



**WORKING PAPER**

**SEVENTH WORLDWIDE AIR TRANSPORT CONFERENCE  
(ATCONF/7)**

**Montréal, HQ, 16 to 20 November 2026**

**Agenda Item 1: Overview of developments in the field of air transport**

**1.2: Air transport in ICAO's long-term strategic plan: Accelerating aviation towards 2050**

**STRENGTHENING ICAO'S AIR TRANSPORT DEVELOPMENT FUNCTION FOR  
BALANCED GLOBAL CONNECTIVITY AND GROWTH**

(Presented by Eswatini on behalf of 54 Member States of the African Civil Aviation Commission<sup>2</sup>)

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The *Convention on International Civil Aviation* entrusts ICAO with fostering the planning and development of international air transport and promoting the development of all aspects of international civil aeronautics. ICAO's Strategic Plan 2026-2050 confirms economic development as one of six interdependent Strategic Goals. Air transport development is one of the principal outcomes of the international civil aviation system and should be pursued in a balanced and mutually reinforcing relationship with safety, security, efficient air navigation, facilitation and environmental sustainability.

The institutional capacity devoted to this function is not yet commensurate with its global scope. ICAO Doc 10229 allocates CAD 16.252 million, or 4.3 per cent of the 2026-2028 Regular Budget, and 27.5 full-time-equivalent positions to the Economic Development Strategic Goal. The same document records that funding gaps have caused a loss of expertise on air transport liberalization and economic contributions, and reduced in-country technical-assistance capacity provides a clear basis for an evidence-based institutional and capacity review, particularly in view of the persistent capacity, affordability and connectivity gaps affecting developing regions.

This paper therefore proposes an institutional and capacity review and a strengthened, results-based ICAO air transport development function supported by adequate core resources, expertise, partnerships and a geographically balanced workforce, with the regional knowledge and expertise required to respond effectively to the differing development needs of regions. It also calls for a global work programme covering regional diagnostics, common indicators, policy and implementation support, investment and resource mobilization, and systematic consideration of economic-development impacts across ICAO programmes.

**Action:** The Conference is invited to:

- a) recognize air transport development as a principal function of ICAO's Convention mandate and Strategic Plan 2026-2050;
- b) request the ICAO Council consider directing the Secretary General to undertake an institutional and capacity review of ICAO's air transport development function at Headquarters and in Regional Offices;

<sup>1</sup> English and French versions provided by Eswatini.

<sup>2</sup> Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

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| <p>c) request ICAO Council to establish a strengthened, results-based Air Transport Development Work Programme, including common indicators, review tools and differentiated implementation support, in cooperation with regional organizations, States, industry and financial institutions; and</p> <p>d) recommend the allocation of adequate budgetary provision and a professionally-qualified and geographically-balanced workforce, with due attention to the representation of qualified professionals from developing countries, with the regional knowledge and expertise required to respond effectively to the differing development needs of regions and Member States.</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Strategic Goal:</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | This working paper relates to the Strategic Goals: <i>The Economic Development of Air Transport Assures the Delivery of Economic Prosperity and Societal Well-Being for All and No Country Left Behind.</i>                                                                                                                                                            |
| <i>Financial implications:</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Implementation will require reprioritization and additional human and non-staff resources within ICAO's Regular Programme. Voluntary contributions, secondments and partnerships may complement, but should not replace, predictable core funding.                                                                                                                     |
| <i>References:</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Doc 7300, <i>Convention on International Civil Aviation</i> (Chicago Convention), Article 44.<br>ICAO Strategic Plan 2026-2050<br>Doc 10229, <i>Budget of the Organization 2026-2027-2028</i><br>Doc 10227, <i>Assembly Resolutions in Force (As of 3 October 2025)</i> (A42-26)<br>ICAO Annual Report of the Council 2024, <i>The World of Air Transport in 2024.</i> |

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The *Convention on International Civil Aviation* establishes an integrated mandate for international civil aviation. Article 44 requires ICAO to foster the planning and development of international air transport, meet the needs of the peoples of the world for safe, regular, efficient and economical air transport, ensure fair opportunity for States, and promote the development of all aspects of international civil aeronautics.

1.2 This mandate is broader than technical standard-setting. It requires the Organization to help create the policy, regulatory, institutional, financial and market conditions through which air services, airports, air navigation services and related systems can develop and deliver connectivity and socio-economic benefits.

1.3 Air transport development should therefore not be treated as an ancillary activity. It is one of the principal outcomes of the international civil aviation system and should be pursued in a balanced and mutually reinforcing relationship with ICAO's other Strategic Goals

1.4 ICAO's Strategic Plan 2026-2050 reflects this interdependence. It identifies economic development as one of six Strategic Goals and calls for a sound, economically viable and affordable civil aviation system. Its mission is to lead international civil aviation as a driver of social and economic development while enhancing safety, security and environmental sustainability and supporting States' capabilities.

1.5 ATConf/7 provides a timely opportunity to consider whether ICAO's institutional and implementation capacity is aligned with this mandate, the new Strategic Plan and Assembly Resolution A42-26, which calls for economic-development considerations to be integrated systematically across ICAO activities and programmes.

## **2. DISCUSSION**

### **ICAO's air transport development mandate and institutional responsibility**

2.1 The Air Transport Bureau carries a broad portfolio spanning economic development, aviation security and facilitation, and environmental protection. It supports several Council committees and global programmes; develops and updates Standards and Recommended Practices in Annexes 9, 16 and 17; prepares policies and guidance; and maintains aviation data, statistics, forecasts and economic analysis. The breadth and importance of these responsibilities make adequate specialization and capacity in each field essential.

2.2 The economic-development function itself now extends well beyond the periodic preparation of policy guidance. States increasingly require support on connectivity and market access, affordability and cost structures, competition and consumer protection, seamless mobility, airport and air navigation services economics, aviation data and forecasting, infrastructure planning and financing, crisis resilience, digital transformation and the economic implications of environmental measures and emerging technologies.

2.3 Assembly Resolution A42-26 reinforces this implementation role. It requires ICAO to keep its guidance, studies and statistics current and relevant; disseminate its policies; monitor and assist implementation by States; give particular importance to infrastructure financing and capacity development; cooperate with regional bodies; and integrate economic-development considerations across the Organization's work.

### **Evidence of a resource and capability gap**

2.4 Doc 10229 indicates that ICAO allocates CAD 16.252 million, representing 4.3 per cent of the CAD 376.577 million Regular Budget for 2026–2028, and 27.5 full-time-equivalent positions to the Economic Development Strategic Goal. The document also acknowledges that funding gaps have resulted in the loss of essential expertise and reduced in-country technical-assistance capacity, particularly affecting developing States. This institutional evidence warrants a review capable of assessing the practical consequences, including unmet State requests and other areas in which implementation support may be insufficient.

2.5 Without sufficient analytical and implementation capacity, supported by a professionally qualified and geographically representative workforce with the regional knowledge and expertise required to respond effectively to the differing development needs of Member States, global guidance may not be updated at the pace of market and technological change, regional disparities may not be adequately diagnosed, and States may receive limited practical support to translate ICAO policies into national and regional reforms. This also weakens the evidence base for assessing how technical and policy measures interact with connectivity, affordability, competitiveness and investment.

### **Unequal development requires differentiated support**

2.6 The ATConf/7 agenda recognizes persistent capacity and connectivity gaps, structural imbalances, cost pressures and unequal connectivity growth. It gives particular attention to developing States, including Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, whose economic and social development depends heavily on reliable air connectivity.

2.7 ICAO's 2024 statistics illustrate the scale of regional disparity. Africa accounted for only 2.2 per cent of global scheduled passenger traffic measured in revenue passenger-kilometres and 2.6 per cent of global available seat-kilometres. Its domestic traffic represented 0.6 per cent of the global total. These figures do not reflect a lack of potential; they demonstrate the need for sustained attention to the structural conditions that constrain market development.

2.8 Thin markets, fragmented networks, high operating and travel costs, limited access to capital, restrictive market-access arrangements, infrastructure gaps and uneven regulatory and data capacity require differentiated and regionally anchored support. Uniform global guidance, without implementation tools and sustained regional engagement, will not by itself close these gaps. ICAO can help States and regions establish the enabling conditions for growth through improved policy guidance, market-access reform, regulatory convergence, reliable aviation data, infrastructure planning and financing, airport and air navigation services economics, and practical implementation assistance. Regional organizations can help adapt global policies, pool expertise, support convergence and monitor implementation across groups of States.

### **Elements of a strengthened ICAO air transport development function**

2.9 ICAO should undertake an institutional and capacity review of its air transport development function, covering Headquarters and Regional Offices. The review should assess mandates, organizational arrangements, staffing and skills, non-staff programme resources, regional presence, data and analytical capability, and technical-assistance demand. It should identify immediate measures for the current triennium and requirements for the 2029-2031 Business Plan and Budget.

2.10 The review should support a strengthened, results-based Air Transport Development Work Programme under the Strategic Plan 2026-2050. The programme should establish common indicators and cost-effective review tools covering connectivity, affordability, market access, infrastructure and investment, regulatory capability, competitiveness and aviation's contribution to national development. regional diagnostics and publicly accessible dashboards should enable progress to be measured and gaps to be addressed.

2.11 ICAO should also strengthen its convening and resource-mobilization role. Structured cooperation with multilateral development banks, financial institutions, industry and development partners can help States translate aviation priorities into investable projects and coordinated capacity-building programmes. Voluntary resources and seconded expertise can extend delivery, but predictable Regular Programme funding is necessary to preserve ICAO's independence, continuity and global leadership.

2.12 Finally, major ICAO programmes and proposed measures in safety, security, air navigation, facilitation and environmental protection should systematically consider economic-development, connectivity, affordability and implementation impacts, particularly for developing States. Such assessment would inform policy design, sequencing, transition arrangements and implementation assistance, without weakening, delaying or compromising the integrity of ICAO's safety, security, air navigation or environmental objectives.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

3.1 ICAO's economic-development function is firmly grounded in the Chicago Convention, reaffirmed in Assembly Resolution A42-26 and elevated in the Strategic Plan 2026-2050. Its effective delivery is essential if the projected growth of international aviation is to produce affordable connectivity and shared prosperity rather than widen existing regional disparities.

3.2 The issue is not to rank air transport development against safety, security, air navigation or environmental protection. It is to recognize that each depends on the others and that air transport development is one of the principal outcomes of the aviation system. Balanced institutional attention is therefore required across ICAO's interdependent Strategic Goals.

3.3 ICAO's acknowledgement of lost economic expertise and reduced in-country technical-assistance capacity provides a clear basis for an evidence-based review. The review can identify the appropriate organizational, programmatic and resource response. A strengthened results-based work programme, supported by adequate core resources and a professionally qualified and geographically

representative workforce with the regional knowledge and expertise required to respond to differing development needs, would help ICAO convert its mandate and policies into practical outcomes for States.

3.4 Strengthening this function will also advance the *No Country Left Behind* Goal by ensuring that developing regions are not only able to comply with global aviation requirements, but can build the connectivity, institutions, infrastructure and markets needed to participate effectively and sustainably in international air transport.

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