



REMARKS OF HER EXCELLENCY MRS JEANNETTE KAGAME

YOUTHCONNEKT AFRICA SUMMIT 2022



OCTOBER 14, 2022

Honorable Dignitaries,

Dear Youth from our Cherished Continent,

Despite the serious topic at hand, I can feel some hope across the youth.

Trust the youth of our continent, to bring energy and vitality to our pursuit of development. Before me, are people that make our every sacrifice of the past infinitely worth it. What a beautiful, promising youth!

I hope you are enjoying being in Kigali and will take some time to discover a little more of what Rwanda has to offer, outside of the YouthConnekt Forum.

Today, we connect through addressing a vital theme: sexual and reproductive health, mental health, and how frequently the two interact.

The Africa we want is one led by healthy, ambitious, empowered, creative, innovative, educated youth; so to get to this dreamstate, we must look at the full developmental picture, leaving no problem unattended.

I applaud YouthConnekt Africa Summit and all its strong partners, for providing such a lively platform for conversations, and sculpting cornerstones, for a united youth, in the common goal towards Africa's progress.

Dear Youth,

We are living in a decisive, transitional period. The current news will at times feel heavy, as if the world itself is coming to an end.

- A global pandemic with millions of deaths.
- Political conflict across the world, wars, displacement, dehumanization.
- Ever deepening social and economic inequalities.
- Some unkind, but pointless words spoken about our own countries; jabs that aim to challenge who we are and our dignity.
- Food crises.
- Climate change.

But, **Dear Youth**, despite the tragedies in all these challenges, it isn't the world that is coming to an end. It isn't the progress of our societies that is coming to an end.

It is the period, where emerging nations are discouraged to center themselves, and prioritise their own growth on their own terms, that is ending at last.

It is the period where unsustainable development across the world is promoted, for the sake of the wealth of a few, despite its impact on the planet, that is coming to an end.

It is the era where African youth couldn't take center stage, in influencing the future of science around the world, of technology, of education, that **already has**, come to an end.

May they be replaced by a kinder, more equitable world. One where neither resource misallocation, or political greed, or disease that our systems are unprepared to tackle, can lead to conflict and social fragmentation.

May you, the **Youth**, be granted, by all of our present efforts, the drive, determination and wellness to thrive, and build this world we desire for you, and the generations beyond you.

Dear Youth,

Despite your vitality, your energy, your optimism, we acknowledge that the problems you face are plenty, some of which are almost unknown to us.

The world's stage has become tactile screens, through which the youth is often targeted with unrealistic, intimidating standards of life and beauty, and the encouragement to engage in impulsive instant-gratification, self-isolation and at times, even individualism.

We must not let excessive screentapping, or decadent fun - these ghosts of real engagement - replace the organic joys that we once held dear.

The anxiety that they can induce, shouldn't win over the enriching pleasures that are still within our reach.

- The joys of a friendly sporting match among friends,
- Of discovering new art,
- Of a healthy intellectual exchange,
- Of voluntary community work, and the pure fulfilment it provides.

You will find that there is little replacement to truly nourishing happiness, in the form of investment in one's mind, spirit, body, and environment.

For us, the public figures whose platforms can effect change, the way forward is clear.

The statistics point to the work ahead.

Access to Sexual Reproductive Health and Mental Health Services are impossible to separate from each other.

- Survivors of sexual violence are three times as likely to experience major depressive episodes as those who have not gone through such a traumatic experience.
- Adolescence is described by some medical experts, as chronic stress exposure, due to sometimes aggressive hormonal fluctuations, rapid bodily changes and social pressure.
- In East Africa, 21 percent of young girls are exposed to mentally damaging Early Sexual Initiation; at the risk of disease and teenage pregnancy.
- An estimated 100 million Africans suffer from clinical depression, almost two thirds of whom are women of reproductive ages.
- It turns out that 1.1 billion women across the world have an unmet need for family planning services. If this number alarms you, it is because it absolutely should. We can only imagine the amount of people that, beyond unwanted pregnancies, develop diseases yearly, based on this number alone.

These statistics have a palpable impact on many sectors of our progress. For instance; Health and Education fuel each other in a cyclical fashion.

Many studies attest to this, but let's look at it on an individual level.

Look back on any point back in your education. I'm sure all of you were top of the class? Let's go with that.

Now, as well as you performed, ask yourself how that performance would have been impacted, if you had suffered from a disease that kept you from attending class, and this in the long term. How well would you have been able to absorb lessons, or to perform on tests?

Could this have held you back, from evolving over the years, at the same rate as your school mates?

The fact is: healthier lives, are typically more educated lives. To live longer and better, is to have more time to educate one's self, and a foundation of wellbeing, that facilitates processing this learning. With better education, income earning opportunities are greater, which means that an educated country has more money to invest in education.

Health and education meet where progress begins.

So how do we protect and prepare our youth?

Dear Youth, I can say honestly, that we are actively working to keep you empowered. And you can help us, by joining our nationwide and continental efforts, including those of non-governmental institutions and individuals.

Imbuto Foundation, which I Chair, started as some of you know, as a project called “PACFA” to halt the transmission of HIV from infected mother to child.

The country came a long way in this respect; **fast**. So Imbuto Foundation needed to be strategic in its expansion to remain relevant, to effect real change and have lasting impact on the entire lifecycle of the populations it serves.

- Today, we are pleased to say that our Foundation’s family planning campaigns have reached over 600,000 Rwandans.
- Our Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health and HIV care and prevention services have catered for over 300,000 Rwandans.
- 76.5% of pregnant teens in our areas of intervention, have been counselled, and provided with support to reintegrate into their societies, and reconcile with their families.

As for mental health care, we understand that the needs of youth should not just be reduced to hormonal imbalances or trauma. Some problems are structural.

How can we holistically uplift you all, so that the future is bright for you, so that less of you identify, with anxiety for the future and even depression?

Imbuto chooses to invest in youth, with time, effort and yes, financial resources.

We are pleased to have now provided seed funding, for 11 organisations in the fields of Mental health, and Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health.

We actively encourage practices, which cater to your overall wellness, **Dear Youth**, and therefore your mental wellbeing.

Our country's Carfree Day, which is taking place on Sunday (and I am inviting everyone), and the development of state-of-the-art Sports complexes, are examples we cannot wait to share with you; including our soon-to-be-launched multifaceted sports facility, a partnership between Imbuto Foundation, the Ministry of Sports, BAL and the City of Kigali, for a modern community playground.

Stay tuned for more details on this promising project aimed and targeted specifically for the youth.

Dear Youthconnekt Participants,

There is much more I could say to you, about Imbuto's work and vision, including our provision of counseling and therapy under our Health Division, and our various Educational programmes, but I hope you will find out more during this Summit.

So instead, I will take this last moment to thank you for your interest in connecting with youth from all over the continent.

These aren't the easiest of times, yet the light of dawn has already broken, and we can once again reunite physically to share these moments of necessary exchanges and interaction.

Now, **Dear Youth**, it is imperative that you be your brothers' and sisters' keepers, and ensure that everyone in need of a helping hand, has one extended to them. I trust that you will do great.

So, **Dear Friends**, as I bid you goodbye, I hope; in fact, I am confident, that we are all determined to do our part, to ensure the healthy, happy progress of our communities, nations and continent.

Valued Youth,

Thank you for having me today, it was lovely speaking with you all.

Till next time!