

Brand Africa - flexing its muscles in the 21st century



By [Thabani Khumalo](#)

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In the year 2000, marking the close of the 20th century, the World Bank published a report provocatively entitled, *Can Africa Claim the 21st Century?* Seeking to answer this question, the report said: "The question of whether Sub-Saharan Africa can claim the 21st century is complex and provocative...Our central message is: Yes, Africa can claim the new century."

"But this is a qualified yes, conditional on Africa's ability - aided by its development partners - to overcome the development traps that kept it confined to a vicious cycle of underdevelopment, conflict, mismanagement, international dependence and untold human suffering for most of the 20th century."

The report also highlighted challenges facing the continent in repositioning itself within the international community, and repositioning the world with regard to its own continental objectives, particular development agenda. While celebrating Africa Day, I wish Africans reflect on the continent's 21st century challenges.

Africa's image changing for the best

Over the past decade or so, there have been new and serious attempts by Africa's leaders to start fixing most of the problems afflicting the continent. Most African countries once raven by civil war, state coups, corruption and human rights abuses are now enjoying political stability and tiger-like economic growth.

Thanks to better leadership, improved administration and increased foreign investment, the Africa of today is more focused, collective, co-ordinated, co-operative and united behind one vision and purpose than it has been in 100 years. Africa's image and reputation have drastically changed and now reflect a continent that has embraced strategies for ushering in self-reliance, self-serving, self-interest, self-reinforcement and self-empowerment in its quest to occupy its rightful place within the global community of nations, bearing in mind the ineluctable process of globalisation.

Africa, an awakening economic giant

The shift in the world's economic balance, from West to East, has presented significant challenges and opportunities for Africa.

Africa is vigorously banding together and utilising the leverage it has with its abundant natural resources, huge labour and consumer markets and other strategic advantages in pursuit of the continent's strategic interests and aspirations.

Between 2010 and 2015, growth in Africa was correctly predicted to be slower than in India and China, but faster than Brazil and Russia. Africa has started demonstrating that the continent is now a strategic player in the international political, economic and social sectors.

Africa is now seen in a new light, and is currently referred to as a waking economic giant by global nations. Hence [Brand Africa](#) has become a household name in the international markets.

Africa needs to strengthen its policies

How can Africa accelerate democracy, development, peace, prosperity and its renaissance, and claim sufficient benefits from globalisation? While Africa needs all the help it can get from developed nations and institutions such as the World Bank, WTO, IMF, G8, and donors, as well as corporate multinationals, Africa remains the primary solution to its challenges.

For Africa to improve her performance in her quest to compete, claim the 21st century and even win globally, the continent needs to strengthen its policies that:

- Consolidate an environment that promotes democracy, transparency, accountability, quality public services, good and effective governance, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. Businessman Ruel Khoza's book titled *The Power of Corporate Government*, argues that "Africa needs sound leadership manifested by good corporate governance, good political governance and good economic governance" in-order to claim respect and good reputation from its citizens, its peers and the general international community.
- Guard against draconian media laws in order to allow media to report and reflect an accurate portrait of the continent. A free media environment guarantees a strong, independent, professional and informative media, and forms a foundation for a democratic authority.

Media is an irreplaceable public watchdog, providing a platform for a well-informed citizenry to endorse or sanction its leaders, curbing corruption, incompetency and maladministration; and for achieving and maintaining good, responsible, accountable and caring governance.

Addressing Africa from Ghana in 2009, president Barack Obama said "an independent media is part of a capable, reliable and transparent institution that will lead Africa to success in the 21st century"

- Prioritise, promote and pursue the continent's political, economic, social and development agendas. "China has agenda in Africa. India has agenda in Africa. The USA has agenda in Africa. We are naïve to think that the people that come into our country, even the ones that are here to help have no agenda. Everyone has an agenda. What is Africa's agenda?", asks former minister, Jay Naidoo.
- Are grounded on communities' indigenous knowledge, experiences, resources, competitive strengths, efforts and aspirations.

"Africa needs African-driven development initiatives that build on communities' indigenous knowledge and past successes and recognise social capital".

Such initiatives should be developed and presided by African intelligentsia. Africa needs to depend on its intelligentsia as its educators and no longer mere conveyor belts of knowledge generated by others outside the continent about its citizens on matters of democracy, economic policy, good leadership, fair trade, sustainable development and continent's relations with the rest of the world.

Such a recognition will assist the continent to retain talented African technocrats in Africa, and to bring back African technocrats in Diaspora.

- Prioritise investment in education and health. Education will produce enough professionals, engineers, artisans and other skills needed by the continent and international economies. Effective health will ensure that the continent has healthy citizens and productive workforce, which will ultimately promote our consumer spending and economic competitiveness.
- Empower Africa's civic society masses to be producers, manufacturers, consumers and exporters of commodities. This includes reducing women and youth unemployment, prioritising rural and agriculture-led development, and continuing to work towards achieving the millennium development goals.

Former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki says that it is necessary that the peoples of Africa gain the conviction that they are not, and must not be wards of benevolent guardians, but instruments of their own sustained upliftment.

"Critical to this is the knowledge by these peoples that they have a unique and valuable contribution to make to the advancement of human civilization, and that Africa has a strategic place in the global community."

- Elevate Africa from mere producer and supplier of raw materials to global brand builders.

Brand expert, Thebe Ikalafeng points out that "to create distinction and success in the global world, Africa will have to 'think locally and act globally' - to create ideas that are distinctly African, but resonate with globally connected consumers. And "Made in Africa" must now represent not just the fauna and flora, safaris and sun, but innovation across all sectors".

Promote fair and strong trade and investment activities within Africa and between the continent and the world. Africa too needs to develop and grow the continent's domestic markets by protecting them against unfair trade by overseas nations.

- Combat high mobility of African people, i.e. internally, externally and urbanisation, and its consequences in terms of citizenship rights; and its impacts on social services, gender relations, issues of climate change, spatial development, infrastructural development, natural resource management, food security; and on issues of common economic activities, common currency and common borders.

The continent is shaking off its war-torn, famine-ravaged, dependency and hopelessness image, and now marketing itself as a destination for political stability, economic diversity, innovation, increasing economic competitiveness, entrepreneurial excellence, better governance, huge consumer and labour markets, foreign direct investment and social development.

Surely, Africa is flexing its muscle in response to the World Bank's 21st century challenges. However much still remains to be done to further improve good political governance, good economic governance, good corporate governance and resource management.

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