

ADDRESS OF THE PATRON OF THE TMF, THABO MBEKI,

AT THE UNDP-UN HABITAT 'YOUTH 21 GLOBAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP FORUM ON INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE': NAIROBI, KENYA; MARCH 17, 2012.

TASKS OF THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD.

Ms Rebeca Grynspan, UN Under-Secretary General,

Ambassador Sahle-Worke Zewde, Under Secretary General of the UN and Director General of the UN Office in Nairobi and other officials of the UNDP,

Ms Joan Clos, Executive Director of UN-Habitat,

Distinguished participants at this important Global Youth Leadership Forum:

I would like to pay tribute to UN-Habitat and the UNDP for convening this important Forum which has brought together young people from many parts of the world, and thank them for giving me the opportunity to make some comments which I hope you will find of some use.

In this context I would imagine that the Forum will give precedence to the views of the youth participants, rather than those among us who graduated out of the youth echelon many decades ago.

This is particularly important given the historic responsibility of the youth to determine its future.

Before I proceed any further, I would like to apologise that my comments will relate only to Africa, the area of the world with which I am most familiar. However I hope that at least some of these comments will be of general application.

In October last year, the African Development Bank, the African Union, the UN Economic Commission for Africa and the ILO launched a 'Joint Initiative on Job Creation for Youth in Africa'.

In a statement about this Initiative, the ILO said:

“The youngest population in the world comes from Africa. Youngsters make up more than two thirds of this region’s population, yet are more likely than adults to be unemployed...This serious jobs gap needs to be addressed rapidly or else it could translate into social tensions as recently witnessed during the Arab Spring.”

It also quoted the President of the Pan African Youth Union, Mr. Ben Duntoye, as having said:

“Youth is a vital force of society. We need a paradigm shift: we must take charge of our own destinies as Africans...Young people must be given opportunities to be exposed and to obtain professional experience. We are at the forefront of changing Africa and the world. We support what happened in Tunisia. We will continue to fight for economic freedom to change the situation of (the) youth in Africa.”

I would venture to say that the entirety of the political establishment in Africa and on all Continents would readily repeat these sentiments – that the youth is a ‘vital force of society’ and that the youth must be empowered to be ‘at the forefront of changing Africa and the world’.

Indeed these are the basic theses which have informed the very rationale for the convening of this Forum, with which theses I fully agree.

Nobody can deny the reality of the African demography, which emphasizes the fact of the so-called ‘youth bulge’.

As a consequence of this, in its December 17, 2011 edition, the magazine ‘*The Economist*’, published an article headed ‘*Miracle or Malthus?*’, and said “*Some Africans think they face demographic disaster, others that they could reap a demographic dividend. They will probably get neither.*”

The article went further to say:

“African demography is unique. It is the only continent that will double in size, reaching 2 billion people by 2045 at current rates.”

This uniqueness derives from the fact of the ‘youth bulge’, according to which, as the ILO said, “youngsters make up more than two thirds” of Africa’s population.

In an article entitled ‘*Africa’s Youthful Population: Risk or Opportunity*’, Lori S. Ashford, then of the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), wrote:

“Africa’s young people will be the driving force behind economic prosperity in future decades, but only if policies and programmes are in place to enhance their opportunities and encourage smaller families...Population change is not the only force shaping Africa’s development. But failure to take advantage of the potential demographic dividend could dampen development prospects, while public policies and advocacy to enhance it could reap substantial rewards.”

When ‘*The Economist*’ magazine, reflecting on African demography, posed the question – ‘*Miracle or Malthus?*’ – it presented us with the challenge to answer an important question.

This is whether the incontrovertible fact of the African 'youth bulge' would serve as a positive factor in terms of our development and a better life for all our people, or a negative phenomenon, according to which the fact of the larger African population would result in the further impoverishment of our people as a whole.

I would like to suggest that it is precisely those who belong within this 'youth bulge', whose representatives are sitting here in this hall, who have to answer this question.

With your permission, I would like to put all this to the young Africans present in this hall in very simple terms.

Soon enough you will be involved in establishing your own families. This means that you will be producing the children who will be counted among the projected population of 2 billion Africans, which the African economy will have to serve just over 30 years from today.

The question you, and us, must answer is - what steps will Africa take from now onwards to ensure that the 2 billion Africans of 2045 enjoy a better quality of life than the plus 1 billion Africans of 2015!

I am arguing and would argue strongly that the answer to this question must come principally from our youth, they who are destined to inherit the future.

I am certain that all of us present here are familiar with the seminal statement made by that great thinker and proponent of human liberation, Frantz Fanon, many years ago - that *"Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfil it or betray it."*

In this context, I would like to suggest that to answer the question about what they should do to help ensure that the quality of life of the African masses is immeasurably better in 2045 than it is today, the youth leaders and representatives present in this hall must start by deconstructing the profound statement made by Frantz Fanon I have just cited.

This statement makes the important observations that:

- in reality, contemporary social practice in all our countries relegates the new generation to a position of obscurity, an unseen and marginalised factor in terms of national development;
- the previous and older generation will act in such a manner that it will insist that its view about the future of our countries must prevail, consistent with its contribution to the historical evolution of our countries and Continent;
- the new generation, essentially represented by our youth, must define its own unique and historic contribution to the further development of our societies, distinct from the contribution of the earlier generations;
- the new generation must elaborate its own programme of action to ensure the realisation of this historic contribution; and,
- it must understand that if it fails to define its unique contribution to the development of society, as well as design the requisite programme of action to realise this contribution, it will have

betrayed the mission of its generation, and therefore condemned our societies to a stultified future of imprisonment by the out-dated views and prejudices of the older generations.

As I said earlier, the so-called 'political class' in Africa and elsewhere on our globe will have no hesitation in affirming the proposition that the youth must be given the necessary space fully to participate in the process of leadership focused on the resolution of the contemporary global human challenges.

Even in the documentation of this Forum you will come across the perfectly correct statement that – *“Active citizenship and participation of many more young people in the social, economic, and political development at community, national, and international level will continue to be the key to transformative changes in democratic governance and sustainable development.”*

I would like to suggest that for this Forum to discharge its responsibilities, it must ask itself and answer the critical questions:

- in reality, does the space exist for the youth to play a key role in terms of the proclaimed transformative changes?;
- does the 'political class' in our countries accept the proposition advanced by Frantz Fanon which implies an inevitable tension among the tasks of successive generations?;
- is our youth positioned to discover its mission and to take action to fulfill it?;
- is it possible for our youth to discover this mission and act to fulfill it without entering into an intense conflict with the older generation which exercises power and enjoys the benefits and privileges of this exercise of power?; and,
- is the youth, the overwhelming majority of society, organised to engage this struggle, determined to secure victory and thus avoid betraying its historic mission?

I am certain that you will have understood that what I am saying is that for the youth to exercise the leadership role to whose realisation my generation claims to be committed, it must organise itself to claim this role as its right, rather than a privilege it would be accorded by the antecedent generation.

Put more directly, to ensure that it actually exercises the leadership everybody rhetorically accepts and proclaims is its due, the youth must organise and ready itself to rebel, so to speak!

It must organise and ready itself to constitute itself into a rebellion because it would obviously be unnatural that I, a member of the older generation, would easily and willingly accept that younger people, my own children, should, at best, sit side-by-side with me as co-leaders, fully empowered to help determine the future of our people.

Apart from anything else, this would mean that I would have to accept with the necessary equanimity all criticism by the new generation that what I had done as a governor had prejudiced the future of the new generation.

At the end of the very first chapter of his novel, *“Anthills of the Savannah”*, Chinua Achebe says of Professor Okong, an intellectual servant of tyranny – *“He had his day and then went into partial eclipse. But I hardly think he is due for prison, yet.”*

It surely would be that when the youth, the new generation, practically exercise the leadership we say we accept, we too, the older generation that might have done much that is wrong and inimical to the interests of the people, would first go into partial eclipse, and then, frightened, await the day when we will go to prison!

Thus, as it strives to emerge from what Frantz Fanon describes as its 'relative obscurity', our youth must understand that it must engage in struggle to discover and realise its mission.

Accordingly, it must organise itself to engage in struggle for the realisation of its goals.

Happily, in my view, these are no different from the goals set by the antecedent generation which our youth would succeed.

In this regard I would suggest that this Global Youth Leadership Forum should study and reflect upon the African Youth Charter which entered into force in August 2009, and is therefore binding on all Member States of the AU.

Among others, this Youth Charter recognises that *"youth are partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and prosperity of Africa with a unique contribution to make to the present and to future development..."*

The Charter contains a comprehensive list of Articles which address what Africa needs to do to respond to the needs of the youth.

With your permission, let me mention these without any elaboration. These are:

The obligation of all States to respect all the provisions in the charter, which include:

- non-discrimination;
- freedom of movement;
- freedom of expression;
- freedom of association;
- freedom of thought, conscience and religion;
- protection of private life;
- protection of the family;
- property;
- development;
- youth participation;
- a national youth policy;
- education and skills development;
- poverty eradication and socio-economic integration of the youth;
- sustainable livelihoods and youth employment;
- health;
- peace and security;
- law enforcement;

- sustainable development and the protection of the environment;
- youth and culture;
- youth in the diaspora;
- leisure, recreation, sportive and cultural activities;
- girls and young women;
- mentally and physically challenged youth;
- elimination of harmful social and cultural practices; and,
- responsibilities of youth.

It is self-evident that these eminently correct objectives relating to youth development will not and cannot be realised without the necessary effort.

In this regard I would argue that the youth itself has the responsibility to engage in struggle to ensure the achievement of the objectives listed in the African Youth Charter, which would also be relevant to other countries outside Africa.

It is of course obvious that the realisation of these objectives cannot take place outside the context of the resolution of the various challenges facing our Continent, with which you are familiar.

Let me mention some of these.

Africa continues to face the challenge of securing a stable and just peace and security for all our countries. In this context it has to address the important issue of the causes of conflict and instability and therefore institute processes for the prevention of conflict. It must also examine ways and means by which to mobilise the people to become activists for that peace and security.

It has the task to work further to consolidate and entrench democracy, informed, for instance, by the Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance which came into force last month, and the benchmarks set by the African Peer Review Mechanism. In this context, among others, it has to address such issues as genuine popular participation in the system of governance, the management of diverse societies and combating corruption.

Our Continent has the continuing responsibility to win the struggle for economic development and therefore the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment, basing itself on the comprehensive vision contained in the base document and the programmes spelt out in the New Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD.

In this regard, among others, Africa has to address the important matters of the management and exploitation of its natural resources, agriculture and rural development, its participation in the global economy, and equitable distribution of wealth to avoid gross and unsustainable disparities in income and standards of living.

We are also faced with the challenge further to intensify the offensive for the emancipation of women and the achievement of the objective of gender equality, understanding that the realisation of these objectives relates directly to the other challenges we have mentioned.

Africa must also continue to focus on the issue of the environment, conscious of the importance to the achievement of the goal of a better life for all our people of such issues as water conservation, the struggle against desertification, the protection of the African rain forests, and generally the concept and practice of sustainable development.

Earlier generations gave themselves the mission to secure the liberation of our Continent from colonialism, apartheid and imperialism, thus to secure for the peoples of Africa their right to self-determination. We have a continuing obligation to defend this hard-won right especially in the context of recent events which threaten its relevance, taking into account the process of globalisation.

A better future for the African youth and therefore the majority of the people of our Continent depends on the accomplishment of both the specific goals relating to youth development as identified in the African Youth Charter and the broader objectives I have mentioned concerning peace and security, democracy and good governance, economic growth and development, gender equality and the achievement by Africa of its rightful place in the system of international relations.

It is surely within this context that we should discuss the issue of youth leadership, which must address the question of what should be done to ensure that the youth plays its role in terms of responding to all the challenges we have mentioned, consistent with the vision contained in African Youth Charter that *“youth are partners, assets and a prerequisite for sustainable development and for the peace and prosperity of Africa with a unique contribution to make to the present and to future development...”*

It is easy and tempting to approach this important matter of the exercise of leadership by the youth by focusing on a head-count. I refer here to the practice to count the number of young people present in decision making structures and then assert that, depending on these numbers, the youth are playing their due leadership role.

It is of course important that the youth should indeed be present in these structures in numbers and in a manner which would ensure that the voice of the youth is heard.

However I am convinced that our starting point with regard to the exercise of leadership by the youth must be the understanding that truly to discharge its obligation to participate in the exercise of leadership, the youth must organise itself to play this role.

Accordingly, of critical importance is the central question of organisation.

Simply put, this means that the youth must mobilise itself into its own organisations in which, as Frantz Fanon said, it would debate and define its historic mission and agree on what it needs to do to fulfil that mission.

It is only through its organised strength at the national, regional and international levels that the youth will ensure that its voice is heard, and therefore that it has the possibility to exercise the leadership to which even the older generations are rhetorically committed.

Naturally, I refer here to organisations of various kinds, some of which would be political, others professional, and others social, and so on.

I am certain that the youth delegates at this Forum would be better placed than I am to make an assessment about how well organised the youth are in their countries and regions and internationally, and what they have done to discover their mission and determine how they should fulfil it.

It would be good that in this context they also identify the challenges the youth face to establish, sustain and activate the organisations to which I have referred.

This would also help to identify the tasks of the older generations and such institutions as those which have convened us here in Nairobi with regard to helping the youth to establish and sustain their own organisations to which I have referred.

With your permission, let me say something about one of these African youth organisations, the All African Students Union, AASU.

A critically important component of the African youth is the large number of university and higher education students studying at home and abroad who constitute the emerging intelligentsia on which, inter alia, Africa will depend during much of the 21st Century for the development of new knowledge to address her challenges.

This student population has its own organisation, AASU, which, with a membership of 53 National Student Unions, has the potential to ensure that our young intelligentsia plays its role in terms of contributing to the accomplishment of the objective of the exercise of leadership by our youth.

Last month, Professor Olugbemi Jegede, Secretary General of the Association of African Universities, invited the African youth to engage the Association in conversation. He posted a letter on the website of the Association headed - *Reclaiming Africa! An Invitation to the Youth of Africa*.

In this letter, among other things, he said:

“Today and the future belong to the youth of Africa who must take the reigns of their future in their hands...We should properly harness the strength of our youth and channel them appropriately and effectively towards reclaiming Africa...The right way to begin, from our perspective, is to get our youth to engage in constant conversation about the future of Africa and what we can do within and using the platform of education as a veritable instrument...The future of Africa is in your hands. Let us hear from you, and let the conversation begin.”

In these words the Secretary General of the important Pan-African institution, the Association of African Universities, once more confirmed the resolve of the older African generations to respect the reality that Africa's future is in the hands her youth, who constitute more than two thirds of our population.

In this regard, it is imperative that the Association of African Universities engages in conversation with the collective voice of Africa's student voice, the All African Students' Union.

For the youth to exercise the leadership which has become, globally, a matter of common cause, it must be organised to exercise this leadership.

It may therefore be that the central question which this Forum must answer is – what should the older generations do to enable the youth to establish and sustain the organisations which would enable them to discharge their obligation to exercise leadership responding to what Professor Jegede meant when he said, referring to the African youth, *“The future of Africa is in your hands!”*

Thank you.