



Left:
President Paul
Kagame of
Rwanda

The fact that many African countries will not reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set for 2015 will not hamper capacity building in Africa. This was the clear message presented by a number of African heads-of-state and development institute leaders during the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) summit to celebrate its 20th anniversary, held in Kigali, Rwanda earlier this month.

The ACBF used the event to launch its first Africa Capacity Indicators 2011 report, and bring together heads of state in an interactive debate. This included the likes of the President of Rwanda; the Prime Minister of Togo; Burundi's Vice President; the Prime Minister of Gabon; heads of the African Development Bank and World Bank; and former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to mention but a few dignitaries.

Rwanda was an apt choice of venue for the ACBF celebrations, given the extent to which capacity development has helped to rebuild the nation in the past 17 years, lifting it from the devastating effects of the 1994 genocide. The ACBF has played a significant role in the rebirth of this landlocked country which its President, Paul Kagame, honoured.

Likewise, who better to introduce the issues of capacity building in Africa than HE Kagame, who made the point that what Africa needs right now is a shift in attitude. "Capacity is the ability to get things done and build institutions and processes that deliver results," he said. "Even if we have all the skills and organisations required to do this, without a results driven mindset we will achieve little for ourselves or our continent. Building institutions and capacities is not an end in itself but the means to political stability, economic growth and social inclusiveness and progress."

Such a mindset will produce change, enough at least to build on the efforts by African countries over the past 20 years, yet Kagame acknowledged that Africa still has a long way to go for it to harness the full potential of its people. By using Rwanda as an example he was able to cite weaknesses such as lack of ownership, broad and unclear objectives, and not being focused on the delivery of results.

President of the African Development Bank (AfDB), Donald Kaberuka, picked up on the ownership issue, stressing that ownership is inadequate without capacity. "Affirmations such as 'African countries must be in the driving seat'", he said, "remain evangelical unless translated into practice. A public sector that fails to deliver will have its legitimacy questioned, irrespective of how it came to office.

"Gone are the days when Africans would implement externally generated agendas, with externally provided support, convincing ourselves and others that we have internalised them."

There are three areas that Kaberuka identified as key for capacity building in Africa. Firstly he said, "is the special attention to countries recovering from war and conflict, such as Burundi and Southern Sudan. Second, the capacity to manage external shocks." Here he referred to "three seismic shocks in quick succession ... the sharp increase in food prices, the financial crisis and the volatile energy markets." Third is Africa's capacity to manage climate change.

The three together will determine how the capacity momentum can be sustained. The real challenge, however, is how to unlock the potential of the continent and its billion people and, as Kaberuka pointed out, to unlock that potential and "exploit the opportunities of the new landscape requires endogenous capacity."

If Africans are indeed to look to themselves it is going to require significant funding. This will come from organisations like the ACBF, the AfDB and the World Bank. The World Bank's Managing Director, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said that her organisation would be doubling its annual aid to Africa to help the continent to sustain, and meet, its development agenda beyond 2015, simply because, she said, "we are impressed by the economic outlook of the continent."

Okonjo-Iweala thinks of capacity in a dynamic sense – beyond the MDGs and asked the questions: "In 2030 what will be thinking, talking about? I think this is strategically aligned to the areas where we think will be the sources of growth and development. The question is, will we have built the capacity to be able to negotiate even the essential rights that are beneficial to our own countries?"

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African leaders call for capacity building beyond 2015

In terms of governance, building the capacity of civil society organisations will prove critical, says Okonjo-Iweala. "It's not just government, or even the private sector, but civil society that will be a central part of the governance of this continent."

To understand Africa's future means looking into the past, which is what Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga suggested would provide Africans with a springboard to further progress. "Africa has now witnessed very appreciable rates of economic growth in the past 15-20 years. This of course is attributable to improved governance," he said. "One issue that has not been paid attention to is growth rates because we tend to measure growth in terms of GDP. When the figure increases we are all very grateful."

But, Odinga continued, people don't attach more value on how this growth spreads into society such as through infrastructure development and improved standards of living, thus the impact is lost.

Dr Frannie Leautier, the executive secretary of the ACBF emphasised that Africa must be more than just a commodity play; "To achieve this, capacity needs to be enhanced, knowledge assets harnessed and disseminated more strategically, and more creative solutions encouraged."

Leautier also talked beyond 2015 saying that Africa currently has more people under 25 than over 50. "Once we have met the MDGs and the youth have been educated and they are healthy, they will need something to do. The public sector cannot create all those jobs, neither can the private sector so we need to consider how we can help individuals to create their own jobs."

Sustaining capacity building is complicated and presents a myriad of opportunities and challenges, but not impossible provided, as HE Kagame says, the capacity is organisational, institutional and human. "It goes beyond having economists, engineers, but having people with a certain attitude, a certain culture so that these useful qualities take us beyond the individual."

The Kigali Resolution

At the conference the ACBF Kigali Resolution working document was adopted ahead of the African Union Summit in June, in order for governments to set out their development priorities and identify the capacity gaps they have in achieving them. The guiding principles in the draft are:

1. Focus on delivering tangible results for economic prosperity, social inclusiveness and political stability for the benefit of all Africans;
2. Build long term economic, social and governmental institutions that transcend individual leaders, and operate independently and accountably for generations;
3. Align with and promote government's own development priorities – with capacity building an integral part of all implementation plans;
4. Drive change at all levels of society and embed the values of integrity, ambition and focusing on results – involving citizens in decision making and empowering local communities to forge their own future with dignity; and
5. Innovate and share lessons of what works across the continent to support regional cooperation especially through trade, job creation and investment.