

Mo Ibrahim On How (And Why) Africa Should Solve Its Own Problems



Editor's Note: Dr. Mo Ibrahim is the Founder and Chair of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation which he established in 2006 to support good governance and exceptional leadership on the African continent.

Africa is the second largest continent on earth and has immense resources, yet African people are poor. The question is “why are we poor” if we have all this wonderful land, sea, shores? We are poor because of misrule, because we are badly governed. I don't subscribe to the narrative that Africa is backward because of colonialism. Africa has been independent for 50 years now. Let's forget the past, we need to get up and dust-off ourselves and get on with life.

What actually happened in the last 50 to 60 years is that we missed a lot of opportunities. At the moment of independence, many African countries like Ghana and Egypt had higher income per capita than China, India or Singapore. Where are we now? And where are those guys?

I think the blame should rest squarely on the way we have governed ourselves.

Not any amount of aid is going to move Africa forward. The only way for us to move forward is to ensure good governance – the way we manage our economy, our social life, our legal structures and institutions – that is the basis for development. We cannot rely on people to come and feed our poor or treat our sick. This is the responsibility of our governments.

Governance is not just about corruption or transparency or human rights or democracy or roads etc., it is about all of this. There is no compromise. All this is a basket of deliverables which governments must deliver to their

citizens. If it is about deliverables then it is measurable. What we need to do is look at numbers and not wonderful leaders' speeches. I want to know what leaders did in the last 12 months. We need to measure this every year and we need to produce a scorecard. This is how the [Ibrahim Index of African Governance](#) came about.

Leadership is also important. It became obvious to us that we need leaders that understand that they are running their country for the benefit of every single individual. Every child in this country is his responsibility; we need people who really believe in that, who cannot go to sleep because some people cannot eat or cannot find medicine. This is the kind of leadership that we need in Africa – an enlightened and dedicated sort of leadership. With this in mind, we came to the decision that we really need to go out searching for these heroes. We need role models that are important. This is why the [Ibrahim Prize for Achievement](#) is in African Leadership.

These were the two main issues we really cared about: the issue of leadership and the role of the leadership in transforming the society and how they started building the institutions. Societies are not sustainable without institutions.

Right now, the most important challenge, in my view, is African youth. We have a huge bulge of youngsters coming forward but where do the jobs come from, and what will happen to those people? The other day someone in our research team worked out that the average age of an African president is about 63 years old when the average age of the citizen is 19 years old. So you can really see the gap between our leadership and our people.

One major problem we have is the education system which, unfortunately, is not doing very well. If you are African, the more educated you are, the less chances you have of getting a job. This says something – education is too serious to be left to the few bureaucrats in ministries of education who have no connection to the real world. This is an area where you really need a national debate between business people, education specialists, and young people to know exactly what kind of work force we need to build in Africa.

China is already running out of labour, moving production houses out of China. We all know about the one child policy and that is one of the outcomes. Who is going to be the next factory of the world, is it going to be

Africa? We have a lot of attractions – geographic locations, cheap labour, etc. but we are not ready because we need to build the infrastructure and we need to train our young people and give them the right skills. We need people who can really build and do things. This is a big challenge for us.

That challenge is immediately linked to the question of regional integration. People talk about Africa as if it is one country. Africa is not one country, Africa is 54 countries, which are not necessarily trading or communicating among themselves. It is more difficult to pass goods from East Africa to West Africa than taking it from China to West Africa and is more expensive.

If you are an African, and you decide to visit every other African country and you are unfortunate enough to have an African passport, you are going to spend a year trying to get visas for all those 53 countries. I have to travel to the country with my British passport, not my Sudanese passport because it takes me a month to get a visa with it.

We need to lay down the basis for the free trade area across Africa. We have been talking about regional integration for ages and its progress is proving very slow. Many African countries will not be viable without regional integration, full stop. We have to accept that, we need each other; we really need to open-up our borders to have free movement of goods, people and capital across our borders. Everywhere I go in Africa, I raise the question of why the Germans need the European Union and keep bailing people out? The answer is simple: they need it because they want to move their goods around.

We have almost 600 million mobile users in Africa, which is much more than European users. We have much more users than the United States but are we really proud of that? How many mobile phones were manufactured in Africa? None. If we don't have the economies of scale, we are unable to force the trade required; we are unable to get a good deal for our manufacturers. Can Siemens sell a single mobile phone in China without building a factory there or transferring know-how? No way.

We are not able to force our demands on any of these companies or businesses because we are 54 failed voices; we need one big voice. And we cannot have that unless we force ahead with this integration.

Good governance in the public sector is a prerequisite for development but it is not enough. We cannot have it without also having good governance in

the private sector; people need to understand that. If we have a go at corruption we really need to deal with it in the private sector, there is no question about that. Political leaders don't corrupt themselves; they have partners in the private sector.