

Being African and being globally competitive
May 2001

The challenge that all Africans face is the challenge of being competitive in today's global arena. For centuries, our rich and fertile continent has been systematically plundered and the colonial powers grew rich on the resources they took from Africa, all the while ensuring that we, its people, were disempowered in a brutal fashion, and were unable to pose a threat to their economic dominance.

Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, we are finally in a position to face the challenge of competing with those countries. As Africans, we must not underestimate the sheer size of this challenge. All of us are impatient to see success. We want to see the fruits of our labours. We want to see an end to the long wait we have endured and although we are in a hurry, we must never lose sight of the fact that the magnitude of this plan is immense. The restoring of Africa to its rightful place among the nations is a long-term programme that will inevitably span more than one generation.

History has taught us that empires come and go. At one time Italy, a small country, had conquered the world, as it was thought to be at the time. It commanded a huge empire, one of many that have exercised huge influence, and then declined. So let no one say that Africa, whose people are filled with energy and determination, cannot rise. Africa will rise, and this will be the century of our ascendancy. In due course Africans will be leaders in the international community. We have chosen this path of advancement and improvement, knowing well that much will be demanded of us before we succeed. In order to face and meet this challenge, there are several requirements that we must fulfil. At a personal level, we must all cultivate an appropriate attitude of commitment to the vision. Whatever we do, we must do it with energy, focus and commitment. Our attitude must be one of excellence, always striving for the best. Study to improve yourself.

Enhance your productive skills. Enhance your value to your organisation and your country by becoming multi-skilled. Apply yourself with vigour. When we all do this, the net result will be a country that is dynamic, productive and successful.

Cohesive thrust

The next level of our attitude to the challenge must be national and, as a nation; we must be committed to act in ways that will lead to international competitiveness. Do not engage in acts that are critical or destructive of our national programmes; support your country and its leadership. Allow our efforts to gel into a cohesive thrust of economic growth. We must grow into a knowledge economy whose pervasiveness should defy boundaries. Our own organisation, Eskom, is an excellent example of co-operative effort. Without a common vision of and commitment to the cause of electricity supply, with everyone pulling in the same direction, there would be no electric power.

Thirdly, we must be aware of a regional challenge. There are countries in Southern Africa that regard themselves as being regionally affiliated to us. Success or failure in any of these

neighbouring countries has an impact on the others, and on the whole region. We cannot distance ourselves from events in our region; we must be involved in finding solutions, and in creating stability and growth. This attitude must ultimately extend to the whole continent. If Africa is to rise and overcome, every African must extend a hand of support to every other African. This is critical. At international level, we must select our allies carefully. We must find those who have the welfare of Africa at heart and who recognise our deep-felt need to drive the reformation process and determine its outcome. We must recruit to our cause those who see that Africans must have the overriding say in the future of Africa. We must define, or at least co-define, our destiny. It is too important to leave in the hands of disaffected strangers. There are various institutional forms or pillars that must be in place to underpin the competitiveness of Africa. One of these is the form of government. At present, forms of government are largely parliamentary. Parliament, not the constitution, is sovereign. This, in effect, is the rule of man rather than rule of law. We have a constitution that has won international acclaim for its breadth, depth and focus on the rights of the individual. Let us seek to elevate this magnificent institution to the place where its provisions are the final arbiter of right and justice.

Another institutional pillar is the enshrinement of the concept of individual rights. Until now we have kept alive the notion of group hegemony. We have adopted the group, instead of the individual, as the basic unit of political analysis and expression. This means that differences between groups become entrenched and divisions grow deeper. We must move away from these divisions and become a single country and a single continent. We must become united in our desire to see Africa grow strong and wealthy, based on the inalienable rights of the individual.

Regrettable

And then, there is another regrettable phenomenon that must be changed: Africa suffers from a victim mentality, a profound sense that we lack efficacy. We feel that we are victimised by events, by others and by circumstances beyond our control. We are victims of nature and the environment around us. We prostrate ourselves before climatic conditions, droughts, flood and whatever else nature throws at us. We are unable even to mitigate the consequences of these natural disasters.

This must change. We must become masters of our own destinies; we must see the problem in ourselves, accept it, understand it and rid ourselves of it. Above all, we must find the resolute will to do something about it. We must invest in education, and in conflict resolution. We must work on our ethics and morality, our self-image and our vision. As a source of inspiration and guidance for this formidable project, our political leaders have compiled what can rightfully be called a grand continental design.

This is the Millennium Africa Programme, or MAP, which analyses the fundamental ills that beset our continent, identifying them and formulating strategies to address them.

The MAP is well founded and comprehensive. Despite this, however, the MAP cannot work unless all the various sectors of society align themselves with the programme and give it their wholehearted support. In particular, big business must swing its considerable resources behind this imaginative design and ensure it does not fail for lack of resources. This element of support is critical.

When the whole of African society, governments, civic society, big business and every community sees the MAP as a clarion call to action, then we will have begun our journey to self-realisation. When we see infrastructural development and significant job creation, Africa-wide, when the regional economic blocs pull together with a common vision; when SADC and Ecowas and the Mahreb and East Africa bury their differences and see themselves as part of one big African family, then our victory will have begun. The politicians and the academics have drafted a magnificent plan. They have gathered input from far and wide. No one can say we lack direction; we have it in abundance and so, you may ask, where to from here?

As a continent with virtually no developmental history, we have a tremendous advantage. We arrive at this point in time with no technological baggage; no “heritage systems” representing major investments that we must first discard before we can embark on our future. We are brilliantly positioned to leapfrog the digital divide into the 21st century without burdens to hamper us. A myriad African initiatives are beginning, many of which will come to fruition as we give them our wholehearted, unconditional support. And there is a singular opportunity waiting for us, as we move out across Africa. This is to play the role of integrators, people who promote synergies between different programmes. We must make the streams flow together, to make the projects gel.

Work together

Our organisation, Eskom, is an apt analogy of this thought. Every single section of this great organisation from the biggest power station to the smallest item of switchgear, must work together in harmony and in synchrony, for the power to flow. If just one element of the system acts out of sequence, the lights simply do not burn. In the same way, for the light of Africa to burn, the overwhelming majority of Africans must be of like mind and like spirit, and drive this continent to the forefront of international affairs. Starting off in the right direction is one thing, but it is equally important to sustain the momentum. As far back as 1957, Kwame Nkrumah said that as Africans, we must learn sustainability. We start things but don't sustain them. We need the wise and insightful programmes, but we also need the stamina to keep them going. Long before Nkrumah, many centuries ago, Plato said that excellence is not an event; it is a habit. Let us acquire this habit and make it a part of us, for the glorious future of Africa.

Africa has a date with destiny

At various points in history, various civilisations have stood at the forefront of perceived relative development in terms of some or all of the following: forms of government; economic prosperity; military might; cultural and scientific prowess, technological proficiency; scholarship, etc.

For example:

The dynasties stretching back to Ming of China

The Mayan and Aztec empires of the Americas

The kingdoms of Gao and Mwene Motapa of Africa

The Greek and the Roman empires of Europe

The Pharaonic Egyptian empires of Africa

Europe of the 19th and 20th centuries

The West and particularly the USA after the Second World War.

Implicit in this is an understanding of history as cyclical, as ever-evolving and not frozen in time, hence the concept of a renaissance, a rebirth, a return to greatness or simply the coming of a new age. In this context, it is possible to conceptualise a very different Africa, an Africa whose time has come ... if we make it come.

An Africa that is more excited about its future than its past. An Africa whose scope for growth is limited only by its imagination. An Africa that has successfully translated its concepts of humanity and communal relations into vibrant forms of co-operative models of government, institutional and corporate relations. An Africa whose children are fed by native produce, its intellectuals nurtured by native founding principles and enquiry; its industry fuelled by native skills; its landscapes covered by native design and construction; its airwaves and print media dominated by issues of native concern and aspiration.

Emergent

An Africa that redefines the term “emergent” from a notion of condescension and derision to being a term of vibrancy, technological prowess, awe and envy.

Africa, the continent that has made nuclear power safe, economical and plentiful. Africa has a date with destiny. These are some of the dimensions of that destiny. The eventuation of these aspects of Africa’s rebirth will be the realisation of the imperative of being African and robustly globally competitive.

In conclusion then, let us project our minds into the future. One generation, or two, to a time when Africans have earned the respect of the international community. When that respect is given unconditionally, not grudgingly. When we stand tall in any gathering; not ashamed, but proud of our achievements as we look into the mirror of our creation.

Then we will be Africans who are masters of our own destiny

Africans who have a clear vision of the future

Africans who are known for what they stand for in the challenges that face humanity.

Africans who are profoundly moral beings

Africans renowned for their integrity

Africans who are capable and competent in everything they undertake

Africans who take individual responsibility for their own actions

Africans who, when they look in the mirror, see the hand of God.