Governance for health

Sustainable Development Goals: an Opportunity for Africa

The opportunity presented by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) once again sees Africa at a crossroads, as was the case 60 years ago when we gained independence from colonialism. Africa may either grasp and run with the opportunity offered by the SDGs, or waste it. This was the subject of a three-day meeting that took place in Kampala, Uganda 16–18 July, 2019, under the theme 'Governance for Health in Africa; Lessons learnt since independence to inform the future'.

The current huge gap in health indices between Africa and other regions of the world were noted as a matter for concern, pain and shame: some participants were deeply moved and were seen crying and shedding tears! Why did Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea and Malaysia that got independence at the same time and with similar indices develop much faster than African counterparts? Some of the causes of these disparities are known to be clearly wrong and intolerable but are accepted as 'normal' and are allowed to persist when corrective actions are within reach. Why is this?

Changing mindsets

The mindset of African people and their leaders over this period of time was discussed and it was noted that the positive, confident and ambitious mindset prevailing around the time of independence was lost and was replaced by that of dependency and self-doubt. This transformation took place during a period of bad governance characterised by military dictatorships and mismanagement, condoned by the protagonists in the Cold War. African economies collapsed and the continent lapsed into beggarhood as Highly Indebted Poor Countries needing both money and ideas from developed countries and their institutions in order to stand their economies up again. Donors inserted themselves into African governments and called the shots.

The good news is that African leaders took decisive action by transforming the Organization of African Unity, which focused on removing remnants of colonialism, into the African Union, which has zero tolerance for illegitimate governments and military dictatorships and is pro-people espousing an African renaissance to restore self-pride and self-confidence. But this philosophy has not been sufficiently disseminated to the populace including the intelligentsia and this remains a major part of the problem. What should be done now?

Francis Omaswa, CEO, African Centre for Global Health and Social Transformation (Kampala); Founding Executive Director of the Global Health Workforce Alliance; and publisher of Africa Health.

First, we need to recognise that the SDGs are a negotiated global compact to create a better world for all people and to protect and preserve the planet. Their implementation is coordinated by the UN but critical action takes place among communities within countries. Governments have key roles that cannot be delegated, such as ensuring that the state is effective, law and order is maintained. Another key role is to create levels of awareness and an environment that enables and empowers people and communities to actively participate in improving their own living conditions including their health and wellbeing articulated in SDG3. There is a gap here. Last weekend I spent some time with rural people in Uganda and I was struck by how little they and their leaders know about SDGs; four years into their implementation! National Development plans in which SDGs are domesticated should to be aggressively publicised and popularised, letting people and communities know what their own roles should be in achieving the SDGs.

Second, the meeting last week expressed disappointment with the African professional and technical class. These are Africans who have been well educated, often at the cost of public resources. They follow the world and are fully aware of the causes of the wrong and unacceptable situations that become 'normal' in communities and countries. However, this class of Africans sits back and improves their personal and immediate family circumstances while the rest of the population is left to suffer 'normally'. The silence and lack of outrage from this group of people was condemned and changing their behavior was identified as a corrective measure that is within reach. Deliberate actions should be taken to strengthen the professions by supporting professional associations, professional colleges, regulatory bodies, academic institutions and related bodies so that they become socially accountable and do not look away when unacceptable situations arise in their midst. Strong institutions in and out of government led by these professionals are needed.

Third, the development of human capital was recognised as central to Africa's future with an extremely young population. The quality of education and training was noted to be declining and the working conditions of those with education were not conducive pushing many to migrate to richer countries with aging populations and are looking for skilled labour.

Our responsibility

Responsibility for achieving all these lies upon each and every one of us individually and collectively, starting now!

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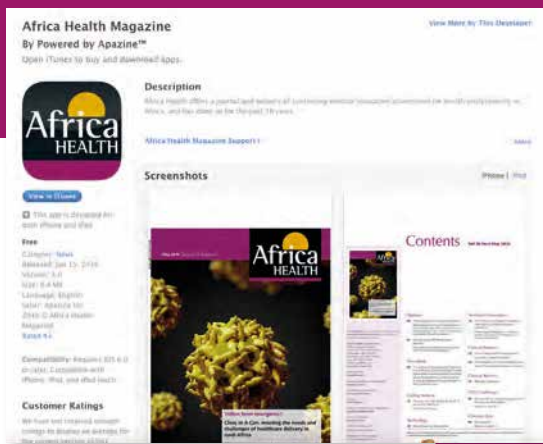
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