

**Speech presenting by H.E Ambassador (DR) Kemafo Nonyerrem Chikwe at the African Centre Conference on Images and Massages, Dublin Castle 14<sup>th</sup> July 2010: “Images and Messages, from an African perspective.”**

Your Excellencies fellow Ambassadors, visiting dignitaries, ladies and Gentles, I want to first of all thank the organisers for offering us this opportunity to speak on this very important topic titled “ **Images and Messages from an African perspective**”

This forum offers the African community the chance to tell its own story rather than the stereotypical and misplaced stories usually spewed out by the western media.

Over the last century the main aspects of the Africa which have been given prominence in the Irish and other media have been of wars, famine, poverty and disease. This is in spite of the African continent's wealth in human and material resources. Africa is constantly misrepresented by the various media formats such as **print, radio, television and web**. In today's global village with the benefit of high tech communications an image is of paramount importance and the power it has to rapidly destroy or enhance a brand needs to be appreciated and treated with the utmost caution. Africa as a continent receives by far the most negative press by the world media today and no brand, product, service or people can withstand such a negative barrage of criticism. The people of Africa have as a consequence suffered because of this negative media coverage.

Africans therefore need to collaborate to create a strategy that promulgates a positive message about Africa and sets in motion a marketing campaign that will protect and enhance Africa's image in Ireland and in the world today. In order to be successful at disseminating positive images and messages from Africa it is important to try to discover why so much negative commentary, images and video exist about Africa in the first place and doing this it must be remembered that the media industry in the western world exists to earn a return for its shareholders through the sale of the content and advertising.

Apart from the general negative stories about Africa in the media there is also a cacophony of commentary that emanates from various NGO's and charitable bodies that again portrays Africa in a negative light. We need to be careful how

such organisations represent Africa in an attempt to obtain funding and that the Aid sector does not mutate into a self-perpetuating industry whereby its growth is dependent on increased aid distribution rather than productive investment in the target African countries that will earn an economic return and self-sustenance for the recipients. A significant portion of the negative advertising seems to be sponsored by the NGO sector which needs to perpetuate this image of suffering and poverty to obtain funding in distribute to different projects they are undertaking in Africa. It may be a caricature to denigrate the entire aid industry but there must be some semblance of truth and balance of reality on the ground in Africa. In portioning blame for this negative advertising that denigrates Africa I have recently observed in Dublin **Sightsavers Fund Raising** posters on the back of Dublin buses and elsewhere which to paraphrase said, “**to be blind is bad but to be blind in Nigeria is a worse**” this further reinforces negative imaging and stereotyping of Nigeria and Nigerians. Such a poster issued by an Irish aid agency is an insult to Nigeria and there is a need for us all as Africans to challenge these negative images and perceptions at every given opportunity. We do not begrudge the aid agencies or NGO’s from raising funds and doing the good works they do in many areas but raising funds through denigrating a country or negative imaging and messaging should be discouraged.

The Aid organisations have a duty to take cognisance of any negative consequences that their actions may cause especially in the dissemination of African images and messages. They much move away from the belief that simply because they are engaged in altruistic activity that they are consequently absolved from any adverse consequences that befall the African continent.

It seems the **Sensationalist content** by the media industry is what sells, so the bias in favour of negative publicity about Africa I feel falls into this category of bias in favours of negativity to the detriment of reporting positive happenings from Africa. The origins of this prejudice about Africa can be traced backed to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century during the scramble for Africa and the so called white man’s burden where native Africans were depicted as savages in order to justify or permit the enslavement of Africa and allow the slave trade exist along with rapacious stealing of Africa’s natural resources, if the African population were depicted as less than human then this would not warrant the necessity for them to be treated with respect and dignity and consequently this could somewhat assuage the white man’s conscience.

Fortunately times have changed and the world is now a global village with the African continent now made up of many independent nations. There is no doubt that the vast majority of the world's population do not see Africans or other ethnic groups in the way the earlier colonialists did, but there are some extreme racist groups and Nazi affiliated networks, we all need to remain vigilant for overt or subliminal messages and thought driven by unconscious and sometimes conscious beliefs that continue to denigrate Africans or other ethnic groups or persons. We also should ask ourselves why the negative stories in the media sell and why is pessimistic reporting about Africa so out of the proportions in comparison with other continents.

Africa is not a large homogenous country but is rather made up of 54 separate and independently governed African countries consisting of almost 1 billion people. I assure you that there are more positive stories about Africa than there are negative.

Africa possesses a dynamic and diverse people with a rich culture and traditions and some of the fastest growing economies in the emerging world with growth rates of 4.5%-6% on average. Where conflict and war does arise, contrary to the common perception it is Africans themselves who play the primary role in instigating the resolution of the conflict and bringing peace to the regions involved. Nigeria was the first country to have acted in providing troops, emergency supplies, personnel and funds in conflicts in **Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Darfur** while other countries followed later. Nigerians exceptional role in liberation of South Africa and Portuguese territories of Angola and Mozambique are well documented but hardly ever merit mention in the media. It is only corrected that Africans be the first resolve Africa's conflict but why does the messages often become distorted so that it looks as outside powers are always instilling peace and conflict resolutions in Africa.

I am somewhat concerned that there is a pathological desire to see Africa as a subordinate continent and as a consistent underachiever, and this desire could be a remnant of beliefs harping back to colonial times. Negative energy feeds off itself and creates a further profitable market if you like for similar negative sensationalist contents. For example on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> July 2008 a journalist at the Irish independent newspaper Mr Kevin Myers wrote an outrageous piece headlined "**Africa is giving nothing to anyone-apart from Aids**". Fortunately at least for common decency and justice he was reprimanded by the press council in Ireland and he and the paper had apologised and withdrawn the piece

but in many ways this was too little to late for Africans as the article made prints and thereby had editorial approval in a widely circulated newspaper in Ireland. There is no place for such reporting in what is deemed to be a civilised society as the press Council believed that the article was marked by rhetorical extravagance and hyperbole which used the failing of some to stigmatise whole societies, employing a level of generalisation that was distorting and seriously insulting to Africans as a whole. The Council also found that the article resorted to language that was gratuitously offensive and was in their view likely to cause grave offence to people throughout sub-Saharan Africa and too many Africans in particular who are now resident in Ireland. For reasons the council founds that the article breached principle 8(incitement to hatred) of its Code of Practice.

Africans need to remain strong and not fall into a cycle of passivity and a belief in the negative stories and images they are bombarded with on a daily basis. They can demonstrate this best by taking ownerships of the messages and images of Africa that are reaching the wider world. Just as any corporate entity manages its brand Africans need to make sure that the positive messages and images from Africa get exposure are seen and heard. The burgeoning African Diaspora around the world needs to be proactive in obtaining positions within the media industries and finding the positive messages and images to bring to the world.

Africans also need to be entrepreneurial in establishing media, public relations and marketing firms that can give a true and balanced view of Africa. Africa possesses outstanding talented people in music, dance, art, films, sport, literature, culture, academia, trade and business.

The image of Africa is also considerably improved by the successes of the African Diaspora and communities aboard even if they have never being to Africa as they are of African extractions and there an achievement reflects positively on Africa. In our efforts to allow positive messages and images of Africa play a predominant role it would be helpful to obtain more support of the Western Media and Africans must persevere until there message is heard. I will request that people be especially very careful of the negative imagery they display of Africa and be prudent to give a true and fair representation of Africa as very often the old adage that a picture tells a thousand words holds true.

Thank you for your time and attention.

