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Educate an Africa fit for the 21st century: Speech at Africa Day Indaba Australasia and the Pacific 2024

Matshepo MOLALA and Noël ZIHABAMWE

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AUTHOR DETAILS

- Molala M, PhD Candidate, School of Social Sciences, Western Sydney University and Director African Australian Advocacy Centre. Email: Matshepo.molala@westernsydney.edu.au
- Zihabamwe N, Founder and Chairperson, African Australian Advocacy Centre (AAAC), Sydney, Australia. Email: noel@africanaustralianadvocacy.org.au

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OPENING REMARKS

Noël Zihabamwe: I would like to begin by acknowledging our distinguished guests and everyone who has taken the time to be here with us today. Today's presentation will be brief but insightful, focusing on the work of the African Australian Advocacy Centre (AAAC) and the "Educate an Africa Fit for the 21st Century" initiative. We recognise the African Union's emphasis on education as a critical theme, particularly the need to equip individuals with the skills required for the modern workforce. In today's rapidly evolving world, digital literacy, technological proficiency, and critical thinking are essential for success. Before we delve into the presentation, let me provide a brief overview of the African Australian Advocacy Centre. AAAC serves as a representative body for African communities in Australia, with a strong focus on advocacy, research, and policy development. Our mission is twofold:

- To ensure that African voices are heard at local, state, and federal levels.
- To advocate using evidence-based approaches, particularly in addressing the challenges faced by people of African descent.

With that, I will now hand over to my colleague, Matshepo, who will take us through the presentation. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask via the chat or during the question-and-answer session at the end. So Matshepo, the floor is yours.

Matshepo Molala: Thanks, Noël. I too would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we are gathering today. Thank you, Dr Rugare, for making this event possible. Happy Africa Day in advance everyone. So, as we discussed, we are here today to talk through the African Union's mission. As Noël and Dr Dzator were saying the African Union is an organisation that is trying to unite Africa or have common purpose and shared goals and objectives across the African continent. For this year, the theme is Educate an Africa Fit for the 21st Century. Now, the African Union's Agenda 2063 highlights that there are important inclusive, equitable, and quality education needs. There is a need to cultivate lifelong learning.

There's opportunities and emphasis on science and technology and mathematics fields to build those skills and that knowledge within the African continent. Achieving these goals is critical for attainment of Africa's sustainable development and competitiveness into the 21st century. Again, we are underscoring the importance of education here. Education in the 21st century does demand that we have people who are skilled to be able to have a modern workforce, so we need digital skills or basic technology skills, and proficiency, we need critical thinking skills and be able to develop critical skills amongst the African population. We understand that education is a cornerstone for economic growth, social development, as well as individual empowerment, and certainly Dr. Dzator has touched on those issues as well. However, we do have challenges, unfortunately.

Looking at the African Union's report around some of these issues, it is concerning. The facts are that: a) out of the 22 countries in the world with literacy rates below 60%, 14 can be found in sub-Saharan Africa; b) there's massive teacher shortages within the region, broadly speaking; c) the highest number of out-of-school children of primary and lower secondary school going age 32,000,000, are all in Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, there are higher rates of exclusion from school access, this could be due to family circumstances; finances; lack of abilities to get to school, that is, schools being a far to be able to get kids there safely and back home, those are some of issues.

Another fact is that a lot of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are out of school, and these are the statistics from the current reports from United Nations Scientific Council (UNESCO) that is looking at these particular issues. Broadly, African governments spend is below the benchmark or recommended spending of around four percent of gross domestic product (GDP), this is across all countries, to be able to deliver some of that quality education. The former leader of South Africa Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela said that "education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to prepare youth to become the leaders of tomorrow". We have an opportunity, really, to leverage education as one platform to build those skills, to build that economic drive.

Africa has a young population. It's identified as one of the growth areas in terms of population numbers, so we have a significant opportunity to turn the continent around in the next century, leading up to 2050, and all of this work hinges on some way being able to build those skills and knowledge, those critical skills, those technology skills within the African population. So, we have an opportunity, again, echoing the same sentiment as Dr. Dzator, that as diaspora, we are the people with some skills, we've got a different experience, we've got networks, we're building social capital, we've got people in parliament here who are representing our people, and so we've got those opportunities to actually leverage some of our knowledge, skills, and experience to be able to contribute to the motherland, if you like.

We have a community that is trying to contribute significantly in terms of the education. Again, we need to look at some of those relationships and partnerships that Dr. Dzator talked about. That we can use to be able to make sure that the skills remain in Africa, or the brain drain is reversed. That we come in and acquire the skills, and we go back to Africa to be able to make the necessary contribution.

We have that pivotal role to play as Africans in the diaspora in leveraging our resources, expertise and the networks to be able to inject capital through remittances and to build educational capacity across the African continent through work that is done by the diaspora community. This could be in the form of scholarships, being able to provide mentorships, technology integration and partnerships. Working with some of the organisations from Australia that we can leverage to be able to take technology that is useful to Africa. We need to ensure that we are taking technology that is useful, that meets the needs of the communities and can make a difference in terms of access to technology in the African continent.

Again, we can play that advocacy role and that leadership development role, echoing the same sentiments around how do we work with the embassies in Australia that are representing Africa, so that they know who is in the pool, what skillset are available, who can they leverage. We need to think how we make these relationships work so that we can contribute right across Africa, the continent, as opposed to focussing on our individual countries. It is really looking at how we can work collaboratively. I will hand over to Noël now to talk about some of these examples that I have spoken to. Thanks.

Noël Zihabamwe: Thank you, Matshepo. We have numerous opportunities to make a meaningful impact. One key approach is through initiatives and programs that directly benefit African communities. As Africans living in Australia, we have the ability and the responsibility to take the lead in developing innovative programs, particularly in the field of education. Building sustainable partnerships is another crucial step. By collaborating with local universities, business leaders, and corporate organisations, we can strengthen education initiatives both in Australia and across Africa. Additionally, through advocacy and policy influence, we must work to establish and support advocacy groups that drive meaningful policy change, ensuring that education remains a priority.

At AAAC, we place a strong emphasis on empowering the next generation. We firmly believe that investing in young people is essential to building a strong and resilient African Australian community. By equipping them with skills and opportunities, we prepare them to lead and contribute effectively. The role of the African Australian Advocacy Centre is to serve as a bridge between Australia and Africa, facilitating collaboration, mobilising resources, and creating platforms for policy influence and educational advancement.

As Matshepo highlighted, this is a collective effort. Real change comes from working together as a community. By supporting one another, we not only strengthen our presence here in Australia but also contribute to the development of our communities back home. For example, how AAAC can drive this. Recently, we had the privilege of collaborating with the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent (UNWEGPAD). Through this partnership, we highlighted the critical issues affecting people of African origin, particularly in Australia. Working closely with the UNWEGPAD, we are advocating for the Australian government to address these challenges, particularly the significant gap in racial discrimination faced by individuals from African backgrounds.

Racial discrimination remains one of the most pressing issues for our community, and we are committed to tackling it. However, this work cannot be done alone. We urge academic institutions, policymakers, and ambassadors to join us in ensuring that the Australian government takes action to close these gaps. Moreover, while we are proud to call Australia home, we must never forget that Africa is our motherland. It is vital that we maintain regular conversations, not just annually, about Africa and its importance to us. We want to ensure that our children understand their African heritage and learn how they can contribute, particularly in the area of education, to the progress of Africa. To have a better education. Thank you.

CLOSING REMARKS

Noël Zihabamwe: I would also like to extend my gratitude to our distinguished speakers, organisers, and all our guests for joining us today to celebrate the significant occasion of Africa Day. As we have heard, Africa Day holds immense cultural, historical, and social importance for people of African descent. Here in Australia, as across the globe, it is a day to celebrate the rich diversity, traditions, and achievements of the African continent. For all of us of African descent, Africa Day serves as a powerful reminder of our heritage, our identity, and the contributions we make to society. This year's theme, as we have heard, is "Educate an African Fit for the 21st Century." It calls upon us to reflect and take action. By investing in education and championing lifelong learning, we can help build a brighter future for Africa and its global diaspora. Each of us plays a vital role in this journey.

Let us be inspired by today's celebrations to actively contribute to this vision. Together, we can honour Africa's rich legacy, strengthen our connections, and celebrate the vibrant diversity that enriches our global community. As we have heard, the African diaspora has a crucial role to play in advancing the African Union's educational goals by leveraging its resources, expertise, and networks. It is only through active engagement that we can achieve these shared goals. Let us move forward with renewed determination, embracing our collective heritage, and working toward a future where every African is empowered to thrive in the 21st century.

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