

Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture keynote address

Dr Mo Ibrahim

****As transcribed*

I am really honoured to stand here before you today to deliver this lecture. I must confess I looked up the list of previous speakers and found out they fell mostly under categories of either presidents or Nobel Prize Laureates, I am neither. I wish to congratulate the Trustees in opting for a commoner like me to present this lecture - brothers and sisters, please and manage your expectations.

Building social cohesion is our topic today. I believe social cohesion is really about really holding our society together.

It is about building a national identity that transcends ethnic, religion, class and gender. It is more than just a passport or an ID, it is where we achieve common purpose as citizens and when we really feel that we have equitable access and participation in the political, economic, social and cultural life of our country.

It's not about entitlement, but about equal opportunities and hope. It is about dialogue, listening and talking the Madiba way.

Nelson Mandela is gifted with many extra-ordinary qualities, but for me the most potent quality he has is his ability to build bridges; to search for and find that common ground with others. And then use that common ground to build on understanding and find solutions. That is Madiba's way.

There is no doubt that great progress has been achieved in this country over the past 20 years. We do publish every year, my Foundation, an index of governance, the African Index of Governance.

We measure the 88 indicators of performance of each government in all aspects of their activities. South Africa ranked, in the year 2000, as number 31 in rural development out of 54 countries in Africa. Last year it was 22nd. There has been much improvement from 31 to 22nd. It is not a fantastic score, but it is a market improvement. It also tells us that a lot still has to be done about rural areas.

I must say also that overall, South Africa is number 5, it comes 5th in our overall Index of Governance. It's a remarkable score to be number 5 out of 54. It is not bad at all. It is really good. However, the gap between rich and poor people in this country is still remarkable.

The table, which I admit is not the perfect measure but it is a very important indicator, lists South Africa right at the bottom.

This is the least equitable country in the whole world, and is it only legitimate for us to ask, after 20 years of independence, what exactly is really going on here? That's the real challenge that our friends here in South Africa need to face up to. I think what we need is to have a good conversation about our policies on what worked and what did not work. We need to be brave, really, and have that kind of discussion.

If we start with the issue of land, a very important issue, this country adopted a policy of willing seller and willing buyer. I think, and you would probably agree, it did not work.

Isn't it time for people to seek other solutions? Isn't it time to find a solution within the Constitution that offers an equitable solution to all parties to address that issue? It is a very important issue for our people in the rural areas. And the government needs to have the courage in order to deal with that. Governance is never easy, but it has to be faced and this is a very important issue and it has not been addressed in the past 20 years.

Black empowerment, the adopted black empowerment policy, was the objective of bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. Isn't it the time to check what really happened with black economic empowerment? Did it help really bridge the gap between the rich and the poor? And if it did, why are we at the bottom of the table? I think we really need to have a conversation about that - at least for the sake of social cohesion. Talking about social coherence, we must also talk about young people, the youth. The youth are the largest constituency in our continent.

Not only in South Africa, but in our continent. Half of the African population is below 19-years-old. This is the largest constituency in Africa. This can be wonderful news but it can also be a major problem for us. It can be wonderful news because our democracy in South Africa and in Africa is inverse of that democracy in Europe, China and Japan. This, our countries and continents of asian population. There is no young people really in China or Japan. There have stopped having babies for some reason. Can Africa dream of being the future factory of the world instead of China? China is going to have a crunch in the next 10 or 20 years. Can we do that? What a wonderful prospect for us to have, that huge productivity of such young people can bring to our factories, our land and work place here. But in order to do that, we need to do two things:

The first thing will have to be attention to education and training of that group of young people. What are we preparing them for? Is our education system matching our business needs? Are we producing the kind of people that future jobs will require? Are we doing that? I am not sure. I was having a conversation an hour ago with the Vice Chancellor here and we both agreed that 2% of African students are studying agriculture, yet 70% of our people are living off the land. So we have an issue here of matching educational and training programmes to the job market. How many business people are involved in the educational process? I think none. That's the first issue.

The second issue is African economic integration. Only 11% of our trade is amongst the Africans. We refuse to let our people travel from one country to another. We always need a visa. And I also say, sadly, although being Sudanese, whenever I travel in Africa I always carry a British passport, because I am welcome.

My colleague here, a Member of our Board, had huge trouble in getting a visa to be able to join me here. He was a Secretary General of the United Nations, a board member, just to get a visa here is a major trouble. But with my British passport I am welcome here through your immigration lines. Is that acceptable?

And let us take this further, as 54 countries, we are all subscale. We only have 14 exchanges, stock markets. Only 6 or 7 of them have any liquidity. How can anybody start a business in a country which does not have a liquid stock exchange? If you are looking to invest money, you are looking at the Dollar, you are looking for the exits. We have countries that have farming, we have countries that have tomatoes rotting because we cannot move tomatoes from here to there. There is no scale.

If China was 54 different countries, would China have been where it is today? So let us get it clear in our heads that for us to move forward, we need to understand the important economic integration of Africa. We need freedom to move people, goods and capital across our borders. That is essential. So I think these are the two prerequisites. Simple. Its not difficult. We need to get that in order for us to move forward. And we have an amazing future. We are a very rich continent. But what happens if we fail? We have a tsunami of young people, millions of young Africans coming for jobs every year. Where will these jobs come from? This is a recipe for a serious upheaval.

Millions of young people without jobs and more important without hope, is a major problem. If you haven't locked up your doors and called the army, that is a bleak future to face. That is a very serious issue. I hope that our leaders, and not only South Africa but all across Africa, I wonder, can help us sleep tonight knowing that the tsunami of young people coming which we need to deal with it. Our future depends on how we are going to deal with those young people. That is the mother of all social cohesion issues we face.

Still on young people, given what is happening, given the demography of Africa, the majority of African people are under 19 years old. Below 25 years old is over 60% of the population. How much space do they have in the public arena? Who is listening to them? Are they invited to the table? The future they deserve is there. They understand the future better than us, and maybe they have better solutions than us. Have we had space for young people to come forward and join us in this process of thinking about what needs to be done? That is the challenge we need to deal with.

Lets go back to the numbers, I love the numbers, I am an engineer. I say half the population are around 19-years-old. Do you know what is the medium age for African presidents? If you just compare the two numbers, you can see how divided we are. Where is the social cohesion here? This may be very interesting to note, Obama became president at 47-years-old. Clinton at 46-years-old. So people in their 40s are being elected to run a country that is not only the greatest super power, but it has a GDP economy of 15 trillion dollars a year - 15 times the total economy of Africa, which is about a trillion dollars.

And those guys who are 40-years-old are deemed to be able to run the United States of America. Here we have somebody in our neighbouring country, who at 90-years-old, is about to start a new term. So what is wrong with us? And the other day I was thinking, if Obama senior decided to take the young Obama back to Kenya, where would the young Obama be today? You may guess, I know, he will never be president of Kenya.

We cannot talk about social cohesion without talking also about another important thing in our society, women.

Women are actually the pillar of the African economy. Seventy percent of our population depend on land, on agriculture. Who does agriculture? Women do agriculture. They do agriculture, family and kids and also schools. And yet women have not yet been allowed the dignity they really deserve in our society. There still is this male dominated xenophobia about women and we have to admit that.

We have a problem here in Africa. And we really need to face the real problem. Rape is a terrible crime. Somehow it is widespread in Africa and widespread here in this country. That is not acceptable. So we cannot afford to lose what is vital productive element in our society, one essential for our social coherence.

One thing I have to say here, is that I really wish to commend the government and the people of South Africa, I note that you have quite a good number of women in government, in parliament, as heads of state, companies and parastatals. Actually you have a high percentage of women, higher than any African country, actually higher than any country in the world and that is a wonderful achievement. So we have great tolerance and acceptance of the role of women and they do amazing jobs, really, but in the rest of society we don't see that respect being reflected. We have a cultural issue and that is something we need to work on because culture is very difficult to change unless everybody is willing to work on that issue.

Just to mention in figures, Africa in general improved a lot on ratings over the past 10 years on gender issues. We moved 37% up so that's a great achievement over the past 10 years. But we are coming from a very low base so we should not pat ourselves on the back, not yet. There is a lot of work that needs to be done.

Now finally I would really like to say that South Africa matters. Of course it matters to you as South Africans, it also matters to us as Africans. We look up to you. You are the most advanced - economically, industrially - country in Africa. We look in admiration to your wonderful struggle to freedom. We look at your founders, founding fathers, the great Mandela, he is our hero. He is an African icon. Not only for you, he is our hero too. So we expect a lot from you. And we will not refrain from being critical when we see you wavering and misbehaving because you matter for us. You are the locomotive. You are supposed to pull this region forward, economically, socially and culturally. We expect more from you.

Unfortunately we have a deficit in leadership in Africa. In all of our 54 countries, you will understand exactly what I mean.

We have a serious deficit in leadership. South Africa needs to step up and really play a better role in working with Africa. Leadership is not about bossing people around. Leadership is not about securing a seat on a security council on behalf of Africa or chairing the African Union.

The leadership we are looking for is true engagement with Africa. We need a cohesive voice for Africa and that cohesive voice you can really help formulate. We need a cohesive voice on the issues of transparency, tax evasion and a lesser transfer of funds, a lot of issues really important for Africa, where we really need your strong voice to be there.

You have a role to play in Africa by understanding Africa, by engaging with Africa. That is what we are looking for. We are waiting, don't keep us waiting for a long time.