



AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK GROUP

**STATEMENT BY DONALD KABERUKA
PRESIDENT OF THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK
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AFRICAN MEDIA LEADERS FORUM**

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TUNIS

Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi,

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to join you at this event and I am very happy that the African Development Bank is one of the sponsors of this gathering.

May I also commend you for the choice of the venue, Tunis, in a country which has been a trailblazer in the democratisation of this region.

I am enthusiastic to be here because our respective missions, you the media and we development finance institutions, are complimentary and intertwined.

Our mission is to promote economic development and fight poverty.

Your mission is that of nurturing a free society that is accountable and transparent, that gives a voice to everyone.

We all share the firm belief that poverty is not only material and physical, but it is also and primarily about lack of voice, inability to influence governance, lack of empowerment and inability to hold rulers accountable.

We all know that an environment where the media is not free is not one that can create wealth, let alone economic development.

To the contrary, it is likely to be an environment where corruption and kleptocracies prosper at the expense of the citizens.

It is likely to be an environment where crony capitalism rather than competitive private sector flourish and where individual entrepreneurship and innovation is repressed.

The view that repressive governments who deny their people basic freedoms somehow deliver superior economic results is a myth to which the Tunisian people gave a firm reply early this year.

Remember, this region had been posting credible headline GDP growth numbers and even being hailed as an economic model.

The government may have delivered impressive GDP growth for some time but it proved too fragile to sustain.

That is not to say that these so called "authoritarian bargaining models" may not deliver results some of the time, but these are not sustainable outside an open society.

Which is also neither to suggest that open societies do not create huge economic mess. As we can see now in the global economy, sometimes they do. The difference is that where they do, the people, the voters, will punish them at the ballot box.

That is why; I am pleased to inform you that in line with the emerging best practices, the African Development Bank is revising its rules to ensure freedom of information for all matters concerning the Bank, save a few items which will be very limited.

The public, including the media of course, will be able to access all information concerning AfDB activities, all information on our operations within countries, project by project, how much money has been disbursed, with what results, and what beneficiaries think about what we do.

That is why I have also commissioned a survey of what our clients, stakeholders, including the private sector, and civil society think of what we do and what we can do better.

To that effect I would very much welcome your views on how we as Africa's premier development institution can get closer to you and to the citizens that we serve.

Today I want to share with you two propositions and an idea.

First; my firm conviction that the progress Africa has made over the last decade is in large part attributable to the steady, even if uneven, democratisation process since the early 1990s, and that includes relative progress on media freedoms.

We of course have a long way to go. However the confidence which, greater freedoms—including press freedom—have engendered is a major factor in the "can do" attitude we now see among our entrepreneurs and our young people.

It is not a coincidence that Africa's decade of decline (the lost decade) was one dominated by one-party states, military rule and limited freedoms, which failed to ignite the people's energies.

Second, there is the other side of the same coin. We are all witnesses to the progress African economies have made this decade. Even in this crisis, this is still a growing continent. But there are risks, both external and internal.

The biggest risk, of course, is the global economy. There is not much we can do, except strengthen our economic buffers, which enabled us to relatively withstand the shocks in 2008 and 2009. International institutions, like us can help by playing a countercyclical role.

But the other major risk is internal and political. Policies that fail to deal with issues of exclusion (of all types) inequalities, voice and accountability. That is what can undermine the momentum we see at this time, precisely because it stalls the forces of entrepreneurship and reduces investor confidence.

You will understand therefore that through our governance programmes, we are absolutely keen to work with governments, civil society, and media like yourselves to buttress voice, accountability through greater freedoms.

It is critical for sustaining the progress we have made so far in the economic area.

But of course, you know better than I that this must be a permanent struggle. The media must be not thwarted by autocratic governments but also private owners (as we saw with News of the World) and even members of your profession (as happened in my country in 1994).

For me this is the force of social media, the democratisation of the media and of course society at large.

Rigging elections has become very difficult because social media give us instant results. I do not know what technology will bring next but it will make life difficult for those who do not embrace greater media freedoms.

Prime Minister, friends,

Let me now conclude with my last point; the perennial problem of Africa's image.

Since I became President of the African Development Bank, I have been struck by two things:

First, the real difference between the perception of Africa's risk and the reality of that risk.

How can we explain that even as late as three years ago, bonds of some of Africa's strong economies were rated more risky than Cyprus, Iceland let alone Greece? A high premium for perception you might say.

Second, our own alacrity at shooting ourselves in the foot. Until McKinsey came forward with the famous report "Lions on the Move," we Africans had not been able to articulate a case of separating the wheat from the chaff.

We continued to project the begging Africa, prostrate, warts and all.

Ten years ago, investors coming to Africa would be worried about whether governments would change the rules halfway or interfere in their businesses.

There is an absence of impartial institutions when things go wrong.

Today those concerns have not been completely eliminated, either because of political will, leadership, or lack of lack capacity.

But what I am hearing more and more from investors is lack of adequate infrastructure, unreliable, expensive energy, poor connectivity, lack of suitable local partners, depth of skills, and of late issues of liquidity.

We Africans should be at the forefront of denouncing that which is holding Africa behind. Let us acknowledge what is wrong without looking for scapegoats, and hold ourselves accountable. But we must also know that we are our own “marketing officers” in the markets for capital and investment. At this moment there is this whole debate on rebalancing the global economy. The surpluses which are the cause of the imbalances are earning pittance because of low interest or destabilising currencies of some emerging markets looking for yield.

We want to attract those funds in Africa, not as alms, but as investment; high return investment in infrastructure.

But this also means we need to take another look at our continent and ask whether we may have involuntarily short changed ourselves in the way we have often presented ourselves to the world and whether a different narrative was needed.

But as the English like to say, I do not wish to “carry coal to Newcastle.” You are the professionals and you know more than me what is it that we can do differently.

Once again I look forward to working with you and I thank you for inviting me.