



Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit

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Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion

Plenary - Administrator Samantha Powers Transcript

Speaker

- Samantha Powers, Administrator, USAID

Session Transcript

Good afternoon, Fellows!

Thank you, Islam, for that wonderful introduction, and thank you to all of you for joining us from all over the continent.

I know you've heard it already, and I know you'll be hearing it across these two days, but you haven't yet heard it from me: congratulations.

I wish—as you do, I'm sure—that this event could be held here in Washington, D.C.; that you could have had the chance to spend some of your summer visiting monuments and museums, meeting your peers in person, and cheering on your countries in the Olympics.

But just like our athletes, we all have to adjust our expectations as we race to address the COVID pandemic and overcome the devastating impacts it is having on our lives, our economies, and even on the stunning progress Africa has made in recent decades. COVID is not just claiming lives, it is contributing to social unrest from South Africa to Senegal. It is exposing deep inequalities, and it is giving its cover to repressive regimes to restrict freedoms and suppress the media. That is not unique to the African continent; that is a dynamic playing out across the world.

But, as President Biden has said, the United States is committed to turning peril into possibility, crisis into opportunity, and setback into strength. We are committed to helping African nations deal with these devastating impacts. In addition to investing billions of dollars in COVAX, the global vaccine alliance, and donating hundreds of millions of vaccines to share with the world, the United States is also investing in Africa's own vaccine manufacturing capacity, so that African countries are in a position to address their own global health priorities going forward. We don't just want countries to build back—we want countries to build back better, and we are committed to doing so as partners.

I am currently on my first official trip to Africa as USAID Administrator, to Sudan and Ethiopia – two countries whose trajectories reflect both promise and peril. My first visit to Sudan was nearly 20



years ago, and it was by no means official. I was a journalist, and, in order to reach Darfur, where a brutal campaign of genocide was underway, I had to cross the border from Chad illegally. What I saw was chilling beyond words: charred villages, bomb craters, wells that had been destroyed to deny water to local villages, and a fresh mass grave – the work of a regime whose grip on power then seemed unshakeable. Not once during my time on the ground did I imagine that Sudan would one day become an inspiring example to the rest of the world that no leader is ever permanently immune from the will of their people. But thanks to a youth-driven and largely peaceful revolution, one led primarily by Sudan’s women, the country is now experiencing a fragile yet hopeful transition to a civilian-led democracy.

In Ethiopia, a long-standing partner of the United States, the case is starkly different. A country that has been home to some of the most impressive development gains and economic growth anywhere on the continent, and a regional anchor of stability and security, now finds itself mired in conflict. The government’s brutal campaign against the people of Tigray has put the country’s people at risk of a prolonged civil war and the people of Tigray at grave risk of imminent famine.

In both Sudan and Ethiopia, we cannot assume a predetermined outcome. Sudan’s trajectory is promising, but spoilers abound and people are impatient for swifter change. Ethiopia’s current path is deeply troubling, but all stakeholders there can still choose peace, pulling back from the brink. In both Sudan and Ethiopia, the United States wants to see citizens enjoy dignity, end violence, and expand economic opportunity. But too often a lack of compromise, a winner-take-all mindset, and a prioritization by some leaders of self-interest over national interest have ruled the day.

The people we count on to change the destiny of the communities and countries that constitute the continent of Africa—the people we count on to fuel peace and fuel prosperity—are you. And that is where we know our investments are best placed.

Today is a day of celebration, so I don’t mean to add any responsibilities to your plates. Each of you were leaders before this Fellowship; indeed, you were leaders before you’d ever heard the word YALI. But today, you emerge as something far more powerful: Alumni of a network that spans the entire African continent. Each of the people you meet at this Summit is someone who can help you think through an idea or scale one you already have; someone who can lift you up when you struggle and cheer you on when you succeed; someone who knows what it is like to feel the weight of other people’s expectations upon you, and to know that your own expectations create the most pressure of all; and someone who will hold you accountable, to live up to your promise, and to represent the values of this program: a belief in inclusive growth, social change, and ethical leadership.

Even though you’re finishing your Fellowship today, I want you to know that our support for you does not end when the Fellowship ends. In fact, I’m proud to announce that USAID is partnering with the

U.S. African Development Foundation to provide up to eight entrepreneurship grant awards of \$25,000 each to applicants from your cohort, the 2021 Mandela Washington Fellows.

This can be seed capital to start a new initiative or enterprise, or it can be money to help scale the great work you're already doing. Regardless, we are invested in your trajectory, and we want to continue to support your success. It is your success, after all, that will determine Africa's success.

And I don't mean Africa's future. So often when we in the West speak about Africa, we talk about its great potential—about what awaits the continent tomorrow. And when we talk about that future, we speak about you—about the nearly 800 million young people who make up the vast majority of Africa's population and will ensure it is the world's youngest continent for decades to come.

But one last thing I want to stress to all of you: You are not Africa's future – you are Africa's present. When we invest in you, we are not investing in some brighter tomorrow – we are investing in leaders who are shaping Africa's trajectory today.

You are fighting against gender-based violence and on behalf of refugees and displaced peoples, centering your work in an emphasis on the dignity of others. You are launching projects to preserve the environment, to plant trees, to help smallholder farmers efficiently power their homes. And you are fueling the engine of Africa's enviable growth – staggeringly, more than 40% of you already own your own businesses. As founders, innovators, data scientists, developers, you are creating sustainable economic opportunity.

It is sustainable because it is yours. You are not waiting for some bright future; you are out there building it today. I hope you cherish that responsibility, I hope you continue to embrace it, and I hope you know the United States will continue to support you along the way.

Congratulations again, Fellows!