

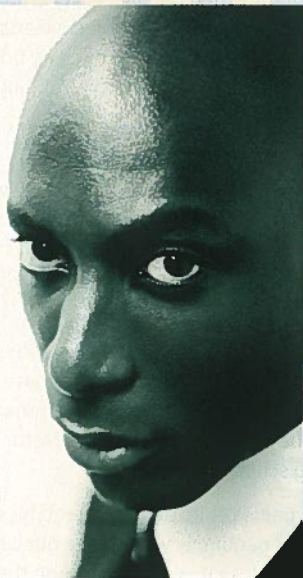
A diamond opportunity

Ozward Boateng,

Saville Row fashion designer and co-founder of Made In Africa Foundation

“The Commonwealth has about a quarter of the world’s available hard and soft resources yet still amounts to only a seventh of the globe’s GDP”

Image: Miles Warren and Ozward Boateng



Reflecting upon the Diamond Jubilee year, there are few institutions that have survived Her Majesty’s reign with such a dazzle of possibility as the Commonwealth.

A reign under which many member nations began as colonies but eventually emerged from as fast growing economies with vibrant democracies looking for partnership with their former master.

The Commonwealth has about a quarter of the world’s available hard and soft resources yet still amounts to only a seventh of the globe’s GDP.

The unutilised opportunities and technological know-how contained, yet unconnected, within its membership are unparalleled.

Yet when contemplated, it is clear that its diversity and the goodwill it maintains could be the key to a new shared appreciation of a greater Commonwealth; of a wealth developed in common.

Seven years ago, I set up Made In Africa with a lawyer, Chris Cleverly, and a Ugandan prince, Hassan Kimbugwe, to look at kick starting

growth in Africa based on enterprise rather than aid.

The prognosis for Africa was poor; UK industry was only interested in what it could get out of Africa rather than what it could put in and Africa’s leaders were not much better.

Aby supported by Andrew Young and Herbie Hancock, we co-hosted the African Union state banquet in 2007, with Ghana’s president, John Kufour. It marked 50 years of Ghana’s independence.

Chris wrote a speech, read by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, that heralded hope for Africa’s emergence into a cycle of virtuous growth: of ample food, clean water, lights that never went out, of railways across its vast expanses, of homes worthy of the name and of lives worth living.

The audience of all 53 African presidents rose to their feet and applauded, and I was hugged by many a ruler since then damned by history. And then, that was it.

We went back to the near impossible task of introducing ethical African opportunities to British businesses. And the politicians carried on as normal.

But despite them, powered by a global commodity boom and a revolution of mass wireless telephony, the sub Sahara’s GDP grew into double digits for some states (Ghana, 14 per cent last year, and Sierra Leone, 51 per cent forecast for this year).

It was clear to us that for those changes to become permanent, they had to be matched with the sustainable infrastructure development of transport networks.

Those would connect with planned urban, commercial and agricultural environments to create Growth Corridors.

The route out of continental

poverty was much more about further railways and roads than additional hospitals and schools.

According to some estimates, a one per cent increase in the infrastructure stock in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) could add one per cent to GDP growth.

That statistic is all the more profound as African countries, already growing at 5 per cent per annum, need economic growth of around 7 per cent per annum in order to halve the number of people living on less than \$1 a day.

And so we organised a conference on African Growth Corridors with the Department for International Development at which I spoke with David Miliband and Mo Ibrahim in 2009.

In particular, we proposed the opening up of a Growth Corridor by a consortium of British household names backed by the UK credit rating, along a new trans-Saharan railway from the new oil port of Takoradi in Ghana, across Burkina, Niger to the Libyan oil port of Misrata.

Opening up the Sahel and creating a \$100bn African “game changer”, lifting millions out of poverty and bringing much needed growth to the beleaguered British economy.

Perhaps it was too big a role for Britain to play alone but it would not be for an empowered Commonwealth.

Projects of global importance could be identified, unifying peoples and bridging divides, behind which the members combined \$10 trillion economy could stand.

Changing the fortunes of its poorer partners and boosting the economies of all.

Now that would be a diamond opportunity for this Diamond Jubilee.