

## Why good governance means great things for Africa's children

by Joaquim Alberto Chissano

I HAVE been privileged to lead my great country, Mozambique, and in the course of that I learned practically and precisely how leadership can and must inspire and propel nations and peoples forward. Now, eight years before we reach the Millennium Development Goals target of 2015, I want to share what I've learned as a Head of State in Africa about governance and its huge potential for good in my beloved continent.

The Millennium Development Goals have a very human face, the face of children and their families, all of them hoping and struggling towards better, healthier, safer lives. Achieving the MDGs will not be an abstract, intangible accomplishment but will be an enormous human success, a dramatic material leap forward for all the children and families in all countries. For that, if for no other reason, leaders in Africa must direct their energies towards achieving the MDGs.

Sub-Saharan Africa is now poised at the cusp of an economic renaissance. However, its benefits will only be realized when our children start benefiting from better health care and education, better nutrition and social services. In this way, the renaissance will deepen and widen equitable resource distribution and our societies will flourish, leading to ever greater contributions from Africa to human culture, science and art.

Yet, we know that as a continent we stand at the rear of the field in this great race towards 2015, with farther and faster to go than other countries. The grim example of child deaths suffices to illustrate just how great the distance is. Half of the 9.7 million children who died before their fifth birthday in 2006 were from sub-Saharan Africa. We are losing our children at a far higher rate than anywhere else in the world: 160 children under the age of five die each year in sub-Saharan Africa for every 1,000 live births. In South Asia, with the next highest toll, the child mortality rate is 83.

The factors that take so many children's lives and compromise the development of so many others may seem overwhelming. The conspirators against progress include the lack of economic development, leading to poverty, wars, disease and corruption.

Against these enemies, sub-Saharan Africa has made gains, but our successes are overshadowed and too often inadequate. It is, therefore, vital that leaders look afresh at the priorities that must be set and at ways to redirect energies and resources to what is right, effective and valuable.

Africa, for example, loses around US\$18 billion a year due to wars, civil wars and insurgencies. In conflict, an African nation's economy shrinks by 15 per cent annually. That represents not only human suffering and loss but surpasses the roughly \$12 billion that our continent needs to improve education, access to clean water and sanitation, and protection against tuberculosis and malaria for our vulnerable people. It also represents more than what it would take to tackle HIV and AIDS in Africa on a yearly basis: \$16.3 billion.

My own country endured 16 years of armed conflict in which an estimated 1 million of my compatriots perished. Soon after I became president in 1986, I initiated wide-ranging reforms and made attaining peace my number one goal. Today, the commonly shared view is that Mozambique is strong and vibrant, averaging 8 per cent in economic growth between 1996 and 2006, one of the highest rates in Africa. As a result, the poverty headcount index was reduced by 15 percentage points between 1997 and 2003, according to the World Bank, bringing almost 3 million people out of extreme poverty (out of a total population of 20 million).

Many African countries are enjoying a peace unparalleled in the history of this continent, yet they continue to allocate resources as if they were at war. I call upon our leaders to re-examine their spending priorities and consider the opportunities lost when these monies are not invested in providing health and education to our people.

Another huge drain on our treasuries and our people is the heavy debt burden the continent carries. In 2004 alone, for example, sub-Saharan Africa paid \$15 billion on debts of \$220 billion, an outflow of \$41 million every day. Thanks to the Multilateral Debt Initiative and other bilateral initiatives, these debts have been slashed for several countries, but many still continue to carry far too heavy a debt burden.

The flight of resources from Africa is compounded by the departure of almost 20,000 of the brightest and most skilled Africans estimated to leave the continent for industrialized countries every year.

Good governance is our best hope against these challenges. Governance entails choices. It demands a visionary leadership that will set enlightened priorities and redeploy resources and retain skilled talent. Compassionate and committed leaders can and must create the policies and invest the necessary resources in infrastructure and services, empowering people to improve their conditions and safeguard their children's lives, thus accelerating progress towards the MDGs.

As I said, we are making progress. Child mortality rates declined by 29 per cent in Malawi between 2000 and 2004 and by 20 per cent in Ethiopia, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania. There has been tremendous progress made in the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Malawi, Sao Tome and Principe, Togo and Zambia in getting children to sleep under insecticide-treated mosquito nets. This is helping to drive down deaths from malaria, one of the biggest killers of children in sub-Saharan Africa.

Partners from around the world are needed as sub-Saharan Africa pushes for enlightened leadership and progress towards the MDGs. But the work is Africa's. As we have risen to many challenges, we must and will rise to this one.

The African Union is determined to install good governance as a main pillar in sustaining the continent's effort to develop. The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is another initiative that consolidates efforts in this regard. Participating countries are working through NEPAD to strengthen their political and administrative frameworks in line with the principles of democracy, transparency, accountability, integrity, respect for human rights and the promotion of the rule of law. In addition to a political governance focus, the countries are also addressing the important issues relating to economic governance, which, in conjunction with political issues, will contribute towards development and the eradication of poverty.

Africa does not need convincing. What is needed is committed leadership at national and community levels, committed partners, resources and excellent governance for substantial and positive change for children.

*See References, page 52.*

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