

First Lady Jeannette Kagame's Remarks
at the
YouthConnekt Africa Summit
Parallel Session:
“Pathways to Development: Civic Engagement and
Volunteerism”

Friday, 11 October 2019

Kigali, Rwanda

- **UN Assistant Secretary General and UNDP Regional Director for Africa, Ms. Ahunna Eziakonwa,**
- **Honourable Ministers and Senior Government Officials and Delegates,**
- **Esteemed Partners,**
- **Distinguished Speakers,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**
- **Dear Youth,**

Good Morning.

It is always a pleasure to be part of events, such as this Summit, which brings together great, young and eager minds, from diverse nations and different experiences, seeking to solve key common issues that affect us, and our continent.

This session in particular, entitled **‘Pathways to Development: Civic Engagement and Volunteerism’** is in synchrony with the spirit of the discussions of the Summit thus far and,

I should hope, will lead to a common understanding of what constitutes effective, and sustainable youth engagement for Africa's development.

Before I fully delve into and share my reflections, allow me to extend a very warm welcome to those of you visiting Kigali for the first time. I hope that your experience of the **YouthConnekt Africa Summit**, and our city during the past few days, inspires you to visit us again and again.

To those who are not new to Rwanda, welcome back. "**Murakaza neza!**" as we say.

Dear Youth gathered here today,

You are our most valued asset. I do not utter these words lightly.

You make up 1.8 billion of the world's population, and within you lies enough energy – if properly channelled – to ignite the continent's power grid of ideas and options.

Representing a whopping sixty per cent (60%) under the age of 25 of Africa's total population, you make this the most youthful continent on the globe.

You are poised to be a determinant factor in the transformation of our continent and the pathway to sustainable peace and prosperity. Therefore, your presence must count for something; your energy must define and shape the destiny of our continent; and yes, our continent belongs to you!

Indeed, in the world we live in today, these numbers matter.

When translated, they tell the stories of the opportunities available for you, but they also tell of the enormous responsibility that is upon your shoulders. The responsibility to build upon, and to take Africa to the next level.

And this is why volunteerism is so key!

Volunteerism is noble as it speaks directly to one's altruistic nature to contribute to causes that especially result in the development of those around them.

Remember also that there is power in all acts of volunteerism, no matter how big or small they may seem.

Allow me here to emphasize that the notion of volunteerism is certainly not new to our continent. Our traditional practices are rooted in the importance of the community, and the resulting duty we owe to one another, to alleviate the inequalities of this world.

Here I call on you to imagine for a second, what our societies would look like, if we did not cultivate the African spirit of ***'ubuntu'***?

Moreover, what would our world look like if we did not uphold the inter-connectedness of humanity?

In the words of the Poet, Kahlil Gibran “ ... *you give but little when you give of your possessions. It is when you give of yourself, that you truly give*”.

Esteemed Guests, dear Youth

As we all know and can confirm from its impact on our economies, volunteerism has shaped our health systems, education, agriculture, science and technology and many other sectors, while enhancing the capacity, skills and knowledge of youth.

We really must acknowledge those institutions and organisations that work tirelessly to offer opportunities to youth to volunteer in this era of youth unemployment, underemployment, quest for self-actualization, and to eliminate the risk of resorting to crime and violent extremism in frustration and despair. I begin by applauding our co-hosts, the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and VSO Rwanda, as well as many other institutions, including the African Union that have specific volunteer programmes for the youth.

Indeed, we could never overemphasize the fact that the active engagement of youth in all spheres of life is essential for our collective development and growth. They are a large percentage of the labour force, and policies that do not integrate them, are compromising overall development.

Cognizant of this, African leaders and decision makers, the world over, are progressively revisiting and reinforcing strategies to effectively harness the dynamic potential of the youth, as key partners of development.

In the case of Rwanda, our government built national policies rooted in our cultural values of volunteerism, to ensure more effective mobilization – and channelling of community efforts – for measurable impact, in a more conducive environment.

Looking specifically at our demographic groups, where 70% of the population is below 35 years, we made the conscious choice to invest in our youth from the onset,

by:

1. Reinforcing their sense of national unity.
2. Ensuring they get a seat at the table of leadership.
3. Placing them at the centre of our transformation journey.

It is through strong political will, inclusive and youth-friendly policies and programmes - especially promoting education for all, access to universal healthcare, finance and political representation - that Rwandan youth are, not only motivated to focus on the aspects that unify them, but have been given avenues to contribute to their country's growth.

To give an example, the Ministry of Youth of Rwanda in partnership with the UN Rwanda and my organisation, Imbuto Foundation, have been recognizing youth innovative spirits, through programmes such as the YouthConnekt Champions and Celebrating Young Rwandans Achievers (CYRWA) Awards.

Launched over 10 years ago, this award ceremony, which recognizes young Rwandans striving for social and professional excellence, has demonstrated that young people can indeed generate innovative solutions, working through the value chain from design to finish, to transform the way things are done in all sectors of the economy.

Dear Youth,

The existence of relevant structures for your betterment, are but the initial steps needed to see your lives and situations improve. The ultimate choice to accept, and participate remain yours, as success will depend upon you adopting the right attitudes and work ethics, to truly soar.

So, I encourage you to take the time to do some deep soul searching, to truly know your purpose. Surround yourselves with people who will push you beyond the frontiers of your comfort zones, and help you exercise your role as powerful agents of change, within your communities.

Only then, will you be able to explore your limitless potential, and to shine your true light.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Youth,

It is therefore my hope that, as we discuss and exchange ideas on increased civic engagement and volunteerism, that we walk away with a stronger sense of the role and responsibility of each one of us towards the transformation of our respective countries, and the need to give time, space and support to youth, as the foremost civic engagers and volunteers.

Building on this year's theme '**Boosting an industrious young Africa**', let us capitalise on all current available technologies to learn from one another, so we can implement more effectively, best practices of civic engagement from across our continent.

Leaders and stakeholders – let our work truly reflect the idea that **‘nothing can be done for the youth without the youth’**.

Youth – should you need an extra incentive, then know that volunteering is also proven to deliver great physical and mental health benefits, while providing better social interactions, and a greater sense of purpose.

Always remember that you have what it takes within you to bring about lasting change. It is up to you to tap into that immense potential, and trust me: We are rooting for you!

I thank you for your kind attention, and wish you all a fruitful day.