

Jonathan Dimpleby's speech at the Five Talents' fundraising dinner on 9th June 2011

Transcript:

Africa – A Misunderstood Continent

Africa, I'm talking about sub-Saharan Africa. There are fifty countries of sub-Saharan Africa with a population now of over a billion. In the year 2000 it was just over 600 million and its growth rate is going up. It is in obvious terms an extraordinarily important continent. It is also an extraordinarily misunderstood continent.

I think we've been - and I've been partly responsible for this - we've been induced to believe that Africa is some special part of the world which is particularly disastrous in one way or another. That it's consumed by war, exclusively and particularly. That it's consumed by poverty. That it has a unique capacity to fail in one way or another. It has a unique range of dictators who control disparate groups of people in very repressive ways.

I say I've been part of that because I first went to Africa in 1972 and I've been going back to sub-Saharan Africa ever since, of which Tom referred to the culminating group of programmes that I did (Ed. An African Journey, BBC 2010). I managed to persuade the BBC to do them. The purpose of those programmes was to say "Hang about, there is much more to Africa than disaster of one kind or another."

Let's look at Africa closely, because the way in which we tend to look at Africa today, if you apply the same prism to the way that we look at our own country, you might see it described as a quaint little old place, with a lot of knife crime, too many pederasts, a funny old lady in her 80s who drives in a big coach from over there to open a parliament that is filled with corrupt politicians, and across there, well I was going to describe our banking sector - anyway I'll leave them out!

We would rightly think that that was a distorted version of the country in which we live. And of course it wouldn't matter to us because we actually know what it's like and put all those particular issues in context.

The Diversity of Africa

But to report a continent as though it were one place, with those characteristics of disaster that I touched on, is really I think now profoundly misleading and I said so to the BBC and the BBC said "OK, you can go and do it."

I'd done a journey through Russia beforehand and so they slightly asked me what I would like to do next. I said I went to Africa in 1972-73 and I had seen some of the most terrible things and I don't want to underestimate the scale to which Africa has been prone to disaster of one kind or another, of course. I've seen as much as anyone's ever

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seen I think of the most terrible things in Africa. I've seen civil strife, I've seen a lot of death, I've seen dead children piled up in Ethiopia in 1973, I've seen hunger, I've seen hospitals in various countries filled with HIV patients who are dying from TB or other diseases which are opportunistic on HIV. So I've seen for myself. I've met some dreadful people; I've met some of the worst dictators, I've met people who are corrupt, but then I've met those kinds of people also everywhere else in the world.

And Africa has and is, changing hugely. Africa is fantastically more open and transparent than it was when I first went in the 70s. You can talk freely to people in most African countries, not all of them, and actually there are lots of other countries where people don't speak totally freely. In this country people don't speak freely if they think it's going to be bad for their company, if they're working in the NHS and are fearful that they'll get the sack if they speak out for instance. We must not run away with the idea that somehow we have perfect freedom of expression, and elsewhere there is an absence of freedom and expression.

The African media generally is more open and the continent itself is very diverse - there is no more diverse continent in the world - geographically, topographically, environmentally, in terms of culture, art, language - a fantastic diversity. It is very rich in terms of its natural resources, its minerals which are hungrily sought along with its oil; not only by the West but now China (China is now the biggest trading partner with the continent of Africa) India, Brazil, all the emerging nations seeking Africa's resources.

A Continent of Energy & Resilience

This puts Africa potentially in a pivotal position. Then you say "Yes it's pivotal but what about these victims?" And so what I wanted to challenge was this notion that Africans are in any way victims. They have been victims and there are some victims like there are in any continent in any country but it is not a continent filled with victims. On the contrary it is a continent filled with an extraordinary combination of energy and resilience. And I want to give you just two or three examples, I could give you many more, but I'll just take one or two.

Esther in Zambia

In Zambia I met a woman called Esther Piri who was a single mother at the age of 16 and earned her money by running a stall selling tomatoes and she showed me the stall. But she was a very good sportswoman and she started to box and someone encouraged her, and she's now the world champion at her weight in boxing. She's a figure in Zambia that is iconic for women in Zambia. All women in Zambia, and in other countries in Africa who are seeking to assert and develop their rights and their skills and their status, look in the case of Zambia, to Esther who is an enchanting individual. I walked down the street with her and people would stop her. She goes back to her old school and people stop her and she is putting all of that to good work because she is investing that particular sporting skill she has in a whole range of social ways.

Dr Reason Why in Zambia

I met someone called - I didn't believe his name - but he calls himself Dr Reason Why, and he works in the market in Lusaka which is very subject to flooding. And all the market porters have to carry barrows to take the stuff around to the wholesalers and to the retailers. And the wheels of the things kept getting stuck in the mud so it was a nightmare job and he suddenly had this brainwave idea; why don't we put different kinds of tyres on the wheelbarrows. So he did that and he does it all himself, now employing about four people and hires out these newly designed wheelbarrows, taking market goods around. And I said to him "What made you think of this?" He said "Well I couldn't work, we couldn't operate, we couldn't move. If I could do this, then I could have a living and then I'd be able to send my daughter to school and to University and that's what I'm doing." I could give you any number of examples of Dr Reason Why as being the kind of person, bright, intelligent and with ideas.

Talents in Congo

In the Congo, in Lumbumbashi which is in Katanga, which is the richest copper producing part of Africa. I saw engineers at work. The Belgians, who treated Congo in many ways abominably, left behind some kind of infrastructure, which has since run down for all sorts of reasons, left behind a railway system. And I went in to the rail yard where they were repairing 1950s engines on tracks that looked like spaghetti junction though they were meant to be straight. The skill and the devotion to exercising that skill to keep these engines running as the engineers there (paid low wages) the pride in what they were doing was absolutely extraordinary. For me it satisfied a lot of things; the feeling that if we could recycle a lot more we would be a lot better off if we didn't just live in a throw-away society. And what really struck me was their skill and talent against all the odds. The inability to get spare parts, they somehow made things work, that capacity you see everywhere, that endless capacity to making things work.

Masai's in Kenya

In Kenya I went in to the Rift Valley and saw something that is very new, that is making a very big difference - the new technologies. I met the leader of a particular Masai tribe. He was a highly educated man, spoke and bit of English, living in the middle of nowhere. He was on the mobile phone. I said "What difference does it make?" He said "It transforms life." I said "Why?" He said "I can do three things; first of all I can talk to my family who otherwise I can't talk to and are in Nairobi or in other countries. Secondly, if something goes wrong, if someone gets bitten by a snake, I can ring to the town and we can get serum out here much faster whereas before the person would have died. Thirdly, we can do business." He had a friend sitting with him and I said "What does the business involve?" He said "Well I can now find out what the price of cattle are and decide whether to sell or not to sell."

That was totally unavailable before, they were at the mercy of a middle man who said that “the price of your cow is x.” Whereas now they don’t have to worry about that. They can also ring people and ask “What’s the pasture like over there?” Kenya has been going through a very severe drought.

A ‘Slum’ in Nairobi

In Nairobi itself, I went in to what is described, I think very inappositely, as the largest slum in the world. It’s actually a shanty town called Kibera. It is very poor but to describe it as a slum is to slightly miss the point because it suggests people who’ve lost it, who are sitting there waiting for something to be done. It is filled with enterprise.

You go up and down the streets, I was talking to someone earlier who’d been there, and everyone is marketing something – buying or selling on a very small scale, very small, too small to get out of the world in which they live. That’s their problem. They use the mobile phone to communicate – it’s the M-pesa system which operates there very effectively. You can go in to a little stall, almost every town and every village in Kenya now has an M-pesa store, it might be selling other goods as well and you go in there, it’s like a little bank. And you can put some money down and the cash is loaded onto your mobile phone. You can then ring that through to someone you want to have money, it could be a relation, a client or someone you are buying something from and they can go in to their M-pesa store and can pick up that money.

In a system which generally, for most people, the overwhelming majority of people in Kenya and in other parts of Africa, are entirely excluded from the banking system because bankers, as we know, only like to take risks with very large sums of money(!). I must remember my audience. Luckily when I’m with any bankers they don’t seem to mind because they never regard themselves as being the guilty ones!

Bethlehem in Ethiopia

The last example, in Ethiopia I met someone called Bethlehem. She works with cotton and worn out rubber tyres and she puts them together to make shoes. She calls herself and the company she set up from nothing “Sole-rebels” and she is now on Amazon, selling eco-friendly shoes. Her turnover this year is expected to be half a million dollars. She started from absolutely nothing. She was lucky because her father was a doctor and they had some money so he was able to start her up. She employs forty people and wants to expand and she drives you crazy because she is fantastically good at marketing – even now I have emails from her “Can you do this, can you do that?” She is an amazing individual and again there are Bethlehem’s everywhere, but not all of them have that little bit of money that helps them start it off.

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Conclusion

My last thought is that, in this continent that has all these people in, all this energy, all this ability, all this talent, all this resolve, if it's going to work it's going to work because all the people in the continent are part of what is inevitably going to be a huge pyramid of economic growth and incoming of resource because of the raw materials and natural products. It's because everyone's going to be involved in it.

At the moment there is a huge and inevitable gap between those who have resources inside the country and those who have virtually nothing – vast economic gaps. It's inevitable at that stage of development but those people who form the majority of that billion plus population are tomorrow's people and they need support to help them develop those talents that I've touched on. One of the ways in which that happens, to my mind, so I'm really glad to be asked to come here this evening, is and I've seen it working in Africa, in India and elsewhere - I'm doing a series in South America and the same applies there - is the ability to harness their talent to the potential to make a difference. They can't go to the banking system, the bank doesn't want to know. They're too small. But, if you can give some sort of micro-finance scheme to those people, they have a future, their families have a future and the consequence to their nations, these nations has a future. It could not be a more useful and significant way of saying "I really care about that continent and those people."

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