

The Madeleine K. Albright Global Development Lecture recognizes an individual whose bold vision has provided breakthrough thinking to tackle the challenges of global development. At the sixth annual lecture on November 7, 2018 at the Metropolitan Club in New York City, the Aspen Global Innovators Group honored Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nobel Laureate and former President of the Republic of Liberia. Hear President Sirleaf's vision to move from incremental to transformative change in Africa, and read the full lecture text below.

I am honored to give this year's Madeleine K. Albright Global Development Lecture, recognizing those who have come before me since this platform was established in 2012, including Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, Paul Farmer, Helen Clark, Mary Robinson and Rajiv Shah.

Madame Secretary, you have my deepest admiration for what you have contributed to America and the world. But I am afraid, my dear friend, neither one of us knows the definition of "retirement." We both are still at "it" and will be until a bigger calling tells us not to.

I will talk today about our beloved Africa, a continent of wide diversities, history, culture, religion and endowment. I will speak specifically on how to continue the path from incremental to transformative change.

I make these remarks as an imperfect leader, coming from a complex, post-conflict society, on a continent of uneven progress, in a world that seems on a fast pace of change that sometimes appears unrecognizable.

I further preface my remarks by sharing with you that I feel a renewed sense of urgency in my 80th year. Not because I am closing in on the final chapter of my own life, but because by 2030, the year when the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals will be assessed, one in five people on the earth will be African, and 65 percent of those the youth.

The transformative path of Africa must continue to do things differently or risk a demographic shift that will overwhelm Africa's productive resources, setting off new chains of migration that will further inflame the emergence of right-wing xenophobic political forces in our world.

The message is clear. We cannot and should not fail another generation of African young people.

We must build institutions that are stronger than the whims of an individuals. We must break down the barriers to political entry for women, youth, and other political outsiders. We must equip Africa's children with the education and skills necessary to succeed in the twenty-first-century economy.

And dear friends, we Africans today are more than capable of rising to the challenge.

I draw these conclusions from my experience as Liberia's first post-conflict elected president with a clear understanding of the inherent fragility that results from changes that disrupt the status quo.

About Liberia:

My administration came into power in 2006 after two decades of conflict. Liberia suffered under a collapsed economy, decaying infrastructure, and paralyzed state institutions. My administration inherited a crushing debt burden, and some 100,000 ex-combatants and youths swelled unemployment to more than 80%. We found a bloated civil service and a society defaulted to desperation, violence, and economic dependency.

We understood that our newly consolidated peace would be strongly linked to inclusive growth and development, both of which create equitable opportunities for all citizens.

My administration went to work, reestablishing Liberia within the community of nations, restoring relationships with the World Bank, The African Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund and our bilateral partners to receive the necessary technical and financial support for achieving macro-economic stability, which would lead us down the path to micro-economic progress

We had to determine immediate impactful interventions. We first sought to negotiate relief from a staggering \$4.7 billion of external debt burden. We then re-established fiscal discipline and enacted regulations which could encourage inward and foreign direct investment.

As a result, our economy went from ground zero to achieving a growth rate of over 9 percent at its peak, among the highest on the African continent at the time.

Following economic reforms, we sought to enhance good governance, to develop our all but decimated democratic institutions – starting with the security sector, to restore the rule of law, and to build confidence in the new yet still fragile peace. We established and strengthened integrity institutions to fight a deeply entrenched culture of dishonesty. We sought partnerships with philanthropic institutions to strengthen our civil service through repatriation and local mentoring training.

We invested in social services. Beginning with fixing our roads, we paved over 872 kilometers which unlocked the potential of people and goods to move freely around the country. Monrovia our capital, for the first time in decades, had running water and electricity.

School enrollment in Liberia reached nearly 2 million. We achieved near gender parity in elementary schools and have placed a renewed focus on retaining girls' enrollment through high school.

Then in 2015, the Ebola epidemic hit creating shocks which drove economic growth close to zero percent. There was an exodus of investors from the country, creating a two-year halt to key production related activities. The epidemic ended in April 2016 and today the country and the sub-region are still recovering.

Notwithstanding, even after losing nearly 3,700 of our remembered citizens, we emerged from the deadly Ebola outbreak as a stronger nation, better prepared to address the next pandemic, in partnership with an awakened international community.

And finally, in January of this year, I handed over presidential power in a peaceful and democratic transition, the first of this order in Liberia for 75 years. A moment which still resonates with me as one of our proudest.

The Liberia that President George Weah inherited boasts a diverse and active civil society and a vibrant free press. These free-willed voices of society and a free press will hold his government and any future government accountable, as they did me and my administration.

As I pivot from Liberia to the future of Africa, I do so with great humility, recognizing that even after two terms, my administration did not achieve all it set out to do.

A strong foundation was laid.

Towards Africa: Institutions, Political Inclusion and Education

Despite the tremendous progress throughout the continent, we must be as Africans impatient, with ourselves and with our leaders.

Last month the Mo Ibrahim Index released its 11th report, reflecting a discouraging deterioration in governance.

Most alarmingly, the 2018 Index reports that since 2008 the African average score for ‘Sustainable Economic Opportunity’ has increased by 0.1 point, or 0.2%, despite a continental increase in GDP of nearly 40% over the same period.

In effect, this means that there has been virtually no progress in creating “Sustainable Economic Opportunity’. Economic growth has not translated into better living conditions for the majority of Africans.

Upon releasing the Index, Mo said, “our continent is faced with unprecedented demographic growth. Key governance areas are not progressing fast enough to keep up with rising demands, and more specifically to answer the growing expectations of Africa’s youth.”

And he closed with this warning: “This is a huge missed opportunity. It could become a recipe for disaster. With the expected population growth, Africa stands at a tipping point, and the next years will be crucial.”

In my mind, what the 2018 Index points to is that we must address the structural flaws in our African nations, be they societal, institutional, and/or constitutional. And we are running out of time.

Institution Building:

Institutions must be made stronger than the individual. There is no substitute for this in Africa or anywhere in the world. This transference cannot be imposed, it must be demand-driven. The citizen needs to be empowered through civic education, decentralization of government and democracy practiced at the community level.

In a World Bank Commission of Growth and Development paper, scholars from MIT and Harvard argue that institutions are the fundamental cause of economic growth and development across countries. They note that in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, the promotion of democracy, check and balances and accountability will almost certainly lead to improved institutions and economic policies. Similarly, I would add that necessary conditions for development also rely on improving the rule of law, assuring democratic transitions, controlling corruption and assuring property rights. Indeed, these strong institutions are indispensable.

Weak and non-existence institutions are the shared variable of all fragile states, including Liberia. This is why Liberia's historic presidential transition in January was meant to be more than a change of administration – a transfer of power to the people and a move to institutional accountability.

Hindering the development of strong institutions in Africa lead to endemic corruption and patron-clientelist politics, which are the most formidable barriers to making democracy work. They must be fought with all tools available. There must be no place to hide.

I shout out to my sister Ngozi, whose recent book “Fighting Corruption is Dangerous,” shows how corruption destroys the fabric of a nation and systematic efforts must be taken to root it out.

I submit to my fellow development experts, all those who have come before me and will follow me, that everything else we do will be incremental if we cannot stabilize Africa's institutions and make them stronger than the whims of a single leader, political party or ruling clique.

The only sustainable power comes from the support of one's people. While the club of legacy leaders grows smaller, the damage they inflict moves beyond borders and across continents. Love of country is about letting go.

Political Inclusion:

Political parties are organized by patronage and patriarchy. We must take on constitutional reforms to address malpractice and inequalities. Campaign finance law

is essential as in many African nations unregulated monies pollute a political system to a point where the voter will become unrecognizable.

Further, quotas, to be phased out over time, should be utilized as a tool to address inequities for women, the youth and considered for the disabled, all of whom have no seat at the table in most African nations.

I applaud the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia for the astounding pace of change especially ushering in the “year of the woman in Ethiopia,” appointing women to 50 percent of his Cabinet, a woman to lead the Supreme Court, and the emergence of the first-ever woman appointed to the presidency, Sahle-Work Zewde.

Over last two decades, sub-Saharan Africa has boasted some of the most dramatic breakthroughs in women’s political representation in national legislative bodies. According to the Brookings Institution, the number of female legislators on the continent grew from 9.8 percent in 1995 to 23.2 percent in 2016. In comparison, Europe, excluding the Nordic nations, comes in at 24.3 percent and the Americas at 27.7 percent.

Yesterday’s election was historic for the United States. Nearly one hundred(100) will be represented in the House. It is not just in the numbers but the “FIRSTS” – the youngest woman, two Muslim women, two lesbian women, a native American.

We see the same in Rwanda under the leadership of my brother President Paul Kagame, which boasts the highest percentage of women legislators in the world due to a quota system imposed to address historical inequities. And in the Mo Ibrahim Index, Rwanda the sharpest rise in broad-based economic reforms.

This shows us that enlightened strong, and focused leadership can shake up the system.

Likewise, we must capture the political energy of the youth. We must open up the political system to youth and lower the age of political participation.

I am sure many of you have watched the changes made in Nigeria. As Africa’s most populous country, nearly 115 million of its citizens are below the age of 25, yet political leadership is held tightly by older generations. Nigeria’s youth population successfully mobilized to reduce the age to participate in the highest levels of government in the aptly named “Not Too Young to Run” campaign. Now, candidates for the presidency can run at 35 instead of 40, governorships at 30 instead of 35, and the House of Representatives at 25.

Those young people who brought change to Nigeria's political system are now themselves running for office in Nigeria's 2019 national elections. Even if their campaigns are unsuccessful, these young people will disrupt the status quo and inspire others to participate in the political process.

On Education:

Education is the great stabilizer of a society. Look at the American example. A major component of the civil rights struggle focused on the right to quality education, where pioneer and trailblazer Thurgood Marshall achieved victory at the US Supreme Court in the historic ruling of *Brown Vs. the Board of Education*.

The fight for the future of Africa is now in its classrooms. And here too, the Mo Ibrahim Index sounds an alarm. According to the 2018 Index, the education scores of more than half of African countries are getting worse, meaning in the past five years children are receiving less education and teaching is of a lower standard.

When you look at the numbers, this does not come as a surprise. Today, just 10% of [official development assistance](#) from OECD countries is allocated to education in Africa and many African nations have great difficulty meeting the UNICEF goal of 20 percent of state budgetary support for education.

I know how challenging this can be when there are so many priorities, including roads, power, water, sanitation, healthcare, security, job creation and security.

Nonetheless we all need to do better.

As noted by Zimbabwean businessman, philanthropist and education expert Strive Masiyiwa, "if Africa's children are educated, prepared for the modern workforce, and equipped with the skills to be successful entrepreneurs, they will flourish and Africa will prosper. But if our children fall any further behind their peers in developing countries, economic progress will be slowed, stunted, or even thrown into reverse."

This is why I applaud the establishment of the International Finance Facility for Education, initiative from Education Commission, put in place to support SDG #4. IFFE is expected to unlock some \$10 billion in grants and loans by 2020 to help countries strengthen their education systems. Using innovative financing techniques, the IFFE will help donor money do more, will incentive government participation, and make impactful differences for Africa's children and young people.

But external financing is only part of the problem, the real burden is on African governments to prioritize education and human capital development. Nelson Mandela

knew this. To him, education was key for the success of a post-Apartheid South Africa. Mandela stated: “The power of education extends beyond the development of skills we need for economic success. It can contribute to nation-building and reconciliation.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

I know I have only touched a fraction of the possibilities to discuss with my remarks, but I hope that they provide the underpinning for a spirited discussion.

In closing, I ask you to celebrate those leaders who introduce transformation change into their country, whether it is Prime Minister of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed with gender parity, or President of Ghana Nana Akufo-Addo with his vision of Ghana Beyond Aid or Paul Kagame who has enacted policies to promote technology and communications, making Rwanda a technological hub on the continent. They are to be celebrated.

We are in a race against time in keeping up with population growth and the rising expectations of Africa’s youth. We must meet their impatience with action.