

HAILEMARIAM DESALEGN

Former Prime Minister of Ethiopia

Thierry de MONTBRIAL

Prime Minister Desalegn, the floor is yours.

Hailemariam DESALEGN

First of all, it is a great opportunity to be among you today to represent my continent, Africa, and also to give you some examples from my own country, Ethiopia. Africans tried to unify through the Organisation for African Unity over 50 years ago, and we tried to evaluate the decolonisation process. We were politically successful in decolonising, but we have not been successful in many ways, especially in serving our citizens, changing the lives of our people, having good government and democratising Africa.

The main issue is that for the last 15 years or so you might have been hearing that Africa is a rising continent, a giant lion which has awoken, a sleeping giant. There have been many narratives about Africa, but my discussion is informed by five points which I want to mention.

The first is that my continent is very young, both in terms of the age of the population and also in terms of natural resources and abundance of opportunities. Africa is still young, which calls for a policy choice that takes this into account. If our population is very young, dynamic and technologically astute, how we can harness this dividend is one of the main issues to be addressed. This has far-reaching implications, because it concerns our neighbours, especially Europe. Our young people who are travelling across the Mediterranean, drowning in the sea, need opportunities. This is an opportunity as well as a challenge for us as a continent, so our policies should be informed by this demographic in Africa. This is the first point.

We in Ethiopia, and in many countries in Africa, recognise this fact, and we started by creating quality education, technical, vocational and occupational skills, which are essential to making our young active in the economic sphere. However, Africa also has other challenges. Most of our leaders are very old, and young people are impatient – they are asking for young leaders who can understand the real quest of the continent. This is a major challenge and has continued to be so, and something has to be done.

For example, in my country, the Prime Minister who came after me is 42 years old, so he has a better understanding than myself – I am 53. This is something which Africa has to address while we are giving people technical and vocational skills and making young people employable – we also have to address their political desire to engage in and be part of the process. Many of us relegate young people to the future but they continue to assert that they are equally the current leaders of Africa. This is a big issue which must inform our policy decisions, and which we are trying to address this issue in Ethiopia.

The second issue is gender – if we want to serve our people, gender imbalances have to be addressed. Some countries in Africa are trying to address this issue, especially in terms of high-level leadership. We now have gender parity in our cabinet, and similarly in Rwanda; many other African countries are now emulating this. This is the basic challenge, because more than 50% of our population are women, and without embracing this section of society, we cannot move forward in Africa. This is a very important issue that must be addressed in a way that resolves it.

Another issue which informs policy decisions in Ethiopia and Africa is disruptive technologies and the advancement of the digital economy. This is also a very important issue we have to address if we want to expedite economic growth and have a vibrant economy, so we have to leapfrog with this technological advancement as this is an opportunity for Africa. This is the next issue we are focusing on – e-governance, e-commerce and e-services, both in government and in private entities. More must be done in this regard - this will facilitate African integration. There is a physical infrastructure deficit



in Africa, and we have to leapfrog this by going further through the digital economy and using digital technology, which will help us to move faster.

Another issue is cut-throat competition among global competitors, all of whom are looking at Africa. Africa is no longer a humanitarian case – it has become a trade and investment case, so this has to be properly understood. Things have changed; it used to be a humanitarian issue, but now that is changing. How can we work with global competitors in an amicable way when they come to Africa to work and invest, in order to have a better impact?

We have some examples in Ethiopia, where the east, the west and the south are cooperating in helping the country move forward. We work with the US, with the EU, with China, with Japan and with the Middle East. It used to be that you had to side with one in their fight, but that is not the case now. We have to be very conscious about getting the necessary support from all corners of the globe. This competition helps Africa move forward, but on the other hand it impedes us, and we have to ensure that agreements we get into propel us forward rather than hold us back.

Regarding the emergence of these global players, my country has seen 10.3% growth over the last 15 years, which is similar to Korea in the 1960s or China in recent years. This kind of economic growth is essential, because without rapid and accelerated economic growth, poverty reduction in Africa will remain at a low level. Therefore, we need to move rapidly – six of the 10 fastest-growing global economies are in Africa, but that is still not enough. All 55 countries have to move rapidly in terms of economic growth, but my country is an example in this regard, having achieved poverty reduction for millions of people in a country of over 100 million.

We have a huge challenge in Africa in terms of the next point which informs our policy choice, which is state capture and poor governance, which is very detrimental for rapid economic growth. I see state fragility in some parts, and some African countries are failed states, so we have to work very hard to bring all the African nations to the same level of peace, tranquillity and development. Therefore, the fight is for zero tolerance of corruption, addressing poor governance, and above all, citizen participation. If there is no proper civil society movement or civil activism, then it is very difficult to keep governments in check. Civil society movements should be at the core of the African growth and development narrative. I believe that this is one of the main issues we have to address.

The fifth is resource depletion and climate change, which is crucial to address. Africa contributes far less to global greenhouse gas emissions, but it is the most impacted continent, so climate justice should always be at the core of our policymaking; otherwise, Africa is suffering from the actions of developed countries because of these emissions. However, we wanted to take action as global and responsible citizens, and we in Ethiopia designed a climate-resilient green growth strategy where we accept to be morally responsible and show developed countries that, even though we contribute very little to global greenhouse gas emissions, we take responsibility for our collective futures. As latecomers, we have an advantage in this. We focused, in that regard, on climate-smart agriculture, eco-industrial parks and environmentally friendly industrial development.

Morocco has also given us an example of renewable energy which reduces greenhouse gas emissions. We are harnessing all the potentialities – for example, Ethiopia has huge potential for hydro, at 60 000 MW, we have geothermal potential of 20 000 MW, and we have abundant wind energy capacity, at 1 GW. Africa is also abundantly endowed with solar potential. We are harnessing all of these energy sources. Ethiopia has an installed capacity of around 5 000, 95% of which is from renewable sources, and again, we have and are building facilities with more than 15 000 MW of capacity.

All this shows that we have taken responsibility, but we also demand action from the global community. We do not agree with the policies of certain countries which are backtracking from the Paris Agreement, as this is detrimental for our children and for our future existence. We have to save our planet, and we are setting an example in our countries.

Beyond that, we have problems with terrorism and violent extremism, which are challenges that have to be addressed, because if we do not create jobs for our young people, there is no option for them to survive or thrive in their countries, so when any kind of extreme ideology comes in, they accept it. Therefore, it is up to us to address the problems of our young people who are joining these terrorist groups and the violent extremism that is taking root across the globe.



These are the main issues that inform our policies and implementation. We are successful in many ways, and we will continue with this. Best practices and examples exist in many African countries, and we have to emulate these and to scale them up.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL

Thank you very much. You have had an academic career but I think the most relevant part of what you mentioned came from this successful experience - 6 years, was it? - which I alluded to earlier.