

3 short stories about Africa: "***Africa is NOT Rising***", "***Africans are NOT Changing***" and "***A Dire Prediction for Africa and the World***"

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am sorry if by the time I am done talking, some of you will be depressed, possibly angry. I must admit however that this is precisely my intention. I am counting on the chance that this anger will lead to a conversation that can in turn lead to solutions for the problems I will highlight in my talk. If that happens, I will have been successful.

My first story is called: Africa is NOT Rising

I will start by stating that there are fundamental flaws in the "Africa Rising" narrative that has dominated news headlines over the last decade.

The first flaw is that like many other supposedly good things associated with the continent, the words "**Africa Rising**" were NOT coined by an African but a well-meaning journalist from the developed north.

Those two words represent nothing more than an observation made by someone standing outside looking in; comparing the state of the continent today, to what it was fifteen years ago. The enthusiastic embrace of this notion of rising by Africans has been done without examination of the facts, but sadly, this is not the first time we have believed without seeing.

The second flaw is that the exuberance associated with the "Africa Rising" talk is derived almost exclusively from what is considered a relative high rate of GDP growth in Africa in recent years compared to the growth of economies in the West; not a fair comparison in my opinion.

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Because if China, a country of more than one billion people could grow at 18 percent at the peak of its own rising, then why is 6-7% GDP growth per annum of economies the size of a mid-size American company being referred to as impressive or even extraordinary?

This year, at 8%, China is said to be in recession, but this is double the growth rate of SSA countries combined.

Studies show that in most African countries, levels of poverty have hardly changed during the ‘rising’ years and inequality, the gap between the poor and the rich has widened.

Why is this considered rising? Has the world set a new standard of excellence in economic management that applies exclusively to Africans?

Must we embrace that notion and if so to what end?

The third flaw is we have not bothered to find the connection between “Africa Rising” narrative and African decisions or actions and this should not be too difficult if we tried.

If for example, a traffic policeman stopped me on a highway for over speeding, I would know that I was indeed driving above the speed limit and would take responsibility for my actions. But if I was sitting at the wheel in my car that was being towed and the same traffic policeman stops us and tries to give me a ticket, I would ask him to please deal with the tow car driver, because while it is true my car was driving above the speed limit, the responsibility for the offence is not mine.

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That the growth of Africa’s GDP is attributed to strategic decisions made elsewhere is in my opinion not in dispute. Africans did not wake up one good day in the 1990s and decide to go around the world marketing their commodities to China, India and other interested parties in the developed North. It was in fact the other way round.

China and others came looking and worked very hard to penetrate African markets, very often against resistance from a people who didn’t even know the real value of the resources they were sitting on.

It is for this reason I think that the evidence of Africa's rise is circumstantial at best or even worse, it may be nothing more than an illusion, our own and other people’s imagination of what Africa might have been had we heeded Nkrumah's call to not only face forward, but to march forward purposefully, confidently, carefully, intelligently, eyes wide open.

Granted Africa is not one country but a collection of 54 culturally and economically diverse nation states, each with its own unique development story.

And it is also true that some African countries have done particularly well in the recent past, recovering from wars, building democratic institutions of governance, even growing their economies, but this does not constitute rising, at least not yet.

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I would like to back up this claim with some statistics:

- We all know that in order to have meaningful development anywhere in this day and age, people must have access to electricity and yet **France, with its population of 65 million, generates four times more power than what all 47 Sub-Saharan African countries generate for their 805 million people.** This means a French person consumes **50** times more electricity than an African today. So if a Frenchman tells you that you are rising, you need to stop and ask yourself what he is really saying.
- Talk of Africa joining the global community as a partner in trade is gaining momentum around the world but it will take many decades of hard work before African producers can compete with the rest of the world on fair terms. For example, **the cost of shipping one tonne of fertilizer from a US port to the Kenyan port of Mombasa, a 9,000 km journey, is \$40. However moving that same tonne of fertilizer 1,000km from Mombasa to Kampala in neighbouring Uganda costs \$120, in all 30 times more expensive to move cargo across African borders than it is to ship to African ports.**
- Energy security is key to development and security for any nation. Despite having some of the world's biggest producers of oil in the likes of Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Congo, **SSA imports 19 billion dollars worth of oil every year. These are direct cash payments from Africa to the rest of the world and compare poorly with \$16 billion**

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received by SSA countries every year in the form of aid.

- And speaking of aid, let me be clear. Aid can be useful if properly given and propely used. Examples of good aid well used are there for all to see. Germany received aid after the 2nd World War and so did Japan, South Korea, Malaysia and even much quoted Singapore. But all these countries graduated from aid dependence within twenty years. Why is it that 60 years after independence, Africa has not graduated from aid dependence to self reliance. Since when did aid-powered growth constitute rising?
- We brag about how much arable land we have in Africa but forget that without command and effective use of technology, it will neither give us food security nor a competitive edge in the global marketplace. **Today, a hectar of maize in the US yields 10 tonnes while in Africa the best we have done so far is 2 tonnes per hectar.** The worrying part is that this difference was much smaller 50 years ago.
- It is not only the technology we lack but also the common sense to use abundant rainfall and the many rivers and lakes that cover our beautiful continent to irrigate our farms. **At only 6%, Africa today has the lowest levels of irrigated farmland. In Asia where weather patterns are similar to most of SSA, total irrigated farmland is 37% and the world average is 20%.**

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- Notwithstanding the big strides made by some African countries in the areas of primary school enrollment and girl child education in recent decades, Africa is a continent where the number of university graduates per capita is the lowest in the world, 3% compared to 67% in South Korea or above 70% in Finland. In this 21st century, a time when knowledge will determine the winners and losers of the fierce global fight for the control of the world’s remaining precious resources, we cannot be rising with that kind of educational performance.
- For African farmers, what some are calling rising has been a sinking experience. Chocolate, an \$80 billion global business expected to grow by 30% in the next six years, is made from cocoa, of which one African country alone, Ivory Coast, produces 35%. **Today, Ivorian cocoa farmers get only 6% of the retail chocolate price.** In the 1980s they received 16% of the price.
- The sabotage of African economies by Africans is on the rise, be it through direct theft, corruption or the wars that never seem to end, our capacity to destroy our treasures and manpower is growing faster than our capacity to build them. **In the three years between 2009-2011 for example, Nigeria lost 136m barrels of oil through a combination of theft and sabotage. This was equivalent to \$11 billion, the same as it spent in importing rice, wheat and other cereals between 2009-12.**
- Our environment has not been spared in this rising fiasco. The biggest threat to the African environment

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and biodiversity does not come from pollution by nuclear disasters or industrial waste but rather from the way we continue to live our lives today the same way we did so many thousand of years ago. **While 50% of the world population relies on fuelwood and charcoal for cooking and heating, SSA is the only region in the world where the use of this polluting energy resource is increasing. Presently, 81% of all households in SSA use fuelwood and charcoal, 60%¹ of them are in urban areas.**

This definitely does not constitute rising, because:

- You cannot be rising when you do not have electricity to power your industries.
- You cannot rise without technology or industries, not in this century, not ever.
- You cannot rise with poor or no transport infrastructure
- You cannot rise when the majority of your people are sleeping on empty stomachs, raising malnourished children whose survival in this world is made uncertain by stunted development of their brains and bodies
- You cannot be rising if your share of profits from agricultural production is declining

¹ Statistics on Africa sourced from Gro Intelligence Inc.

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- You cannot rise if you are busy wrecking your own economy through corruption, theft and other forms of sabotage
- And you definitely cannot be rising if the environment and biodiversity that sustains life is dying in your hands.

So, what am I saying? I am not saying that Africa cannot rise, on the contrary, I am saying that Africa can rise but only if we work extra hard, undersatnd the world we live in and take charge of our destiny.

We should not mistake hype for reality or as another Ghanaian statesman Kofi Annan said, we should not mistake hope for achievement,

My second story: Africans Are NOT Changing

It concerns me greatly, that despite countless lessons from history, African behavior, especially that of leadership elite has refused to change and adapt to the changing global environment.

I will illustrate my point by telling you a short story about events that began in my country seventy-six years ago:

76 years ago, a 40-year-old Canadian geologist called Dr. John Williamson discovered diamonds in the northwestern part of the then British colony called Tanganyika now Tanzania. The discovery itself was interesting in that he only realized there were diamonds in the area when he found natives using big rough diamonds to play a popular traditional board game.

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He convinced the local chief to sell to him the land on which the mine site stands today in exchange for little money and trinkets. Williamson quickly proceeded to apply for and obtained an exclusive diamond-mining license for the area and shortly thereafter, the colonial government declared unlicensed ownership of diamonds a criminal offence. Williamson sent scouts to all the surrounding villages with instructions to buy all the diamonds in exchange for small amounts of money and trinkets.

As a show of gratitude, Williamson built a nice modern house for the paramount Chief of the area and named his mine after the local Chief, Mwadui, with whom he had become good friends. In addition, the chief's subjects were allowed access to the water dams Dr. Williamson built for mine workers. They also had access to medical services offered by the mine clinic.

Over its lifetime the mine has produced over 19 million **carats** (3,800 kg) of diamonds worth several times the GDP of my country today and has gone down in history as one of the oldest continuously operating diamond mine in the world.

To this day, Dr. Williamson is fondly remembered by people of Mwadui as a good man, a different kind of colonialists who cared for the people, learned their language and blended in.

Now fast forward to the present and you see big bold newspaper headlines reading: **“Five of the largest oil and**

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gas discoveries made in the world in 2012 were made in Africa²”

Exciting stuff and quite a lot of people including the people of my country where huge amounts of natural gas have been discovered by modern day Dr. Williamsons cannot contain their excitement.

The trouble is, like three quarters of a century ago, we still do not know the real value of the wealth we are sitting on that people from distant lands are coveting.

Today’s Dr. Williamsons still negotiate with illiterate local chiefs and gain control of our valuable assets for a pittance and trinkets. And of course the local chief gets a nice home or two built for him as a show of gratitude for his generosity. So what has changed in 75 years? It would seem, not much and this is the nature of the tragedy we face.

We cannot keep making the same mistakes and expecting different results simply because somebody says so.

Africa can rise but only if we recognize our weaknesses and make the necessary changes.

My 3rd Story: A Dire Prediction for Africa and the World

You may have been wondering what this picture behind me is all about.

Some ten years ago, I sat down for a conversation with a gentleman from the US who asked me a question whose

² Source: Gro Intelligence, Inc.

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answer surprised me. He said: **“what do you think the next world war will be fought over?”**

Without hesitation, I replied that the next world war would be fought over energy resources, namely oil and gas.

He shook his head and told me I was dead wrong. He said that all the nations that have the power to start another world war have enough energy resources of their own not to risk a world war over oil and gas.

He went on to say he was certain that the next world war would be fought over the control of fresh (or sweet) water.

He said as I listened in astonishment that at the rate the human population was growing, fresh water that is easily accessible to humans would become a very scarce resource by the year 2050, enough to cause nations to start fighting over its control.

I thanked him for educating me and promptly forgot about that conversation until recently when a statistic someone mentioned to me brought that conversation back to the present.

The statistic says that these three lakes,

Lake Victoria,

Lake Tanganyika and

Lake Malawi; hold between them more than **30%** of all the fresh water available to man on this planet today!

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Now how amazing is that?

What are we going to do differently this time? How are we preparing to avoid or survive this war?

I am sorry to make this prediction but hope that by making it here today, this war can be averted.

Thank you for listening to me