

Leadership in true service will be the transforming force of Africa's development #LSEAFRICANLEADERSHIP

Dinah Hanson was part of the inaugural class of LSE's Programme for African Leadership (PfAL). In this post, Dinah reflects on power of an individual and a collective for change.

Of Africa I Dream...

‘There is nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come’–

The Africa of my dreams tells a tale of two cities; of day and night, light and darkness. Sometimes Africa seems to rise with the sun – glowing with promise and burgeoning prosperity; at other times she fades into darkness with the stealthily approaching night—“the dark continent” as the fable goes. My subconscious mind pauses for interpretation; there is none...my dreams fade into reality for my reality is my dreams.



Dinah Hanson (centre) at LSE PfAL

This is Africa. The headlines in recent times heralding the continent as the last frontier have ranged from “Africa Rising” (the Economist; Vijay Mahajan) to “Lions on the move” (McKinsey) to “It’s time for Africa “ (Ernst & Young). This is a welcome change from the pictures of starving children, images of disease and conflict and the stereotypical jungle-like connotations that have been the enduring image of Africa to the world. The other side of the coin has finally been flipped; Africa is home to poverty and prosperity just like any other continent. Our problems should not negate our achievements, BUT neither should our problems be swept under the mat in the vain assumption that the solutions are

embedded in the emerging macro- economic growth success stories. Growth and development must trickle down at a steady pace to the micro level to be inclusive and sustainable and this can only be a result of well-intentioned policies; the recent Arab spring is a testament to that. Both sides of the coin matter for Africa to achieve its potential.

The strategy utilised for Africa’s development agenda has been aid, capital: physical and human, food aid, conflict resolution – an influx of resources. The impact of this aid is often not discernible; some pundits allege aid has failed miserably as a solution. The old makes way for the new, thus the prevailing cry is leadership – Africans must spearhead the development agenda, leading across all sectors and transforming institutions to enable development. What Africa needs, it seems, is leaders. Consequently, as the forces of demand and supply dictate there has been an endless flurry of leadership training programmes and analogous interventions to fill the supply gap and meet the growing demand. The outcome should be obvious; develop a new cadre of ethical, responsible, equipped leaders across all sectors, and voila, Africa will rise to achieve her full potential. Surely this is a fairly simple feasible solution; teaching ethics, civic responsibility, varied skills from leading teams effectively to entrepreneurship is not overly complex and defines the leadership gap?

No, certainly not at LSE; endowed with a generous gift from Uganda-born alumnus Firoz Lalji and his wife Najma, LSE has launched a Programme for African Leadership (PfAL), of which I was privileged to be a member of the inaugural class. Mirrored in the ethos of this prestigious institution, to know the causes of things, the LSE PfAL’s approach to nurturing leadership is

radically different. “Definition, Causes, Consequences” was what Professor Saul Estrin bellowed to us in our first class, “Leadership – the challenges of a globalised world.” The rationale is compelling: How can leaders even begin to implement a vision of inclusive development if they fail to understand the complexity of development challenges their people face?

For two-and-a-half intense, mind-blowing weeks, we grappled with the issues critical to development from poverty and capabilities to health and education, from human rights and social policy to climate change, from China in Africa to the G8 and global economic governance. We also delved into areas such as communication and leadership presence for focus on our personal leadership styles. We took a step back from the piece of the puzzle each of us was trying to solve: politics, health, human and civil rights, media, private sector development, entrepreneurship, and looked at the interconnectedness of the pieces of the puzzle, and the picture they form to define the needs of our society. Necessity is the mother of invention, as the Greek philosopher Plato once noted. Our LSE experience is more aptly described as a profound life-changing immersion.

The theme of the programme raises the classic question in development: Why do nations fail? Why do nations succeed? A recent book, “Why Nations Fail”, by Acemoglu and Robinson notes with compelling rationale and illustrations, the role of institutions in the development of nations. Nations succeed, according to the authors, when institutions are inclusive and pluralistic with opportunities for the broader society. Nations fail when institutions are extractive with prosperity reserved for the political and economic elite. The institutions underpinning success include constitutions, democratic elections, property rights, the rule of law, ease of doing business and competitive markets. Leaders have to understand what good institutions are and how to create them.

Our sense of responsibility and pride in our nation are some of the values that can propel us to do the right thing. Our value system is what will deem us incorruptible. I listened with admiration to the foreign minister of Grenada, a small island state, declare with unflinching loyalty in response to possible options of compensation or relocation at an LSE event on climate change and its impact on small states, “I will not sell my future, my children’s future, my country’s future for a few dollars no matter how much it is”. Imagine if we could translate that commitment and passion for a cause to all the tasks at hand for leadership in Africa. Imagine how far a strong will and commitment to make a difference could propel us. We must choose to make a difference because we can, because we must.

PfAL begins in the classroom; its graduates go on to form a lifetime network, forging ahead to implement commitments made to each other and to the continent. We cannot solve problems in isolation; a network of diverse individuals already engaged in acts of leadership in Africa, exploring the issues together, spurring each other on and collaborating will achieve shared understanding and deeper and broader impact across the continent. I care about what happens in Sudan and South Sudan because I have several colleagues working in diverse roles for development and peace in these countries; I can do business in Uganda or Nigeria because I discovered areas of mutual interest and partnership with my colleagues; I can jointly advocate for a Pan-African cause with my colleagues from countries all over the continent. Networks serve as a powerful catalyst for leadership.

My dreams began as I started my life journey six years ago, I was passionate, zealously optimistic and confident that enough people had made the same choice as I to be the change I wished to see in Africa for it to be possible in my lifetime. Today experience has tempered my passion with realism, my optimism has taken a few knocks and bruises every now and then, but I remain more confident than ever that the change for which I aspired is possible. Why? Firstly, nothing worthwhile is easy. Secondly, the power of one and the spirit of the collective – leadership in true service – is what will define the transformative force of Africa’s development: leaders defining and building enduring institutions, leaders implementing systems and abiding by the rule of law, leaders creating new industries and spearheading the growth of enterprises, leaders advocating and defending the rights of the vulnerable and oppressed, leaders persisting in doing the right thing: leadership by action, leadership by results, leadership by impact.

PfAL serves as a delightful inspiration that every year individuals somewhere on the African continent make the same choice that I made six years ago and define a path to change Africa. It is individuals that make society and it is society that forms the fabric of our beloved continent.

Our future lies in an inclusive, purpose-driven society.

Of Africa I still dream...

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