



COMMON
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INITIATIVE

REPORT ON THE AFRICA IN ACTION CONFERENCE

18TH JUNE 2014



Conference delegates

Comic Relief hosted a conference on 18th June 2014 in London on the theme of Africa in Action: Celebrating Diaspora Contribution to Development. The event set out to highlight the contributions that the UK-based African diaspora organisations and individuals have made to international development and to inspire diaspora, donors, and other development practitioners to continue to innovate and refresh their approaches to support Africa's development.

The event brought together a diverse range of experts, representatives of diaspora organisations and people interested in international development. It included speeches from Lord Boateng, Williams Nkurunziza, the High Commissioner of Rwanda and Justine Greening MP, Secretary of State for International Development. There was an engaging 'in conversation' with Lenny Henry, a long standing trustee of Comic Relief. In addition there were a wide array of panel discussions, focusing on issues related to diaspora and international development including philanthropy, advocacy, investment, businesses, remittances and volunteering.

AFRICA'S CRITICAL CHALLENGES

In order to understand the role of the diaspora in Africa's development, the conference highlighted the critical challenges for African countries. Several issues were raised, including the need for a continent-wide economic transformation and investment. Both Lord Boateng and Mr Nkurunziza called for better governance in African countries; a stronger civil society able to make demands on its political leaders; and the need for a more enlightened and accountable leadership across the continent.

The need to change outsider perceptions of Africa was highlighted by several speakers. Many Africans may live in poverty, but the continent is wealthy, said Lord Boateng. Although it is a sad fact that 33 African countries are listed among the least developed in the world, said Mr Nkurunziza, this situation arises from the failure in Africa to harbour its wealth.



Lord Boateng

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The Common Ground Initiative
is co-funded by Comic Relief
and the UK government, and
managed by Comic Relief





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Justine Greening MP

Africa's progress was acknowledged by Justine Greening MP, who mentioned that six of the ten fastest growing economies were in Africa. The continent, she said, had a whole new generation of entrepreneurs and a wealth of natural resources which, if managed properly, were Africa's assets.

Yet at the same time she warned that many people were being left behind, reiterating a view that Lord Boateng had expressed earlier when he spoke about current growth patterns in Africa, which were accompanied by growing inequality.

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, AN AFRICAN ASSET

The African diaspora was also considered to be part of Africa's wealth, one of its greatest assets. Theo Sowa (CEO, African Women's Development Fund and trustee of Comic Relief) spoke about the remittances that the diaspora send back to Africa, estimated to be as much as £15 billion every year. However the African diaspora were not simply remittance givers, they also had knowledge, networks and a voice to ensure that issues most pertinent to the continent were high up on the international development agenda.

It was noted by many speakers that the African diaspora tends to be highly skilled, well-educated and well-connected. The diaspora had the potential to be Africa's ambassadors, working in partnership and solidarity with African citizens and their governments, helping to change the narrative on Africa through their efforts to highlight many positive changes taking place in the continent. Lord Boateng urged the diaspora to be active participants in Africa's transformation. Only the best, he advised, is good enough for Africa, and the diaspora needed to ensure that this would happen.

DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

The need for the diaspora to understand the African context and to have humility when working with Africans was noted by several speakers. Theo Sowa emphasised the need for mutual respect between the diaspora and people living in Africa and also the need to work together in a 'strong and mutual way'.

Alan Gamlen (research associate at Oxford University) warned that there was a significant difference between loving Africa and living there, which made it all the more important, as Kathleen Newland (Migration Policy Institute) pointed out, for the diaspora to listen to Africans on the ground. Diaspora engagement, she advised, "had to be a two-way street", which to be effective required better communications at various levels and the setting up of stronger relationships between people from different backgrounds and different interests.



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Lenny Henry in conversation

The need for the diaspora to reflect more deeply on how it supports African development was echoed by several speakers. Was the diaspora being sufficiently inclusive in its approach to development? Was the African diaspora also ensuring that it wasn't working in silos, but instead helping to build connections and partnerships with the wider diaspora and aid community?

Chukwu-Emeka Chikezie (Up!-Africa Ltd) asked if connections were being made between the old and new African diaspora, and about building the potential links with the Asian diaspora. He also warned that diaspora shouldn't necessarily be mirroring NGOs to achieve change in Africa, and that the diaspora offered a plethora of other ways to bring about positive change in the continent which needed to be understood, recognised and talked about.

This was echoed by Lenny Henry who felt that Africans and the diaspora in the UK were still not in charge of the story of their own development, both as individuals and as a group. He urged the diaspora to create its own work, and stop thinking parochially. "If we, as the diaspora don't control the narrative", he warned, "we will always have the same story told about us."

A MORE EFFECTIVE DIASPORA

To the question on how the diaspora could become more effective in achieving development goals and in shaping the development narrative, there were a number of suggestions. Amanda Khozi Mukwashi (United Nations Volunteer Programme) spoke about knowledge sharing and scaling up innovative work. Demeke Atnafu Ambulo (Minister Counsellor at the Embassy of Ethiopia) agreed, stressing also the need for the diaspora to work with African countries in a number of areas including foreign investment and trade.

Several speakers emphasised the importance of the diaspora becoming more organised. Other people spoke of the importance of making plans and sticking to them, and not getting swayed too much by donor-driven agendas. As Kathleen Newland observed, raising funds from diaspora communities would enable organisations to set their own agendas and be less constrained.



Kathleen Newland, Migration Policy Institute



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Noo Saro-Wiwa chairing a panel

The importance of working with others, not demonising anyone, and making a concerted effort to build relations with a wide assortment of people was echoed by many people in the conference. It was the best way to break down some of the barriers, as one speaker put it.

In her address to the conference, Justine Greening spoke of the key role that the African diaspora have to play especially when it came to promoting inclusive development, building on Theo Sowa's statements earlier in the day. The Secretary of State spoke specifically about African women and girls who were being left behind by economic development and said she wanted to see the diaspora play a fundamental role in supporting them and in promoting social and economic transformation in Africa.

Justine Greening echoed the importance of the diaspora supporting efforts to end female genital mutilation (FGM), child and forced marriage, which she felt were litmus test issues around women and girls rights. She wanted to hear from the diaspora about their development plans and also their views on the next international development goals.

THE NEXT PHASE OF THE COMMON GROUND INITIATIVE

The conference was also an opportunity for Comic Relief to speak publicly about the next phase of the Common Ground Initiative (CGI), the programme co-funded by DFID which provides funding to diaspora and small organisations.

Richard Graham (Head of International Grants at Comic Relief) explained that DFID had recently awarded Comic Relief £12 million to which Comic Relief would add another £8 million for the second phase of CGI which would run until 2019. CGI will continue to give grants to diaspora organisations, and would include social investment, diaspora activism, and it would also help the diaspora to tell its own story of development in Africa.



Delegates in conversation