

Africa Education Leadership Awards 2012: No higher honour

Friday 28 December 2012

By John A. Akec

December 21, 2012- I was delightfully shocked and elevated to receive an invitation recently to attend Africa-India Partnership Summit that was scheduled to take place in Le Meridien Ile, Mauritius, on 12 December 2012. The invitation also pointed out that I was going to be honoured with Africa Education Leadership Award for 2012 during the summit. All happened as planned. I travelled to Mauritius and participated in that Summit accordingly, and received the Africa Education Award for 2012 for "Outstanding Contribution to Education", it says in the invitation letter.

The Africa Education Leadership Awards is an annual event that takes place in Mauritius and are organised and presented by World CSR Day, in partnership with CMO Asia, and Stars of Industry Group, among others; all of which are not-for-profit bodies active in promoting good governance, business excellence, leadership, sustainability, innovation, and corporate responsibility both regionally and globally.

The Awards which comprised of a trophy and citation "are of the highest stature and are presented to Individuals and Institutions who have surpassed several levels of its excellence and set an example of being a role model and Exemplary Leadership. And also to Individuals behind the Institution who are building their Institutions through Leadership, Innovation, Academic and Industry Interface and a supreme objective of Building future leaders", according to presenters of the Africa Education Leadership Awards.

Most important for me, this Award is an endorsement of the vision I have been trying to sell through advocacy work; namely the need for South Sudan to turn its back on outmoded colonial elitist type of higher education that favours few bright students, and move towards mass higher education that provides ample opportunity for most to study at post secondary level. This is because the increasingly knowledge-based economies of twenty first century demand large educated and skilled workforce for any country to compete in the global marketplace, especially in area of science and technology. Not only did I advocate for it, but have presented policy change recommendations, most of which are yet to find acceptance by the education establishments in my country. The Award is therefore a boost for my morale to persevere and stay the course until this vision comes to full fruition.

Africa Meets Asia in Mauritius to Share Views on "Leadership for Future"

The Africa India Partnership Summit that coincided with Africa Leadership Awards and Africa Education Leadership Awards 2012 explored the potential and avenues for Africa India cooperation and exchanged views on questions related to leadership for the future- with a particular focus on two main themes that were the subjects of panel discussions: "Building Future Leaders - Perspectives," and "Building Strategic Thinking for the Future."

Keynote Speeches

The Summit and Leadership Awards were well attended with keynote speeches on the above themes by Dr. R.L. Bhatia, Founder of World CSR Day; Mrs. Pelononi Moitoi, Minister of Education, Botswana; Mr. Ronald Dubois, Senior Advisor, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, Mauritius; Mrs. Sheery Ayithey, Minister of Environment, Science and Technology, Ghana; Mr. Walter Mzembe, Minister of Tourism and Hospitality, Zimbabwe; and Mr. Sarat Dutt Lallah, CEO, Mauritius Telecom.

Presenting his perspective on the theme of building leadership for the future, Dr. Bhatia the founder of World CSR Day and Indian national, maintained that a leader is someone with whom you can go where you cannot go alone, that leaders grow other leaders, and that leaders show during the time of great crisis. Finally, he said, good leaders create great nations.

Mrs. Moitoi, Minister of Education, Botswana, on the other hand, stressed that leaders are not grown in the classroom but are born with talents and instinct for leadership. She shared how Botswana works tirelessly for the betterment of lives of the populace. She also encouraged more Africa India partnership.

Mr. Roland Dubois, Senior Economic Advisor to government of Mauritius pointed out how his country, which is devoid of natural resources such as oil and diamonds, has invested in its people as the resource for wealth creation through education and training, pointing out the strategic location of his country as the meeting point between Africa and Asia.

Mrs. Ayithey, Minister of Environment, Science and Technology, Ghana stressed the fact that leaders can grow other leaders by being role models to whom the young can look up to in society; that leaders should put people and their interests of first, not their own; and to always strive to bring everyone on board.

Mr. Lallah, CEO, Mauritius Telecom, explained how two decades ago, as Mauritius Minister of IT and Telecommunications then, he encouraged his government to invest in fiber optic cables that connected Mauritius to Red Sea, South Africa, and Malagasy respectively and hence to the rest of the world. He pointed out how his country is now ripping great benefits because of its

easy and fast connectivity to the world via multiple sub-marine cables. He underscored the necessity for leaders of our countries to look deep into distant future and recognize the awaiting opportunities while making investment decisions now rather than later.

At the end of keynote speeches that were followed immediately by presenting the speakers with Africa Leadership Awards, Prof. Elsaadani Muhamed, Vice President, Misr University of Science and Technology, Egypt, announced that his University will host Africa Education Leadership Awards for 2013 and invited all to attend.

Panel Discussion on "Building Future Leaders – Perspective"

On the panel entitled "Building Future Leaders – Perspective" were Thebe Ikalafeng, Founder and CEO, The Brand Leadership Group; Vidia Mooneegan, Senior Vice President, Ceridian Global Workforce Strategy; Dr. Primrose Kursha, Vice Chancellor, Zimbabwe Open University; and Dr. Lazarus Hangula, Vice Chancellor, University of Namibia.

In her perspective, Dr. Primrose, Vice Chancellor, Open University of Zimbabwe emphasized the role that education plays in shaping future leaders. Leaders should listen and listen when making consultation which should impact premade decisions, she stressed; pointing out how vitally important for leaders to also roll up their sleeves and work at operational levels as opposed to confining themselves to strategic level where it is so easy to get out of touch with reality on the ground.

Dr. Gangula, Vice Chancellor, University of Namibia described the strategies his country used to jump start education after independence. He underscored the necessity to hire foreign expertise in higher education institutions to close the gap in national human resource.

Panel Discussion on "Building Strategic Thinking for the Future"

This author participated on this panel. Other panelists included Prof. Nyeko Pen-Mogi, Vice Chancellor, University of Gulu, Uganda; Dr. Samuel Donkor, President and Founder, All Nations University College, Ghana; Dr. Sandip Jha, Chairman, Sandip Foundation, India.

Prof. Pen-Mogi pointed out how the idea of a vision for future has been found wanting in most of Africa. He gave examples of poor town planning approaches that in the end cost so much money to correct such as allocating residential areas in swamps regions of his country; only for the government to end up borrowing large sums of money from World Bank and IMF to construct flood water drainage systems for such residents, instead of anticipating the risks ahead of planning and finding remedies. He also lamented how easy it is for national parliaments in Africa to endorse many plans just because they were brought up by the presidents, and not for their own merits. Other panelists also presented worthy perspectives that space would not allow to cover in this article.

My Perspective on Building Strategic Thinking for the Future

Giving my perspective on the theme of building strategic thinking for the future, I saw a need for Africa to have a mindset that can "plant a tree" as I reminded my listeners how the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher commented on the famous statement by John Maynard Keynes, the twentieth century British iconic economist, when he argued in his time with free market fundamentalists that: "in the long run, we will all be dead." Later on, when Keynes has been long dead, Mrs. Thatcher told a Conservative Party conference in 1980s: "Anyone who thinks like that [Keynes] cannot plant a tree."

While Margaret Thatcher deliberately quoted Keynes out of context as a putdown on economic Keynesianism, she makes a point of necessity of having a mindset that is ready to invest in distant future and rip the benefits later. As Africa plans for the future, I pointed out, there is a need for the leaders of our continent to get out of the 'here and now mentality' and look further beyond quick rewards or short-term interests.

Hence, I urged for the need to discard the narrow elitist based higher education model that benefits privileged few, and move to broader based mass higher education model that is socially just and in tune with the demand of twenty first century. Our education systems, as I see it, should emphasize the mastery of generic skills particularly languages (such as English), numeracy, ICT, and communications and team work skills over narrow-based specialist skills at undergraduate level. This is because the future generations will be frequently changing jobs and professions several times in their lifetime; thus, demanding constant deskilling, and re-skilling to keep pace with changing needs of the job market.

We should also empower women so that they can contribute more effectively to global well being, I demanded.

Furthermore, education institutions should encourage extra curricula activities outside the lecture hall and the library to develop talents that can be of great benefit in later professional life; and teach entrepreneurship to young so that they can create their own jobs, and be sensitized about the need to protect environment and responsible use of dwindling earth resources.

I also urged governments to avail more funds to teaching of science and technology subjects and for private sector to a play pole in higher education. Last but not the least, we should strive to increase South-South cooperation in areas of technology transfer, health, education, and infrastructure development; and devise platforms and mechanisms for sharing experiences

on best practice.

Now for Digression: My Conversations with Niccolo' Machiavelli on the Island of Ile Aux Cerf, Mauritius

Mauritius is a beautiful island nation located in the Indian Ocean, off East Africa coast. It has a population of 1.2 million and total GDP of USD 12 billion (purchasing power parity, PPP) and GDP per capita of USD 10,000 (PPP). Its economy is mainly service-based (61 percent of GDP) with tourism making a significant contribution to economy. Industry contributes 29 percent and agriculture 10 percent to the GDP. The country's literacy rate averages 83 percent and with just 10 percent of population living below poverty line. Mauritius capital is Port Louis.

I was on the maritime nation for 4 days (11 to 15 December 2012). A day before my departure, I went on a boat day tour of the beautiful Ile Aux Cerf Island in the South East coast of Mauritius, 45 minute drive from Grand Bay in North East Mauritius where I stayed. The tour package did not exceed USD 30 (800 Ruppees), and included boat trip to the island, visit to a waterfall on speed boat, lunch with fish and chicken barbecue and bottomless assortment of drinks. This would hardly be enough for a decent lunch at your average hotel in Juba, yet it was more than enough for the whole day entertainment in Mauritius. One big lesson learned.

After touring the island and had lunch, I killed the rest of the time waiting for my boat to take me back to mainland by reading George Bull's excellent translation of The Prince by Niccolo' Machiavelli:

"First it is to be noted that whereas other princes [read presidents and prime ministers] have to content only with the ambition of the nobles [read politicians, ministers, MPs, academics and civil society, italic my addition]and the insolence of the people, the Roman emperors encountered a third difficulty: they had to content with cruelty and avarice of the soldiers... This was a hard task and it was responsible for the downfall of many [ouch!, my exclamation], since it was difficult to satisfy both the soldiers and the populace....," (page 107). This is a difficult one, but sorry, Machiavelli, I could not possibly comment. I told myself.

Then, continues Machiavelli: "a prince should also show his esteem for talent, actively encouraging able men [and women, my italic], and honouring those who excel in their profession. Then must encourage his citizens so that they can go peacefully about their business...the prince should be ready to reward men [and women] who do those things and those who endeavour in any way to increase prosperity of their city or their state..." Unquote (page 123). Well said, Machiavelli, I thought. Enough advise for today. I will take this last one home to my country, South Sudan. Thank you.

Time passed quickly, and I was soon on my boat to the shores of Mauritius and on the van to hotel in Grand Bay. The following morning I was happily on Air Mauritius to Nairobi on my way home... encouraged, refreshed, and with lots of ideas for the betterment of my country.

Finally, I give my deepest and ineffable gratitude to World CSR Day and its partner organisations for the good they are doing for our world and Africa; and to fellow panelists at the Africa India Partnership Summit for sharing their thoughts on the vital theme of leadership.

Also, I would like to extend my best wishes for a Very Merry Christmas and a Happy New to all and everyone who has taken trouble to read my marathon blog article.

I entrust you all in the hands and loving care of the Almighty until we meet again in 2013.

**The author is vice chancellor of University of Northern Bahr El Ghazal, Aweil, South Sudan. He chairs Academics and Researchers Forum for Development, an academics-led think-tank registered in South Sudan. He also edits blog: www.JohnAkecSouthSudan.blogspot.com.*