed. This is why the Secretary-General has put forward the SDG Stimulus to increase affordable development finance by US\$ 500 billion per year. The role of Southern-led institutions, such as the New Development Bank, is instrumental to this effort.

In his Policy Brief on Reforms to the International Financial Architecture, the Secretary-General outlines an ambitious path forward for long-term structural change. At the heart of these is a call for reforms to global economic governance to ensure a greater voice for developing countries in the international architecture. Other issues covered include sovereign debt, international public finance, the global financial safety net, sustainable financial markets, and the global tax architecture. Indeed, the African group has taken the lead in supporting negotiations on the global tax architecture at the United Nations.

At the same time, African countries must continue to pursue ways to serve themselves better. Reforms to the international architecture and a global investment push must be matched with and supported by coordinated national action. The SDG Stimulus will only succeed if national policies reignite investment in the SDGs domestically. They are two sides of the same coin.

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To do so, countries must build their domestic productive capabilities and a dynamic domestic business sector to promote decent jobs, productivity, and sustainable growth. This includes strengthening the enabling environment for investment, including supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), addressing informality, and tackling corruption. Efforts should be designed to address countries' biggest investment constraints while building on their natural strengths. Integrated National Financing Frameworks can help countries develop country-owned national plans that respond to countries' needs and institutional frameworks.

Many African countries have already taken great strides in expanding access to finance, and some have become leaders in fintech. Capacity development through peer learning can be critical to helping those countries that are furthest behind. By working together, Africa can become a leader

in transforming the international system as they do in their leadership on international tax cooperation at the UN and building an African-based sustainable development.

**Millions of African-Brazilian girls and women actively search for new role models and heroes who reflect their experiences. They yearn for black women who have triumphed in life, surmounting obstacles to achieve their goals in a society still largely dominated by white men. In Brazil, an impressive feminist black movement has emerged, tirelessly working to reconstruct the country's predominantly white-male historical narrative. This movement aims to reshape Brazil's history by highlighting the pivotal roles played by black women in key moments, individuals who have unfortunately been deliberately omitted from the annals of history. In this context, you inspire many of these women, particularly those engaged in diplomacy and international relations. These women look up to you and seek guidance on navigating and excelling in this realm, especially if they come from humble backgrounds. On a more personal note, what is your message to these women in Brazil, especially to those who want to become diplomats?**

**AJM:** It is an honor to know that my journey has resonated with and serves as an inspiration for African-Brazilian girls. This is an important moment in history, and the voices of the women of Brazil are resonating across the world. African and African-descent women are changing the face of diplomacy in Brazil, but more needs to be done.

*My message to young African-Brazilian women is to stand up and be counted, be proud of your heritage, dig for the courage to challenge the status quo, and always put your best foot forward in whatever you are called to do. Remember, even great individuals started from humble beginnings.*

I encourage the diplomatic community to be vocal advocates for diversity and to actively promote diplomacy as a viable and accessible career option for Afro-Brazilian women. By creating an environment that allows them to thrive, we can best support their advancement because women's equal participation and representation at all levels of decision-making are key to unlocking the transformational changes needed to secure a future we want and need.

Women's engagement in political processes improves such efforts: more inclusive decisions are made, different voices are heard, and solutions are created.

My message to young African-Brazilian women is to stand up and be counted, be proud of your heritage, dig for the courage to challenge the status quo, and always put your best foot forward in whatever you are called to do. Remember, even great individuals started from humble beginnings. Do not view obstacles as hindrances but as opportunities to overcome and grow. And finally, put people first and at the center of everything you do. Establish strong networks and foster meaningful friendships, as friends can become invaluable allies on your path to personal and collective development.

Our world is not in a good place; climate change, debt distress, rising hunger levels, and a growing geopolitical divide have set back the human development index for two years in a row. We cannot achieve our Sustainable Development Goals, the global agenda for people, planet, and prosperity, if we do not bring along half our population. We all must engage with the challenges and remember that development is a global issue. We need to have a united voice, promote and learn from one another in the Decade of Action to deliver the SDGs, and in the lead-up to the SDG Summit in September, we need the voices of women and youth to take the baton from us and continue the legacy and take the lead on social, economic and environmental change. 🇧🇷

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**To cite this work:** Mohammed, Amina J. 2023. "I have no doubt that Brazil can help imprint the type of ambition we need." Interview given to CEBRI-Journal. *CEBRI-Journal* Year 2, No. 8: 246-253.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54827/issn2764-7897.cebri2023.08.06.01.246-253.en>

Interview granted through written medium on August 16, 2023.

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