AFRICA IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: HOW TO ENHANCE THE CONTINENT'S REPUTATION

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INTRODUCTION

Allow me to start by making reference to the 54th Congress of the International Press Institute in Nairobi last April [i.e., in 2005]. This congress proposed a meeting of African media experts to discuss how best to promote positive coverage of our continent.

In June 2005, the Federation of African Public Relations Association had a 3-day conference attended by 130 participants. At the end of the conference, 14 resolutions and recommendations were made. The recommendations centred on the same theme: the image and reputation of our continent. It is obvious that Africa has an image and reputation crisis and that we Africans will continue to interrogate this topic among ourselves until we find the building blocks we require to correct the misconceptions and misrepresentation of our image and reputation.

I wish, therefore, to make three simple statements at this point. Firstly, that the decisions we make, and how we think and feel or what we do are entirely determined by what we know. In other words, what we know matters.

Secondly, more than any other institution, the media today are at the centre of the production of popular knowledge and values that influence what we accept as true, good and right. The media, therefore, are a pervasive presence in our lives; an integral element of our environment. They have the ability to "filter in" and "filter out" information.

Thirdly, that despite the rapid expansion of the media across the world, Africans, more than any other peoples in the world, are the most dismally represented in them.

The implications of these three statements should be the simple realization that across the world what people think of us – the decisions they make and actions they take – are influenced by the negative images of Africans that are splashed on their television sets, newspapers, the Internet and the books they read.

A book written in the middle of the last century by Baroness Karen Blixen on the *Black Nations of Africa* states that Africans lacked the mental capability to grow beyond a European child of nine! Whether she wrote this out of ignorance, spite or insensitivity, all it amounts to is damage of the African image.

Africa has suffered greatly at the stroke of a journalist's pen. We have been reduced to a bastion of disease, savagery, animism, primitivism, corruption, war, famine, refugees, poverty, dictatorship, crime, filthy and poor roads, over-population, and forcibly amputated limbs. We could go on with the list and populate the minds of those people to whom "Africa" is mediated.

The consequences are that even before a European, American or Korean child grows to the age of 18, they already believe that Africa is a really nightmarish place. To visit Africa is to seek adventure to mingle with the lions, cheetahs, elephants and buffaloes – all the while avoiding corrupt African politicians, African conmen, African gangsters and beggars who stretch their dirty hands to your 4 by 4 tour vehicle.

This "Afro-pessimism" is a dismal prognosis that sees the continent as the dump of history, with no agency of its own and with very dim prospects.

The hard reality we must face is that somehow, the despondent images of Africans that are mediated to other parts of the world make people think that something is amiss in Africa;

that something is wrong, false or bad about Africans.

Our beginning point in this paper should be to reflect on why Africans, and not Americans, Indians, Europeans, the Japanese or the Chinese, are presented in the negative light that we are.

If we are honest to ourselves, we will realize that it is not because there is something inherently wrong or different about Africans. We will realize that there is something dishonest about how Africa is represented. Let me give a few illustrations.

Over the last 15 years, Africa has, perhaps more than any other region in the world, undergone a decisive change from authoritarianism towards democratization. Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, South Africa, Nigeria, Burundi, Malawi, Ghana and a host of other African countries have undergone democratic transformations and are currently in the process of consolidating democratic gains. There are, of course, important problems in democratic process and these are not unique to Africa. Regardless, these media outlets choose to focus on these problems and overlook the bigger reality of democratization.

Today, there are more peaceful African countries than those at war. Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa, Burundi, Malawi, Ghana, Angola, Senegal, Lesotho, Libya, Namibia, Benin, Cameroon, Botswana and Rwanda are examples. Countries that previously experienced long conflicts such as Mozambique, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan are slowly but surely moving towards sustainable peace. War in Africa, therefore, is the exception rather than the rule. Yet certain sections of the media persist in painting the continent as a uniform battlefield, where war, death and human devastation continue endlessly. The media also choose to ignore the complicity of outsiders in the conflicts.

The number of refugees and other displaced people across the continent is declining. But this continent is still painted as a factory of refugees, internally displaced people and human crises. Indeed, many students from other lands who want to study the refugee phenomenon assume that Africa is a natural habitat for refugees.

This is not to deny that there are important challenges still faced by millions of Africans.

Important challenges remain in democratization, and in economic and human development. To be sure, most of these problems are a veritable legacy of the past, and in some cases persisting autocracy, economic mismanagement, corruption and lack of vision by a fast disappearing breed of 20th century African leaders.

Africans are part of the human universe. It should, therefore, be natural to expect that a mother in Moscow, Jakarta or London should feel the same pain of a child dying of starvation in Nairobi, Lome, Maseru or Casablanca.

Although important challenges remain, the continent has generally seen dramatic improvements in health, education, welfare and social development. More African children are going to school today than two decades ago. Literacy levels are rising across the continent. This should not be seen as production of skills that our economy can absorb.

Fewer African children are dying of diseases that need basic medical care – consequently, child mortality rates are naturally declining. Again, this should not be interpreted as a signifier of fatal overpopulation in Africa.

Africa is producing more highly skilled human resources than it did two decades ago. Some of these Africans, for a whole range of reasons choose to work elsewhere, where they nevertheless post stellar performance on their jobs. Because they cannot deny it, they choose to focus on the negative side of this fact – the brain drain.

Most importantly, at the continental level, strategic initiatives for the renewal of the continent are going forward steadily. The former OAU has been transformed into the AU, and has since put in motion a framework for integrating the continent along economic, political and socio-cultural lines. Africans have dreamt up initiatives like NEPAD and APRM, with the aim of promoting good governance, enhancing economic development and entrenching democratic governance.

President Thabo Mbeki says central to the conceptualization of the African Union and its development programme, NEPAD, is the collective determination to promote African unity and the political and socio-economic integration of our continent. This he says is informed by the conviction that the people of Africa are interdependent and share a common destiny.

Significant among AU programmes is APRM. I believe this is the single important block in the search for an African Brand. A NEPAD APRM, The G8 Africa Action Plan, The Accelerated Growth Programmes of Senegal and South Africa plus Skills Acquisition drive will play a major role in changing Africa's image.

Recently, and more specifically after G8 Gleneagles Summit, the Investment Climate Facility (ICF) was endorsed as a means to bring about the right climate in Africa for doing business by removing perceived and real obstacles to domestic and foreign investments. We need to reject the false and negative representation of Africans. We need to act in proactive ways to rein in these falsehoods that are peddled about Africa, and confidently present ourselves in our natural, positive and vibrant colours.

In the words of Professor Eskia Mphahlele, "Africans, let us find ourselves happening to events, instead of always responding to events happening to us". How do we do this? With your indulgence, I shall present a few thoughts.

The challenge we face is how to get the media to work for and with us. As I have mentioned earlier, the media are part and parcel of our environment. Those who decide to clamp down on the media miss this point. The media are not an enemy; they are an environment. How to deal with an environment is to understand its terrain, manipulate structures of opportunities therein, and strategically manoeuvre your position for maximum advantage.

Hence, the challenge for us is to seek ways of constructively engaging the media. There are

three strategic points that I wish to propose for consideration.

The first tactic is to our own media in Africa and shape their role in enhancing the reputation of the continent globally.

It is difficult to imagine how else the media can play this role without first putting the mechanism in place within our government structure to guarantee, protect and promote media freedom. Yet, beyond just enhancing media freedom, there is a need to actually promote the development of our own media outlets.

What is ironical about our situation in Africa is that our stories are written for us, told for and to us, and broadcast by media outlets in which we have very little stakes and whose agenda we have very little influence over. I cannot think of a media outlet that we can talk of as being patently African; that broadcasts African stories from a patently African perspective to the rest of the world. The rest of the world must thus listen, read or see our stories through the eyes of others. In contrast, most of our media houses are, by and large, quarantined within our national and regional enclaves.

It seems to me that one way by which Africans can have more influence in the manner in which we are represented to other people is by, in fact, promoting our own media that tell our stories from our own perspectives. In this respect, governments, business and civil society organizations like yours need to be encouraged to work hand in hand to seek ways of getting a continental media network with a global reach in place. Such can be done through collaborative initiatives of media players across the continent that can come together to pool resources, ideas, networks and expertise towards this goal.

The second strategic point relates to how we engage the existing media outlets, which we have little control over. In this respect, I wish to propose two broad tactics:

The first is "counter-penetration", a term that I borrow from Prof. Ali Mazrui. By *counter-*

penetration, I mean that, in the same manner that the African psyche has been invaded and bombarded with external perspectives, ideas and worldviews, we, as Africans, need to penetrate the minds of others by presenting African perspectives within their media outlets, under their terms, and rules of the game, in their terrain and in a truthful and honest manner. This way, we shall be able to create a dissonance in the false images that are propagated about us, consistently, powerfully and truthfully enough for any reasonable mind anywhere in the world to see what is true and what is false.

The second tactic is "resource-inversion", which I borrow from strategic studies. Resource inversion means using the strengths of your opponent to your advantage. In most of the countries and regions where Africa has the most negative media coverage, the media are also most developed. In these countries, media freedom is highly valued; the media enjoy unrivalled influence over nationals. The media in these places also have the most extensive networks that reach the remotest hamlets in the countryside. This presents a strategic opportunity.

We need to identify within these countries the most developed media outlets and use them to tell our story. This way we shall be using the same resources that have been used to paint us in dim light to project ourselves in more favourable light. Do we have the resources to do so? Yes we do.

If it is true that Africa is suffering from a brain haemorrhage, then it should also be true that we have human resources spread all over the world that can and should be used to enhance our image abroad.

African nationals, Africans in the Diaspora and non-Africans who are sympathetic to Africans, or are at least honest, should be encouraged and feel obliged to continuously engage the media where they live. Where and when they see a dishonest, or unfairly pessimistic reportage, we should feel a moral duty to ourselves, to the continent and to the rest of humanity by correcting the misrepresentations of Africa and presenting the true position of things.

Besides mobilizing Africans and friends of Africa abroad, we need to demonstrate more purposeful leadership from national leaders and from eminent Africans living abroad and in Africa. These should be our flag-bearers, our envoys and opinion leaders in foreign lands. Equally important, we need to see more collaboration between diplomatic missions in packaging the continent through availing easily accessible, up-to-date and accurate information.

A third tactic that needs to be employed is a strategic and continuous encounter between government, business and civil society with the media. Editors of major media houses have a lot of discretion in determining the media agenda. We need to work to get these editors to be more sympathetic to African perspectives. These encounters can thus be used as a means of ensuring that editors have a continuous stream of up-to-date, accurate, easily accessible and positive information about Africa.

In effect, we need to strive to highlight the good in Africa, contest unfairly negative images with skilful presentation of facts, and confidently present a positive image.

This way, we shall be able to get people to think, act, make decisions and relate with us on the basis of truth. And in this manner, the truth shall set us free. Let us, therefore, reclaim and correct the distorted image of our beautiful continent.

Allow me to end with this optimistic quotation by President Wade of Senegal who once said, "We will win the battle for Africa which is in effect a battle for Humanity".