
Championing Africa's Renaissance

Address by Kofi Annan to

Africa 21: New Challenges for Africa

Yaounde 19 May 2010

Monsieur le Président de la République du Cameroun,

Monsieur le Président de la Commission de l'Union Africaine,

Mesdames et messieurs les Ministres,

Mesdames et messieurs les Ambassadeurs,

Mesdames et messieurs,

C'est pour moi un grand honneur d'être aujourd'hui à Yaoundé pour célébrer cet événement important de l'histoire du Cameroun et de notre continent.

C'est aussi un immense plaisir d'être entourés d'amis chers. Pour cela, j'aimerais exprimer ma profonde gratitude envers le Président Biya et son gouvernement, qui ont organisé une manifestation de cette ampleur qui marquera longtemps les esprits.

Let me begin by congratulating the 17 countries that are celebrating their Golden Jubilee this year – and in particular our generous host, the Republic of Cameroon.

[Bakassi]

All these countries have come a very long way since independence. Freed from colonialism they have strived to become valued members of the international community. Freed from the will of European capitals they have sought their own governance paths and political directions and built national identities.

Many of these countries have worked hard to develop functioning economies and political systems that prioritise the needs of their own citizens, rather than distant consumers.

Many of us in the room are, as the French say, “of a certain age”. The change we have seen in our lifetimes has been enormous. I remember well how I witnessed

Ghana's independence as a nineteen year old student beaming with hope. 50 years later, many of the hopes I harboured that day in Accra have been realized.

The last decade, in particular, has been one of remarkable progress. Unnecessary and cruel wars have come to an end. Increases in trade, domestic and foreign investments have fuelled impressive economic growth rates. New partners are being found, democracy and human rights have taken root, governance has improved, civil society has been empowered, an agricultural revolution is beginning to take hold and opportunities have been extended to ever larger segments of the population.

After a gloomy year dominated by the global crisis, economic growth rates are already climbing again, restoring the continent's place as one of the fastest-growing regions of the world.

All this is cause for celebration and much more than many outside commentators are ready to acknowledge. However, I cannot help but compare our social and economic progress to that of Asia where many countries also gained their independence half a century ago.

Let me just give one example: In the 1960s, the per capita income of South Korea was virtually the same as that of Sudan. Yet today, South Korea is one of the richest countries in the world and a respected member of groups like the G20 and the OECD while Sudan trails every conceivable league table.

Of course, not every country in Africa has struggled like Sudan and not every country in Asia has been as successful or stable as South Korea. But in general, the unfavourable comparison between the two continents holds.

But this may be about to change.

As we have heard throughout this conference, opportunities for progress abound, both at home and abroad.

At home, our wealth in natural, human and renewable resources provides a strong basis for social and economic progress. Our land, too, has enormous potential. If properly invested in and used, it can not only meet Africa's food needs, but also help feed the world.

This wealth is also increasing Africa's geo-strategic importance. At the moment, attention is focused on our oil, gas, minerals, and to some extent, on our agricultural lands. But as the unsustainability and damage created by current models of economic growth and energy consumption become more obvious in richer countries, Africa's potential for low carbon growth, effective land use for food production and renewable energy generation will become more important, and integral to the world's search for more viable and sustainable development.

Ever stronger partnerships within the global South are multiplying social and economic opportunities. Investments by countries like China are helping to diversify our economies, address infrastructure deficits, lower the cost of business and facilitate trade. Goods and services are becoming more accessible to the poor.

Abroad, Africa is becoming an increasingly important and vocal player. The ascent of the G20 and the emergence of new groupings around specific objectives is an encouraging sign that outdated structures of global governance are changing. So are recent reform plans of the IMF and the World Bank.

Comprising a quarter of the world's states and one billion people, Africa is a sleeping giant about to be awoken. The Copenhagen Summit has already provided a small glimpse of what this giant can achieve when it speaks up. While the summit was a disappointment, the Africa Group did assert itself and helped to shape the final Accord, particularly with respect to financing for developing countries.

At home and abroad, investors are increasingly recognizing the potential of African markets and the rich talents of the continent's people. In many countries, regulatory reforms are helping to stimulate the private sector and release the creative energies of the men and women of Africa. At the same time, the private sector is beginning to understand how it can add social and environmental value without compromising core business objectives.

Lastly, the rapid spread of modern technology like mobile phones is changing the way Africa's economies function, its people interact, and services are delivered. It is opening the door to an entire new world full of possibilities and promise.

These and other opportunities are real, but they are also under threat. They are under threat from global dynamics like climate change and economic volatility. But they are also under threat from within the continent – from new forms of insecurity and the spread of ungovernable areas; from the rise of organised crime and illicit activities; from the discrimination against women; from the inability to feed a growing population; and from our own complacency.

For the opportunities I have mentioned will not be realized automatically – we cannot take further progress for granted. We need to work hard for it.

We know what is required; we have heard it from many of today's speakers. It is strong leadership and good governance that will make the difference, both at home and on the global stage.

Despite some glaring setbacks, the last decades have already seen progress in the quality of African governance. But there is still a long way to go. There are still too many instances of corruption, of elite capture of resources, of growing inequality in wealth and opportunity, abuse of electoral processes and selective adherence to the rule of law.

We need to see the fulfillment of commitments in our national constitutions and in the AU Constitutive Act, promises kept on good governance, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. Across the continent, civil society needs to be given more space and rights to be able to hold leaders accountable for their actions and make an essential contribution to nation-building efforts. Women finally need to be given the rights and access to opportunities that correspond to their central role in our societies and economies. Gender equity is key to good governance, social stability, and sustainable development.

We must also see much greater transparency in the way governments manage revenues, particularly those from the extraction of natural resources. They must be turned into results for all citizens, not just the elite few. The same is true for our agricultural lands which increasingly attract the interest of foreign investors.

We need more progress, too, on consolidating and enhancing regional integration and cooperation. Africa's international competitiveness and ability to meet its trade potential depend on much greater economies of scale, and on improvements in transport, energy, and communications infrastructure. This African agenda must be driven by strong African financial, economic and political institutions. The African Development Bank and the African Union, our springboard for cooperation within and beyond Africa, need to be further strengthened. There is great scope for more concerted action to ensure that Africa's place in global decision-making fora is secured, and that its voice is heard.

Throughout this conference we have heard how stronger partnerships within the global South are already having a positive impact on the continent. But much more is possible – and necessary. The main challenge for African leaders is to manage these and other partnerships in a way that is mutually beneficial and generates tangible and lasting benefits for their citizens. In doing so, they can draw upon the experience of their partners – such as China's pioneering activities in low carbon energy, India's in agriculture, and Brazil's in social protection. Partnerships that boost trade but not green growth and poverty reduction represent a wasted opportunity. Partnerships that do not include all stakeholders, including civil society, will not work. Governments cannot do it alone.

As we move ahead we must recognize that solid societies are built on three pillars. Security, development, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. There can be no long term security without development and there can be no long term development without security. And no society can long remain prosperous without due respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The challenges before us are great. As we celebrate our successes, we must not forget that hundreds of millions of Africans continue to live in poverty and insecurity, without access to adequate food, health, education and other services, in

conditions that have not improved since independence. But the many success stories of the last 50 years have proven that rapid progress is possible – even in the most difficult circumstances.

This, and the extraordinary talent and energy of Africa's people, and the impatience of the younger generation to transform the quality of life and assert Africa's place in the world, gives me the confidence that the next fifty years will be even better.

It is the next generation of leaders that must pick up the challenge from all of us in this room. From what I have seen on my travels throughout the continent, they are well up to the task. We just need to give them the chance.

Thank you very much

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