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From Dialogue to Power: Advancing a Worker-Centred Just Transition in Africa

Reflections from the ITUC-Africa New Year School 2026, Lomé, Togo

Reframing Africa's Transformation Challenge

The 16th edition of the ITUC-Africa New Year School (NYS 2026) convened trade union leaders, policymakers, and civil society actors at a critical juncture for the continent. Despite sustained economic growth in many African countries, structural transformation, decent work, and social justice remain elusive.

Participants framed this not as a failure of growth, but as a failure of distribution, structure, and political direction. The School therefore positioned itself as a strategic and political space focused on shaping alternatives rather than analysing problems.

A clear consensus emerged, Africa's development must be worker-led, justice-driven, and anchored in democratic participation.

Just Transition as a Strategic Entry Point

A central theme of the School was the consolidation of Just Transition as a key framework linking climate action, industrialisation, and social justice.

Participants emphasised that:

- Climate action must deliver decent work and social protection
- Energy systems should be treated as public goods
- Climate finance must prioritise workers and communities, not only infrastructure

The discussions also highlighted the risks of green extractivism, where Africa remains locked into exporting raw materials with limited value addition under the banner of a global energy transition.

In response, trade unions called for a strategic repositioning linking climate policy to industrial policy, value chains, and economic sovereignty.

Strengthening African Coordination: The Role of the Advisory and Advocacy Group (AAG)

A key moment for FES TUCC during NYS 2026 was the Strategic Dinner with Mrs. Angelina Mensah, African Group of Negotiators (AGN) Lead Coordinator for Just Transition, which explored how to enhance African coherence in global climate negotiations.

The discussions identified a structural gap: limited coordination between negotiators, labour movements, and civil society, combined with insufficient technical support for African positions.

The Advisory and Advocacy Group (AAG) is increasingly recognised as an expert group that can help overcome this gap.

Participants outlined a three-tier coordination architecture:

- Political Level: Alignment between the African Group of Negotiators (AGN) and labour (ITUC-Africa)
- Technical Level: AAG providing research, analysis, and evidence-based inputs
- Coordination Platform: Joint spaces for pre-negotiation alignment and narrative development

This positions the AAG as a technical backbone to African climate diplomacy, strengthening both coherence and negotiating power.

From Technical Capacity to Political Influence

A critical insight from the discussions was that technical capacity is a precondition for political influence in global negotiations.

African negotiators often operate under conditions of:

- Asymmetrical power dynamics
- Limited access to technical expertise
- Weak coordination and continuity

The AAG can play a catalytic role by:

- Providing policy briefs and negotiation inputs
- Supporting capacity building and mentorship
- Support developing coherent African narratives on Just Transition, finance, and industrialisation

This is particularly relevant in complex and high-stakes areas such as carbon markets, climate finance, and industrial policy.



Implications for Trade Union Strategy

NYS 2026 signalled a broader strategic shift for trade unions in Africa:

- From observers to agenda-setters
- From reactive engagement to proactive leadership
- From sectoral advocacy to systemic transformation

Trade unions are increasingly positioning themselves within key policy arenas, including climate governance, trade negotiations, and social protection systems.

This reflects a growing recognition that Africa's transformation requires not only economic reform, but political agency rooted in organised labour.

Looking Ahead: Consolidating the AAG Platform

The discussions in Lomé point to a clear next phase for the AAG and its partners:

- Consolidating the AAG into a structured and operational platform
- Formalising engagement with African negotiators
- Strengthening alliances across labour, civil society, and policy actors
- Advancing a worker-centred Just Transition agenda linked to industrialisation

The objective is not only to improve participation in global processes, but to shape outcomes in line with African priorities.

Conclusion

The ITUC-Africa New Year School 2026 reaffirmed a central political message; Africa's transformation will not be driven by markets alone, but by organised, worker-led power grounded in social justice.

In this context, Just Transition is not only an environmental imperative; it is a strategic pathway for economic transformation, democratic governance, and social equity.