

Center for Global Development Keynote Address

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Former President of the Republic of Liberia

As delivered

November 4, 2019

This is the text of a speech given by president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at an event hosted at the Center for Global Development on November 4, 2019.

Mr. Masood Ahmed - CDG Chairman, Mr. Larry Summers, former President and my dear friend Nancy Birdsall, the CDG Family, Special Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I fondly recall that CGD was one of Liberia's first partners, even before my inauguration in January of 2006, as we sought to tackle the legacy of decades of regional and civil war. It was the Chair Emeritus of CGD Ed Scott who established the Scott Family Liberia Fellows. The program recruited both Liberians and non-Liberians to serve as assistants to heads of agencies and ministries to help rebuild the country. A current Visiting Fellow at CGD, Gyude Moore, was one such Scott Fellows. Gyude was also my former Deputy Chief of Staff and Minister of Public Works.

Your platform continued to be here for me, arguing for debt relief, highlighting the importance of rebuilding Liberia's security forces towards post-conflict stabilization, and helping ensure that Liberia was at the front of the queue for programs like PEPFAR, Feed the Future, the MCC and Power Africa.

Through the efforts of Betsy Williams, the Scotts Fellows initiative expanded to the President's Young Professional Program, which included qualifying graduates of local institutions. Today, the program has transformed into the Emerging Public Leaders and has been implemented in Ghana with potential to expand into other African countries. Liberia is proud to have modeled an intervention that will lead to stronger and younger civil servants throughout the continent.

I am grateful that CGD continues to be a platform for building U.S.-Liberia ties. From the bottom of my heart, from the hearts of the people of Liberia, thank you.

I now would like to proceed with my remarks, and with no surprise to anyone in this room, will focus on governance and the importance of building independent institutions.

In recent years, Africa has made much progress, with several countries having achieved rates of growth at levels to effectively address poverty.

However, the 2018 Mo Ibrahim Index reflects a discouraging deterioration in governance. Since 2008, the African average score for 'Sustainable Economic Opportunity' increased by 0.1 point, or 0.2%, despite a continental increase in GDP of nearly 40% over the same period. 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."

We are pleased that over the period of 2006 to 2017, Liberia was the only country to improve in every category and sub-category of the Ibrahim Index of African Governance – a testament to all those who served in my government.

In a paper from the World Bank Commission of Growth and Development, scholars from MIT and Harvard argue that institutions are fundamental to economic growth and development across countries.

They note that in the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, the promotion of democracy, checks and balances and accountability will almost certainly lead to improved institutions and economic policies. We should add that the necessary conditions for development also rely on improving the rule of law, assuring democratic transitions, controlling corruption and assuring property rights. Building strong institutions to protect these rights are indispensable.

Weak and non-existent institutions are the shared variable of all fragile states, including Liberia. Therefore, Liberia's historic presidential transition in January of last year was more than a change of administration – it was a transfer of power to the people whose rights are protected through the established institutional accountability. And it was the first peaceful transfer of presidential power in Liberia in 75 years.

Liberia's success will depend upon the continued strengthening of weak institutions and combating endemic corruption and patron-clientelist politics, which are the most formidable barriers to making democracy work. These ills must be fought with all tools available; they must be made stronger than the individual. There is no substitute for this in Africa or anywhere in the world.

It is also clear that transference cannot be imposed. It must be demand-driven by citizens empowered through civic education, decentralization of government and democracy practiced at the community level. The only sustainable power must come 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.

Indeed, my most proud accomplishment is that after decades of violent conflict, the power in Liberia now rests where it should – with the people, who must assure that it is grounded in the rule of law and upheld by institutions.

Yet, Liberia remains a fragile state. Institutions are still young and being tested, and resources remain scarce. Nations in a state of fragility, particularly post – conflict nations, need special attention and support. We ask that supporters and partners remain focused on Liberia so the country can continue its emergence as a post conflict success story.

In all countries, improvement in African governance requires political inclusion. We must identify the barriers-to-entry into political society and break them down, one-by-one. Democracy must devolve from a single event, into the institutionalization of a process that provides access to all of its participants.

One such barrier exists within political parties themselves. Political parties are organized by patronage and patriarchy. We must take on constitutional reforms to address malpractice and inequalities. Campaign finance law is essential; in many African nations

unregulated monies pollute a political system to a point where the voter will become unrecognizable. Quotas can be used to address inequities for women, the youth and considered for the disabled, but must be phased out over time.

It is worthwhile to note that over the 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.

We see the same in Rwanda under the leadership of 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 registered the sharpest rise in broad-based economic reforms.

But, as President Kagame has said, this also requires support and action by an enlightened citizenry. I might add a citizenry ready to take responsibility and participate individually and collectively in the nations' development.

While we are right to celebrate the increasing number of women holding elected office and participating in the democratic process, let us remember that much remains to be done.

So, as we applaud our progress, let us take a hard look at the work that remains to be done, because these barriers are stubborn; they fight back to keep women and other change makers down. Many are prepared to take on this fight. Indeed, this evening let us honor all the warriors, men and women who are battling for women empowerment and a more equal world.

Our call for a more participatory and democratic society is made more achievable through education which 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 U.S. Supreme Court in the historic ruling of Brown Vs. the Board of Education. America was made more equitable and stronger by that ruling.

The fight for the future of Africa is also in its classrooms. And here too, the Mo Ibrahim Index sounds an alarm. 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.

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.”

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

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.”

I would like to applaud the Center for Global Development for being at the forefront of inclusive strategies for development in recognition that interventions in Africa must be done in concert with those whom the policies will affect.

I believe the same must be said for institution building. It is one thing to discuss strategy, how to break down barriers, and improve governance. It is another to engage and include those most directly affected by weak and broken institutions.

Think-tanks like CDG, international policy groups and governments must take a serious look at improving institutions. They must consult with those who have been kept at the

margins. For example, when looking at how to improve campaign finance law, aspiring women politicians must be involved to properly break down the barriers that keep women from full participation in the political process. When looking at eliminating barriers to education, youths must be consulted to learn how to best provide ways for them to attend schools and obtain training for future careers.

This means that partnership institutions such as the World Bank, African Development Bank, and International Monetary Fund can no longer decide the future of Africa from desks in Washington or Abidjan. They must consult well beyond country officials with those who have been kept at the margin.

They must also walk-the-walk through partnerships with home-based institutions such as the African Center for Economic Transformation and the Emerging Public Leaders.

With the rise of Africa's civil society, including women, youth and other political outsiders, Africans are demanding more of their leaders, more of their partners, and more of those in this room. They are calling for transformational change.

We must respond. We have no choice. As Mo Ibrahim reminds us, we are running out of time.

Thank you!