

**KEYNOTE SPEECH BY UNICEF GOODWILL AMBASSADOR
DANNY GLOVER ON THE “REDEMPTION SONG” YOUTH DAY
AT THE AFRICA UNITE SYMPOSIUM**

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Every generation seeks its own redemption.

Every generation dreams its own dreams based on where it stands, based on the situation in which it finds itself.

Every generation wishes to achieve that final emancipation which eluded the previous generation

and maybe ...

Every generation sometimes forgets to remember that where they stand and dream is only possible because of the efforts, the struggles and the sacrifices of a previous generation of dreamers.

Thus, perhaps one of the great things about this symposium is that it brings together different generations of dreamers, who would see a better world and have been ready to struggle and sacrifice to build that world. We are already hearing the dreams of the new generation and I would like to address myself to them later but first I would like to acknowledge and celebrate those previous generations.

So, if the young people will forgive me, let me reflect a little on my past. I was about 15 years old when I went to visit my grandmothers, living in rural Georgia, deep in the heart of segregation.

I went as someone who had watched the civil rights movement from afar, had seen young people, my generation, members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), some not more than 15 years old, taking an aggressive stand against segregation through freedom marches and sit ins. I had seen young people brave water cannons, dogs and bullets to fight for an end to segregation and racism. So I went with my mind full of criticism of my grandmothers.

What had they done to resist oppression? Why had they not confronted segregation and racism in their day? They were just handkerchief heads who had done nothing which was why I and my fellow blacks of my generation were suffering.

It took me a long time to realise that it was only because of the courage and steadfastness of my grandmothers, that my mother was who she was, and it was only because of her courage and strength that I could even think these thoughts about my grandparents.

And I know the same is true here in Africa. I am sure that many of you are here because of the sacrifices of your mothers who were determined that you would lead a better life than they led. I know mothers who accepted the worst forms of domestic violence and oppression, or the most degrading jobs so that their daughters would not have to lead the same kind of life. And I know there are thousands and millions more (and many fathers) who did the same.

The same is true of the political level. Young people are dissatisfied with the current situation in Africa, and they have every right to be, but even that dissatisfaction can only be expressed because of the strength and sacrifices of those who fought for the independence that we now enjoy, and who put in place the expanded educational systems and health systems that were never considered under colonial rule. Some representatives of that generation are here and we thank them.

However, we must also recognise that one reason why we cannot, unfortunately, celebrate the struggles, the sacrifices and the successes of the previous generations is that for many in that previous generation, the fire has died. Neo-colonialism is still with us. African leaders and people of colour everywhere still have to confront the economic monolith which leaves little space for them to manoeuvre in. And it seems to young people, who are impatient for change, that the leaders have capitulated – partly because their leaders are not open with them about the situation, partly because there is no sign of any continuing struggle.

Worse still, that fire that brought political emancipation has turned destructive. Many of those leaders have been seduced into the international class which welcomes them to eat at the high table while the rest are left to starve, or fight over the crumbs that drop from their tables. Of course a few, a very few young people are coopted into the ranks of those eaters but they are so few that they too can quickly be seduced. Many embrace Pan-africanism in international meetings without realising that the very base of Panafricanism is that between the leaders and the led, the educated and the uneducated, the privileged and the vulnerable, the old and the young within their own countries.

And because that fire has turned destructive, it is the younger generation that has suffered and continues to suffer. And young people see that because their eyes are too sharp to miss whatever happens, and because it is they who feel the pangs of hunger, and the pangs of anger as their dreams are blocked and their talents are left to rot. Young people sit and analyse and blame. They see that they are more than 50% of Africans, more than 50% below the age of 19. And they see what percentage of the resources goes to them. Teenagers are 25% of the population of Africa but they are the most invisible group when it comes to allocation of resources. Less than 50% of teenagers are in school or any educational institution. And they want to know why.

It is good to see the young men and women analysing their situation. It is good to see their rejection of simple solutions to the problems that face them for as another great African American, George Jackson, said 'diagnosis of our discomfort is necessary before surgery'

I would like to take one example of this, the greatest scourge that threatens young people here in Africa, HIV and AIDS. Young people continue to be the targets (a military word if every I heard one) of other people's assumptions, other people's programmes, other people's solutions. They listen continuously to songs of behaviour change as if behaviour development or behaviour change takes place in a vacuum. And they know that in an epidemic, while individuals have responsibility for their actions, that responsibility has always to be considered in a context of what individuals can and cannot do given the structures of inequality within which they live their lives. The UN Secretary General's report on girls, women and HIV/AIDS stated very clearly that for most women and girls, the famous ABC formula is often not an option – until the basic determinants of HIV and AIDS are addressed. It is no accident that young people have the fewest opportunities in society, the least access to resources and employment and at the same time are the most affected by HIV and AIDS. It is even less of an accident that girls who are the most marginalised of all are 4 times more affected than boys.

However, diagnosis alone does not cure the sickness. Surgery is required and surgery requires skill, courage and commitment, especially when not all the tools are there for carrying out the surgery. This again is what young people have shown throughout history. Young people have always fought for their dreams in the most difficult circumstances. It was a young man, Nkrumah, who galvanised the fifth Panafrican Congress, not just with his rhetoric, but with his boundless determination to act now. He then returned to Ghana to confront the colonialists and their threats and the rest is history. Within 20 years most of Africa had, at least flag independence. Nkrumah did

not just look at the hesitation of some of his elders but worked to convince them of the rightness of his task.

The same was true of leaders like Nyerere and the young Mandela who led the ANC Youth Wing in the first direct action against the apartheid state in the Defiance Campaign before he was 30 years of age. And more recently the same was true of a great daughter of Africa, Wangari Maathai who left the security of her university lecture rooms to lead a women's movement to plant trees. When she was being beaten and imprisoned she had no idea she would win a Nobel Prize for Peace but she, and her fellow women, held and lived their dreams until they triumphed.

The same was true of Martin Luther King who at the age of 26 became the leader of a civil rights movement which profoundly changed America for ever.

The same is true of inspirational musicians such as Brother Bob who not only lived but died young in the yards of Jamaica, forging a message which still resonates throughout the world decades later.

And these are just the leaders. Nkrumah, Nyerere and all the other nationalist leaders would not have been successful without a legion, an army of young people who walked from village to village spreading the word of freedom. It was the young men and women who refused to be silenced by the threats of the colonialists, or the doubts of some of their elders and through their organisation and their actions, suddenly independence became possible. Young people of that generation had the dream and the fire ... and the eloquence to reignite the dream in the hearts of their elders.

And who walks from village to village today? It is the same young people, the peer educators and facilitators, who have volunteered to spread knowledge and life skills despite the threats of some officials who see them as misguided or dangerous, and the

doubts of some of their elders. They have demonstrated that, if given the smallest of opportunities, they will show their creativity and skill and commitment and that if large scale programmes were based on the same principles, Africa could and would be a very different place today. They too have the dream, and the fire ... and the eloquence to reignite the dreams of a better Africa, of redemption, rather than so much trouble in the world.

But it is good for us elders to remember too that when dreams turn to dust, the anger cannot be held back. Young people will turn away from the Panafricanism of international meetings unless it is expressed in one love in their own lives. Another great son of the Caribbean who came back and played a major part in the liberation of Africa, Frantz Fanon, wrote of the thousands of young unemployed people searching for a place in the colonial city that they are like rats gnawing at the root of the tree. You can kick them, you can continue to throw stones at them but they will continue to gnaw at the roots of the tree. They will not be silenced or marginalised. They will not allow others to trample on their dreams.

It is up to us to give them the opportunity to turn their dreams into reality and infect us with their dreams so that Africa and Africans wherever they are take a further step forward in confronting the troubles in the world and moving us towards the redemption we all desire so earnestly.

So let me finish with a word for the young people. You have to realise that the world is often harsh and cruel. Although your parents and leaders gave you the precious gift of life, it is a gift for which each of you must take full responsibility. That does not mean only protesting life's cruelties and resisting its oppressions. In a way that is the easy part. It means that your principal responsibility is to transform the world into which you are born into a new world of peace with justice.

I would like to leave you with the words of a great African American trade union leader, A. Philip Randolph who developed the plans for the first march by African Americans upon the capital city of America, Washington D.C. Although I do not have his exact words, what he said was this:

At the banquet table of life, there are no reserved seats. You have to take what you want and to keep what you take. And you cannot take anything or keep anything without organisation. Go forth and organise your plans, organise yourselves and your communities and transform the world.

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