

“The Role of the Diaspora in Support of Africa’s Development”

Keynote Address by

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Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is an important event at a time of great hope and opportunity for Africa. It is a pleasure to join you at this meeting. I would like to thank the Centre for African Policy and Peace Strategy (CAPPS) for inviting me to speak at this occasion. The Office of the Special Adviser on Africa at the United Nations in New York intends to collaborate closely with the Centre on efforts to mobilize the African Diaspora, as an important stakeholder in support of the development of Africa and the implementation of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD).

The past few years have witnessed many positive developments in Africa, as well as expression of strong support from the international community for the development of Africa. It is most fitting that the first meeting of The African Diaspora Leadership Forum should take place in London. The Government of the United Kingdom has been a strong and reliable supporter of Africa, exemplified by the establishment of the Commission for Africa which produced the report entitled **OUR COMMON INTEREST**. Thanks to that report the G8 Summit in Gleneagles in 2005 made a number of commitments in support of Africa.

Millions of people originating from Africa reside outside the continent. Diaspora comprises two different groups: the “old” Diaspora whose forbearers left Africa over 250 years ago and who identify themselves with the entire region, and the “new” Diaspora who left in the post-Second World War period for political, economic or cultural reasons and who maintain close ties with their countries of origin. While the actual number might be even higher, the International Organization for Migration estimates that there are about 3.6 million Africans living in the “new” Diaspora. These two Diaspora groups have a common interest in the development of Africa but their specific interests and expectations vary.

As Africa moves forward and as international support for Africa gathers pace, the Diaspora is well placed not only to help in strengthening international support for Africa but more importantly to make a practical contribution to accelerate growth and development in Africa. The growing recognition of its contribution has spurred action both from the Diaspora and the national Governments. A number of African Governments already convene annual meetings for dialogue with the Diaspora. At the same time, many Governments have established focal points for the Diaspora within government departments or created different institutional mechanisms for interaction with the Diaspora.

The African Union also has recognized the Diaspora as an important stakeholder. The Diaspora is now seen as the 6th region of Africa. The Constitutive Act of the African Union was amended according to a proposal by Senegal, leading to the adoption of a new Article 3(q) which declares that the AU shall “invite and encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of our continent, in the building of the African Union”. Along the same lines, 20 seats on

the AU's Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), are reserved for Diaspora organizations.

For its part, the Diaspora has organized itself into a myriad of organizations, including associations of migrants originating from the same country or community, professional associations, religious and political groups, NGOs involved in development efforts, virtual networks and think tanks.

Diaspora groups possess many unique strengths, such as good knowledge of the culture and the specific needs of their countries and communities of origin, the ability to work in different cultural settings, long term personal commitment to the development of their communities, and the ability to gain the trust of the communities. In addition, the Diaspora has at its disposal a multitude of intellectual, economic and political resources, through which it can make a significant contribution to development and poverty reduction efforts in Africa.

If there ever was a time for Africa Diaspora to provide additional impetus for Africa's development and democracy, it is now. Let me briefly describe some areas where the Diaspora can contribute – and is contributing – to Africa's development.

Providing expertise in crucial areas

Many Africans in Diaspora have professional skills that can contribute to development efforts in African countries, either through short-term placements, sharing research findings or cooperation projects. For example, a number of schemes have been established, through which qualified professionals of African

origin are placed in African countries with the objective of providing skills or expertise lacking in the countries of origin. These short-term placements can take place in public or private sector institutions, universities or NGOs, in areas ranging from manufacturing to agriculture, health, education, law and science.

At the same time, research findings can be shared through networks of scientists without physical relocation of the scientists living in the Diaspora. The researchers in the Diaspora can promote scholars exchange and cooperation projects between foreign and African universities, research institutions and the growing number of “think tanks” in Africa. Indeed, it high time that some of the “think tanks” located in Africa and those owned and led by Diaspora Africans organise consortia around particular economic, social or scientific issues to contribute to public policy problem solving.

If the Diaspora Africans, especially those in the scientific community, needed an inspiration from a best practice, they only need to look East: to Asia, where Diaspora scientists have contributed significantly to the development of that region.

A serious challenge for many African countries, particularly the smaller economies, is the issue of “brain drain”, which is depriving African countries of a significant part of their skilled work force. The health and education sectors are especially vulnerable to this regrettable trend. In consequence, many African countries are experiencing difficulties in the delivery of basic services, such as health and education. It is unrealistic to expect these health and education workers to permanently return to their countries of origin but they can be instrumental in

supplying expertise to manage the institutions in the health and education sectors in Africa.

Mobilising financial resources for development

The development challenges facing Africa, including meeting the Millennium Development Goals, require considerable investments, and call for the use of innovative sources for financing, including the mobilization of financial resources from the Diaspora.

There is growing evidence that the Diaspora already makes a significant financial contribution to economic and social development in Africa through remittances sent home countries on a regular basis by millions of Africans living abroad. Estimates suggest that for the period 2000-2003, remittances from Africans working abroad averaged about US\$ 17 billion, virtually overtaking Foreign Direct Investment flows, which averaged about US\$ 15 billion per annum during the same period. Remittances have increased steadily over a couple of decades and have been relatively resistant to international financial crisis or violent conflicts.

These remittances play an important role in poverty reduction, not only through increasing household purchasing power for essential goods such as food, housing, education and healthcare. The Diaspora, however, must go beyond remittances to devising specific financial instruments that enable them to invest in the major infrastructure and other projects for which large financial resources are needed. This is a task where the Diaspora on Wall Street in New York and the City of London are well placed to make an important contribution. This is as much an issue of commitment as it is a sound financial proposition.

Private sector development

In the flourishing literature on globalisation, there is much talk of openness of economies as a pre-condition for reaping the fruits of global integration. Openness is often viewed in terms of trade liberalization and receptivity to foreign capital. An equally important factor, however, is the existence of a vibrant private sector. Indeed, in this era of globalization, the ability of a country to benefit from the global commerce is critically dependent on the extent to which its private sector enterprises participate in the global production and supply chains, including outsourcing opportunities.

Many small and medium scale businesses in Africa have been established and are operating on the basis of the wealth of ideas and skills learned in the Diaspora, thus facilitating the transfer of technology and business practices to Africa. Through their contacts in host countries, the Diaspora can also help African businesses link to production and supply chains.

Diaspora is well positioned to know and understand the business environment and local culture in Africa. Diaspora investments in Africa are the best way to show to the international community that Africans themselves take business opportunities in Africa seriously. When Africans themselves start to invest massively in their own countries of origin, this will encourage other potential investors to look seriously into the possibility of productive investment on the continent.

Advocacy for and on behalf of the continent

This leads me to the next area where the Diaspora can play a significant role, which is advocacy for the African continent. There continues to be a bleak portrayal of Africa's present situation and prospects in the international media, notwithstanding the improvements in the region. The Diaspora can play a substantial role in shifting the international perception of Africa through advocating for a more balanced and accurate coverage of African issues by the international media. Africans living in the Diaspora themselves can act as role models. Those who occupy strategic positions can also be useful and effective advocates for Africa.

Through building partnerships with key stakeholders and lobbying as well as incisive research on topical African issues, the fledgling Diaspora "think tanks" can play a crucial role in influencing the policy debate in their host countries on a range of issues of interest to Africa. This is an area of potential growth and "think tanks" like CAPPs have an important role to play in this regard.

Institution building and democracy

The Diaspora can also use the experience gained in their host societies in order to engage in advocacy in their countries of origin, helping to impart best practice in the formulation of public policies and strengthening political institutions, as well as to develop mechanisms for the creation of partnerships between the government, civil society and the private sector, and thus sustain democracy.

Institution-building and social capital building are particularly relevant in post-conflict situations. Through economic and social investment, Diaspora groups can be instrumental in peace-building and reconstruction processes in their countries of origin.

Impossible to measure but nevertheless important are the intangible flows from the Diaspora of positive new attitudes to work, human rights, gender empowerment, rule of law and healthy life styles. Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf, President of Liberia, is a good example of a Diaspora Liberian who has returned home and brought her rich experience to bear.

The African Monitor

Today marks the launch of another important initiative in which the Diaspora is expected to play a role: namely **The African Monitor**. The African Monitor is a very welcome and valuable addition to other initiatives monitoring the implementation of commitments made to Africa. Its strength lies in harnessing the energy of the civil society, including the Diaspora organizations, to advocate for tangible benefits at the grassroots level in Africa. After all, this is the key question – are our development efforts making a difference on the lives of the African poor? I am convinced that this initiative will contribute to maintaining the momentum on international actions in support of Africa's development.

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Thus, there are many opportunities for the Diaspora help Africa. Today's globalized world, characterized by easy movement of information, people and

goods, provides the Diaspora a unique window of opportunity to contribute to the economic, social and political development of the African continent. The challenge is to take advantage of these opportunities. The Diaspora needs to be proactive, effective and organized in order to make a difference. The African Union and its NEPAD programme provide a crucial platform for Diaspora contributions to the development of Africa.

In an audacious and proactive publication titled “*Can Africa Compete*” jointly issued by the World Bank, Economic Commission for Africa and the African Development Bank in 2000, these institutions explored the question of what it would take for Africa to be competitive in the 21st century global economy. In that report, there was hardly any reference to or, in any case, scant acknowledgement of the potential contribution that the Diaspora could make to Africa’s development. Six years later we know better. The valuable contribution of the Diaspora was a recurring theme at the High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development held recently at the United Nations Headquarters. We now know that the Diaspora can be an important force for building the region’s research, scientific and institutional capacity as well as mobilizing financial resources for development. We also know that the Diaspora can be important advocates for and on behalf of Africa. And we also know that the Diaspora can be a creative force for upholding and strengthening democracy in the region.

The Diaspora must rise to these challenges. If they do not bring their wealth of knowledge and growing financial power to bear on Africa’s development, who would? And if not now, when?

Thank you for your kind attention.