

SPEECH

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Young people for a new governance in Africa

Your Excellency the Prime Minister, government leaders, members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps, young leaders of Africa, ladies and gentlemen:

I am honored and deeply touched to have been given this opportunity to address this august gathering on the occasion of the Third Pan-African Youth Leadership Summit.

In my dual capacity as Under Secretary- General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UNAIDS, I am particularly excited by the chance to contribute to fair and transparent discussions on the role and the place of youth in Africa—discussions which have not always been fair and transparent in the past.

Let me begin by congratulating the organizers of this Summit, not only for their work of recent months, but also for their vision. They have brought together under one roof more than 1 000 young Africans from diverse backgrounds to conduct an independent and objective analysis of the challenges and to outline out-of-the box ways of thinking and acting.

Let me pause a moment to thank, from the bottom of my heart, my brother and friend, the Prime Minister of Burkina Faso Luc Adolphe Tiao, whose concern for youth issues has been demonstrated on numerous occasions.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants: This Pan-African Youth Summit is extremely timely. It is being held at a critical period in the evolution of our societies, when the world starts to collectively reflect on the Post-2012 development agenda.

As we all know, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a commitment by Member States of the United Nations to eradicate poverty. The 2015 deadline, and the debates now beginning around the architecture of Post -2015 development, offer an unprecedented opportunity to carry out a comprehensive stocktaking on several fronts.

Africa's ascent is real and sustainable

First, Africa is on the move, and its ascent is unstoppable. Some skeptics have dismissed the rapid growth of African economies during the last decade as a temporary phenomenon.

It is not. This cyclic expansion is sustainable, diverse and rooted in emerging growth sectors. It offers millions of poor real opportunities for social mobility and economic empowerment.

The dynamic evolution unfolding before us is wrong-footing the cynics and other doomsayers who have always maintained that Africa will never emerge from dictators and disasters to initiate its development. But progress is real, visible, impressive and well established: the figures are there to prove it.

During the past 12 years, real GDP growth in 48 African states has been maintained at an annual average of 5% to 7%. Six of the world's countries fastest growing economies are African.

Africa is progressing especially in the field of the HIV response. We can say today that our efforts have helped to break the trajectory of the epidemic and reverse the dynamics of new infections. Thirteen of the most affected countries in Africa have reduced new infections by more than 50% since 2001.

In recent years, access to treatment has grown from 50,000 to more than 6.4 million, bringing a significant decrease in the number of deaths and children orphaned due to AIDS. We are going to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of the virus very soon. Several African countries have reached the coverage thresholds guaranteeing elimination. For the first time since the beginning of the epidemic, we have moved out of the desperation phase and fully entered into an era of hope and optimism.

Your Excellency Mr. Prime Minister, I do hope that your legacy in Burkina Faso will be one of a new generation without AIDS. It is possible and it can be achieved under your leadership.

Africa will experience tough challenges in its historic transition

Second, the remarkable growth of African economies on the continent carries both opportunities and challenges. Unbalanced and inequitable growth, in which profits are not shared, will result in an increase in the number of poor and vulnerable people, and weakened capacity of society to maintain peace and social cohesion.

Let's say it here clearly: There will be no human development or sustainable social progress if large segments of the population are marginalized and deprived of their basic human rights. The Arab Spring, which has captivated our collective imagination, showed us what happens when the benefits of strong economic growth are confiscated by despotic and corrupt regimes, unable to meet the legitimate aspirations of their youth for more freedom and democracy.

Our world and our continent need more social justice and a fairer distribution of opportunities. We need growth that is inclusive and equitable and supports job creation and social progress for the majority. This is what the young people of Africa are demanding. This is the objective of their combat.

African youth will lead the change

Third, more than any other societal demographic, African youth will be the architects and builders of the future of our continent.

Times change, and young people can no longer be swept aside. You already have the knowledge and tools that allow you to understand better than your predecessors—and more quickly—the major changes underway that are shaping the world of tomorrow.

Young people, with their mastery of the tools and concepts of the technological revolution that is sweeping our planet offers, have in their hands an irresistible lever to influence the choice of development models that govern our world after 2015. More than ever, young people refuse to be passive recipients. They want to be engaged actors whose efforts will shake everything up.

Examples abound of young people who embody the dynamism, creativity, initiative, risk-taking and ambition of youth. Allow me to name a few to illustrate my point: Tchadjobo Alassane, Director-General of Groupe Kilivision; Seynabou Dia, founder of Global Mind Consulting; Aboubacar Kourouma, creator of the start-up Wontanara; and Moussa Yacine Sidibé, who just three weeks ago founded Futur Answerz, the first youth platform for peace and good governance in Africa.

Africa must invest strategically in young people

Finally, investing in youth is a prerequisite for further progress. According to expert forecasts, in less than two generations, the population of young Africans will grow by 340 million, while the number of young people in Europe, Asia and South America will decline. In the year 2035, the largest population of working age—and therefore the main potential labor force of the globalized world in which we live—will be African.

This is a huge challenge, but also a major asset for the continent. As Mo Ibrahim said, “These young people are, in a way, the greatest natural resource the continent has. It is therefore essential to help them realize their potential. Our collective ability to offer them not only acceptable employment, but also encouraging and stimulating opportunities, is a major challenge.”

As we open the Third Pan-African Youth Leadership Summit in Ouagadougou, we must remember that youth is, and will remain, a major test for Africa in the years to come. But if our investments are fast, smart and targeted to develop its potential, we can make youth a positive force for social change and progress. Several lines of thought and political action can be explored to address the challenge of youth and capitalize on the enormous potential it represents for our continent;

The first is the "demographic bonus" or "demographic dividend" of a growing population. Due to the remarkable progress in the field of health, maternal and child mortality has been in clear decline for more than two decades. Fertility—that is to say, the number of live births per woman of childbearing age—followed the same path, leading to the onset of a demographic transition in the majority of African countries.

This natural evolution offers the continent a unique opportunity to create a large workforce of young, educated people to feed its economic growth. But this can only happen if significant, sustainable and meaningful investments are made in education, health, vocational training and employment.

The second area of potential is investment in the establishment of social safety nets in Africa to reduce the vulnerability of young people and prepare them to better withstand modern social ills such as alcoholism and drug addiction. In the same vein, it is important to undertake concerted efforts to encourage the establishment of pension funds and other sources of long-term capital investments that can support medium- and long-term measures for the creation of jobs and wealth.

The third is related to the challenges of Africa's rapid urbanization, the impact of which will be felt permanently by young people, particularly in relation to their educational needs, employment, protection against vulnerabilities and political participation. In the same vein, we must reflect anew on the need to evolve the informal sector—whose space for growth has reached its limit—in order to integrate a diverse pattern of job creation and wealth.

The fourth area of potential is the reform of our educational systems to align with the needs of our work sectors, meeting the challenges of the emerging knowledge-based economy centered on information technology and communication.

Finally, there is opportunity for a new social movement to emerge—one in which young people demand greater participation in debates on issues of development and social justice. Recent experience in the HIV response has shown that young people are able to use social networking and other emerging media to create spaces for dialogue and virtual exchange.

About a year ago, 5 000 young activists from 79 countries decided to define the contribution of the youth of the world to the HIV/AIDS response. They formed an independent committee that drafted specific recommendations for how UNAIDS can better involve young people in the response. Young people called this initiative "CrowdOutAIDS." The document that emerged was published online in October 2011.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear participants: Investing in youth is a guarantee for the present and savings for the future. As the saying goes, "Youth is not the future of Africa, it is the present." We must invest now to determine the choices that define the contours of the Africa of tomorrow. That is why I propose to establish a Global Commission to conduct a prospective reflection on the advent of a world without AIDS. This commission will include a Youth Subcommittee. I hope that Burkina will be the starting point.

Thank you.

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The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners to maximize results for the AIDS response. Learn more at unaids.org and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.