Forget the usual tired debates about Africa, it's changing – for the better

Afro-optimism versus Afro-pessimism is a misplaced debate. Africa has changed. The Nairobi of my childhood and the Dar es Salaam where I began my professional career have both changed dramatically. This is evident in the real-estate booms and lengthening traffic jams. Million-dollar deals used to raise eyebrows, but now billion-dollar deals are becoming the norm.

Regardless of social class, almost everyone has a mobile phone, or two or three. Even in remote villages, mobile phones have replaced the bicycle or radio as prized assets. As urbanisation kicks in, the air-conditioned supermarket is fast replacing the local duka, or small convenience store. Political democracy is evident in newspapers and blogs.

A more important shift has been more of my peers assuming political leadership. A new generation of leaders has emerged, with its own ideas on how to run governments, multinational companies and international organisations. It is a key moment in our history of which the international business community has taken note – to the point where, today, the rate of return on foreign investment is higher in Africa than in any other developing region.

The challenge now is to scale up this investment in a way that does not leave ordinary Africans behind. Too many Africans still lack food and, just as importantly, adequate nutrition, without which they will struggle to reach their full potential. They lack access to decent healthcare and education, and are burdened by weak institutions and governance. The leaders taking charge of Africa's destiny need to be aware of the legacy with which they are contending: 50 years ago, when sub-Saharan Africa gained independence, the region was a net exporter of food; today, it is an importer. Being in charge of one's destiny is not enough to guarantee success.

I believe this is understood, just as I believe that the next 50 years in Africa will feel nothing like the past half-century. Young opinion-makers I listen to are increasingly vocal about the end of aid dependence and the need for new development models that are as much concerned with inclusiveness and sustainability as profit. The rise of an indigenous, often brilliant, brand of social entrepreneurialism is increasingly providing local solutions to local problems.

Consequently, instead of debating optimism versus pessimism, we should be debating how Africa can rewrite its future. This is something close to my heart. From my assignments working in Tanzania on projects to turn underused farmland into a bread basket that will one day employ hundreds of thousands of people, I have been able to witness at first-hand the transformative effects that can be achieved when public and private sectors work together. Today, I am in the privileged position of being able to apply this best practice across the whole region, to the point where such public-private partnerships are now the norm.

The difference between African development now and development in the past is that we are in the lead. Agricultural development is helping to restore productivity, bringing employment to thousands and helping to improve our environment. In the coming week alone, one year after we launched our Grow Africa initiative with the African Union and New Partnership for Africa's Development, seven African governments will present to the international community their blueprints for inward investment in agriculture in an attempt to follow the lead set by Ethiopia, Tanzania and others.

Great strides are being made elsewhere, too. The new generation of leaders in government, business and civil society are making inroads towards establishing new models for responsible mineral development, vibrant new growth sectors such as financial services and ICT, and the infrastructure needed to help us to compete globally.

There is still much work to be done, but transformation is well and truly under way. Who knows what Nairobi, Dar

es Salaam and the rest of Africa will look like in 50 years' time?

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