



Toyin Akinosho

# In Cape Town, Africa Was Shy, Tentative



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Midnight revellers at the Al Hussein Mosque in Cairo, Egypt. (Photo by Toyin Akinosho)

**C**HRIS KIRUBI, THE BUSINESSMAN from Kenya, seemed quite upset. “Who is that Nigerian who is running down the continent?” he queried. “I need to have a meeting with him”.

It was a response to my comments on Africa’s expected economic performance over the next few years. Mr Kirubi was one of a six man panel on Economic Outlook, the kick-starter panel session at the World Economic Forum on Africa, Cape Town in early June 2008.

I had indicated that I had a problem with the optimism of most members of the panel on the current growth on the continent, as well as the growth prospects in the next few years. A six percent growth rate on average, I argued, was too low for a continent that’s on the starting blocks, especially if much of the growth was based on commodity prices. If you are coming from nowhere, you shouldn’t be congratulating yourselves if you were not doing 10% growth rates year -on -year for several years. China was doing far more than Africa is currently doing ten years ago when it came to global attention.

And there was no evidence of big ticket projects under construction in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa; the sort of massive power and road construction projects that ignite economies.

I have sat at conferences after conferences on and about Africa, listening to proposals and plans for such intra African projects as the rail link from Accra to Lagos, or the Grand Inga Power project, in the Congo, capable of delivering 44,000 MW of electricity, exporting power as far as Calabar, 2,000km to the south. Much of what are agreed in those gabfests still remain airy fairy. The Inga Dam, for example, has been talk, just talk for over six years now.

Mr Kirubi and I didn’t get to have a meeting. Otherwise I would have told him that, at the ministerial conference on African energy in Cairo last May, the Inga Dam project was rated “tentative”. The Democratic Republic Of Congo was asked “to come up with a framework”. Like the Kudu gas to power project in Namibia (a mining country which has not built a single power plant in 30 years), Inga is another one of the many infrastructure projects in Africa that has remained stubbornly on the drawing board.

Mr Kirubi would have responded that he considered such projects opportunities for (foreign) investors. To which I would have argued that the investment tango takes two. An example in Nigeria; if the government had not built the Escravos To Lagos Gas Line in the

80s, when it looked like an unnecessary project, we would be sitting around today debating the merits of a gas transport line.

In the last one year we have witnessed the sighs and exasperation of the officials of the Nigerian government on the proposed (that word again), Lagos To Kano rail line. Even while summits after summits are organized around the failure of food distribution in that country, the fact is that a countrywide goods transportation network is not under construction as we speak. And what about the drawn out negotiations on the West African Gas Project, expected to deliver Nigerian gas to the neighbouring countries of Benin, Togo and Ghana?. As I write, 12 years after the idea was muted, the first gas to Ghana is yet to be delivered. Meanwhile South Africa has been receiving gas from Mozambique for three years now and the project happened under three years. Egypt started supplying gas to Israel last May, less than four years after the idea was initiated. Let me rub it in; Egypt, with one third of Nigerian gas reserves, produces 28,000MW of power, almost entirely from gas. This is nine times more than Nigeria produces with a mix of gas fed and hydroelectric power plants.

If we had sat to have a chat, I would have asked Mr Kirubi if he was at the Middle East equivalent of the same gathering we were in, which had held two weeks before the Cape Town meeting. At the World Economic Forum on the Middle East in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, Arab leaders, mostly from the Gulf States, were talking about large, ambitious projects that were already under construction. They exuded far more confidence than the Africans and I sensed more of a “we are doing it already”, in Sharm El Sheikh, whereas, in Cape Town, the Africans were coming across as saying. “There are opportunities here, come and help us, sirs”.

Like many people, I have read material about the world’s leading emerging markets analysts saying that Africa is the next destination. I insist on interpreting this for what it is: they are talking about relatives. The old continent (as Europe is described by Americans) is waning in material influence; America itself has reached the peak

of its powers. The current growth of the world economy is driven by China and India. When these reach their height, capital would seek somewhere else. But it would all become speculative if Africa doesn’t build the critical infrastructure. Africa is not developing capacities in building development templates that investors, local and foreign, can simply plug into. The continent is not in a hurry to revamp its education and build the manpower that would challenge the rest of the world in project prioritization. Africa hasn’t started to see “The Big Man Who Shares The Largesse” as a possibly extinct entity. This is what I saw in Cape Town

The problem with Afro-optimism is the way its acolytes skirt around the issue. Once there are white businesspeople in the room (and they are often more in number than the hosts, whether you are in Dubai, Rio or Nairobi) African discussants start to deny that our leaders are short sighted, are not bravely confronting the demons that keep us down and are in fact, part of the problem than the solution. At the opening plenary session, where five African heads of government were arraigned together to answer questions from Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, I watched, with deep dismay, John Kuffour of Ghana and Raila Odinga of Kenya take on each other, arguing whether or not it is colonialism that’s still keeping us down.

But Professor Schwab’s World Economic Forum gave more respect to the Middle Easterners. Instead of five heads of sitting together and quarrelling with each other at a grand opening, in Sharm El Sheikh, there were three different Opening Plenary Sessions. George Bush addressed one. Saudi King Faisal addressed one and the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak addressed one.

To me, body language is important. At the World Economic Forum in Sharm El Sheikh, there were 1,300 participants. At the World Economic Forum in Cape Town, there were 800 people. While the conference hall adjoining the Resort Hotel in Egypt’s red sea riviera came across as a huge colourful feast, the mood inside the Cape Town International Conference Centre felt like a town hall meeting.