ECA Calls on SADC to Turn Mineral and Agricultural Wealth into Industrial Prosperity

Durban, South Africa - 17 August 2026 - The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) called on Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states today to accelerate the transformation of the region's vast mineral and agricultural wealth into industrial production, regional value chains and lasting economic prosperity.

Addressing Heads of State and Government at the 46th Ordinary SADC Summit, ECA Executive Secretary Claver Gatete delivered a stark assessment of Africa's position in the global economy and a clear call to action. "*Africa exports minerals; others manufacture batteries, electric vehicles and renewable energy technologies. Africa exports agricultural commodities; others process, package and market higher-value food products*."

He highlighted the extraordinary endowment of Southern Africa, rich deposits of platinum, lithium, diamonds, manganese, cobalt and copper, alongside fertile land, manufacturing capacity, financial markets and transport corridors linking the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Africa holds approximately 30% of global reserves of critical energy transition minerals, for which demand could more than triple by 2030 under net-zero scenarios.

Yet despite this wealth, minerals contribute only 7% of direct employment in SADC. A gap that points directly to the opportunity. ECA research underscores the economic case: building a 10,000-tonne battery precursor plant in the Democratic Republic of the Congo would cost approximately $39 million, roughly three times less than an equivalent facility in the United States. While also reducing emissions compared with existing supply chains routed through China.

Mr. Gatete outlined six priorities for the region to advance industrialisation:

1. Mobilize financing and partnerships at scale. Governments must lead but cannot finance this transformation alone. Development finance institutions, sovereign wealth funds, pension funds and the private sector must prepare bankable regional projects in energy, transport, industrial parks and agro-industrial development.
2. Accelerate mineral beneficiation and regional critical mineral value chains. The objective must be integrated regional industries spanning extraction, refining, precursor materials, component manufacturing and finished products.
3. Transform agriculture into an engine of industrialisation. Investment in seed systems, mechanization, irrigation, storage, food processing, cold chains and export infrastructure can reduce food import dependence, create jobs and strengthen climate resilience.
4. Make fertilizer and agricultural input security a strategic regional priority. Southern Africa has natural gas resources, phosphate reserves and markets to develop regional fertilizer value chains that lower costs for farmers while creating industrial capabilities.

5. Strengthen regional value chains through the AfCFTA. The African Continental Free Trade Area provides the framework to combine mineral, energy and manufacturing advantages by reducing trade barriers and facilitating cross-border investment.
6. Accelerate investment in energy and enabling infrastructure. Industrialisation cannot flourish without reliable, affordable and sustainable energy, efficient transport networks and modern digital connectivity.

ECA and the African Development Bank are working on African Critical Mineral Value Chains and related Strategic Corridors. These include the Battery and Electric Vehicle value chain (DRC, Zambia, Tanzania, South Africa); the Lithium Industrialisation Corridor (Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana and South Africa); the Graphite Processing Corridor (Mozambique, Madagascar and Tanzania); and the Iron Ore, Manganese and Green Industrial Materials Corridor (Guinea, Mauritania, Liberia, South Africa, Gabon, Zimbabwe and Namibia). *"Southern Africa has the minerals, agriculture, energy, finance, ports, skills and markets to build competitive regional production networks. The pathway is clear: implementation at scale, coordinated regional action and sustained investment."*

ECA reaffirmed its commitment to working alongside SADC, the African Development Bank and all partners to turn this vision into reality.

Related reading: SADC's critical minerals can power Africa's structural transformation — Op-Ed by Claver Gatete, Executive Secretary, ECA