

Speech by Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin
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On the Commemoration of the Appointment of
President John Dramani Mahama as Co-Chair of the Group of Eminent
Advocates for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
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Your Excellency Mr. President John Mahama, Honourable Ministers here present, Heads of Agencies, other Members of Government, Leaders of Trade Unions, Civil Society Organisations, Faith-Based Organizations, Youth Organizations, Curious Minds, Colleagues, dear friends. Good morning.

I think the concept that we have here today is one which all of us must understand. Seventy years ago the United Nations was established to look after three things: security, human rights and development. The first 70 years of the UN, these three things worked in parallel, not together. So you found peace and security was big, development was running, human rights did not play a role and the modality we worked with was for the rich nations of the world to provide resources for the poor so that they could lift them out of poverty. So money came from the rich and went to the poor. That was actually captured in the MDGs which reduced poverty but did not place a lot of emphasis on human rights. What we have done now with the SDGs is actually something of a transformation.

With the MDGs, the UN put it together and gave it to member states. This time the member states took over and said “we are in charge of our destiny” and so there were three major events, the SDG conference in September, and before then the Financing for Development conference in Addis Ababa, and then the Climate Change summit in Paris. The three of them worked together – you cannot talk of sustainable development without climate change, and you cannot talk of sustainable development and climate change without financing. When we did the MDGs, we were looking at millions of dollars, now we are looking at trillions of dollars. What Dr. Thompson talked about when he talked about the power deficit, if we are going to fix the power deficit of Africa, we are looking for trillions of dollars to do it. It is not something that would happen on the basis of a national development plan; it is the basis of a global development movement.

While the partnerships to implement this are huge, I also want to emphasise that the place where it all starts is national development, national planning, government leadership and that’s why I think it is so critical that I want to salute President John Mahama today, this son of Africa that has been chosen to lead that process, because it’s about national leadership, it’s about countries

getting themselves together and saying, “You know what, we have the money, we have the resources, we have the human beings, we are going to do this ourselves.” The pride of it, the ownership of it, the sustainability of it. Donors are going to go and come but the sustainable development is that of the people of the countries themselves.

And so Sir, I speak on behalf of the UN Secretary-General, I speak on behalf of myself as an African, and I tell you Sir, we look to you to provide leadership to member states. It’s not for us the UN, it is for member states to determine how this SDG programme is going to go. We at the UN are small fry but what we bring is significant. We bring expertise and we will support you in Ghana and in the rest of what you have to do globally.

I will end by saying, and I think Dr. Thompson talked about it, the biggest asset Africa has which is sitting there, mostly untapped, is the curious minds, the young people of Africa. We need to invest in them and we need to ensure that they are skilled to develop Africa and the world. You know they are going to be the workforce of the world. Europe is declining in terms of population, Asia is declining, Africa’s time has come and it’s the young people. I thank you.

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