

Dr Mo Ibrahim

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Surprised, humbled and honoured. That's how **mobile communication expert, billionaire and philanthropist, Dr Mo Ibrahim**, feels about being asked to give the 11th Nelson Mandela Lecture in Pretoria on Saturday afternoon, 17 August 2013. Ibrahim will talk about building social cohesion in South Africa almost 20 years into democracy. **SABC National Radio Current Affairs Editor Angie Kapelianis** has interviewed him and compiled this profile.

Mo Ibrahim: "I'm really an African boy, who was lucky. I had the opportunity to travel abroad and steal some of the knowledge of those guys. I became a techie. I was able to use this know-how to build my business in technology. I made good. I was extremely lucky, extremely fortunate."

Sixty-seven-year-old Dr Mo Ibrahim also describes himself as a Nubian from northern Sudan. He did his schooling and Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering in Alexandria, Egypt. But why did he do his doctorate specifically on mobile communication, between the 1970s and '80s, when cell-phones weren't even commercially available?

Mo Ibrahim: "I was a radio engineer, doing some internship at the International Telecommunication Union in Geneva. One evening, they were showing the famous movie called 'Khartoum'. So I took a taxi, which was rare for me because I didn't have the financial resources. And I noticed the driver was using some strange radio equipment to communicate. And I was really puzzled because we used to work with radio systems based on line-of-sight. But here was a taxi, running down the streets, talking to somewhere, which is invisible. So, I started to ask questions and discovered that some university [Birmingham] in the UK was doing some research in that area. It was just curiosity really, just the engineer in me who like to play with a new toy and understand how does it work. Again, I was lucky because I stumbled into an area, which became very strategic."

Mo Ibrahim and his team at British Telecom's wireless company, Cellnet, were instrumental in designing Britain's first mobile network in the 1980s. By the end of that decade, though, Ibrahim was fed up with BT's bureaucracy. So, he started his own engineering consultancy and software company. Mobile Systems

International designed cell-phone networks in Europe, the United States of America and Asia.

Mo Ibrahim: "The only place we didn't have any work was Africa. People had a completely false view of Africa. Yes, we have problems in Africa. We are not angels. But we are not the devil, not so corrupt or so hopeless. You can do business in Africa. So, okay, those operators don't want to do it, we will build an operating company and that's how we started Celtel."

The rapid growth of cell-phones in Africa is mind-blowing. About 14 years ago, there were less than eight-million. Today, Africa has about 650-million cell-phone users - more than Europe or the United States.

Mo Ibrahim: "The way to connect Africa clearly is wireless. So, I knew it was going to be a good market. But I never ever imagined the size of the market or the way people would embrace mobile phones. I would have made more money."

Ibrahim says cell-phones and new applications can fast-track Africa's development. They've already created a liberating and healthy space for citizens.

Mo Ibrahim: "Many governments in Africa think of civil society as the enemy. Now, in your own pocket, you have your own radio station, TV station. You're taking videos, pictures and you're sending it everywhere to everybody. This is democracy and participation as it should be."

This former Marxist made over four-billion dollars for himself and his shareholders, including his employees, when he sold his companies by 2005. And he never bribed anyone. Now, he's reinvesting in his roots and the source of his wealth - Africa. The Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership is the largest in history, comprising five-million dollars over ten years and 200-thousand dollars annually for life. So far, it's only gone to three former African presidents - Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, Festus Mogae of Botswana and Pedro Pires of Cape Verde.

Mo Ibrahim: "We are bringing to the attention of the world some African stars, really unsung soldiers. The prize gives them the resources to continue to do their good work in Africa. But more than that, the prize is focussing the minds of the African people on the importance of leadership and governance."

The annual Ibrahim Index of African Governance monitors, assesses and ranks countries.

Mo Ibrahim: "I think it's made a big difference. It helped to focus governments' mind that everybody is accountable. Governments now are paying attention."

Angie Kapelianis: "Why do you care so much about the state and quality of governance in Africa?"

Mo Ibrahim: "This is the big elephant in the room. The only way for Africa to move forward is by Africans themselves deciding that enough is enough. We really need to do the right things, run our governments in a fair, transparent way for the benefit of all the people; not for the benefit of my family, my cousins or my tribe. It is time for our leaders to know that they are servants of their people, not masters of their people. They ought to be honest custodians who really develop this wealth for the benefit of every single citizen in their country. That is what is going to change us. Nothing else!"

Mo Ibrahim has received at least six honorary doctorates and over a dozen awards for his innovation, leadership and philanthropy.

Angie Kapelianis: "How did you feel in 2008 when *Time* magazine named you as one of its 100 most influential people in the world?"

Mo Ibrahim: "Nothing!"

Angie Kapelianis: "Really?"

Mo Ibrahim: "Listen, Angie, a few times in the UK, they choose me as 'The Most Powerful Black Person in Britain'. I carry a British passport. Each time I go through Heathrow, the officers look at the passport and read my name, then they look at the computer and then they start typing things and look at me again, and then after consulting so many databases, they say: 'Okay, you can get in'. If, I'm that powerful guy, why don't those people let me go just through like anybody else? So, these things don't mean anything."

This busy man sits on about 20 international boards, councils or panels. They include the United Nations Commission on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, American Council on Foreign Relations, London Business School, Reuters and the Mandela-Rhodes Foundation.

Angie Kapelianis: "Dr Ibrahim, what are you most proud of in your life or in your career?"

Mo Ibrahim: "Wow! I think the thing I'm most proud of actually are really my children. I'm just amazed how I managed to have some wonderful children - they bring a lot of pleasure to me."

Angie Kapelianis: "Do you have any regrets - things that you might have done differently?"

Mo Ibrahim: "A lot, Angie. I'm going to need two hours to start listing all my regrets! I have a lot of regrets. [LAUGHS] Well, one regret, I really wish I'd started my business a little bit earlier. I started my business when I was 40 years old or so, but at the end I think, well, I learnt something also from companies like British Telecom - at least how not to do business. It's more creative to do your own thing and invigorating when you feel free, you feel independent."

When Mo Ibrahim does have some free time, he likes to read and listen to jazz.

Mo Ibrahim: "I enjoy very much swimming in the sea, actually. I'm not a great swimmer, but I just like to go into the sea and splash around and swim a little bit. I think in my previous life, I must have been a fish or something. [LAUGHS] I like to play golf, but I never have time really to play, so I'm an awful, awful golf-player and I always regret that."

I'm Angie Kapelianis in Johannesburg.