



Mandela Washington Fellowship Summit

AUGUST 3-4, 2021 | VIRTUAL

Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion

2021 Keynote Address Transcript for Keynote Address

Speakers

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- Yolanda Sangweni, Senior Director of Programming, National Public Radio

Session Transcript

Uzodinma Iweala: Greetings to all of you. I had hoped by this time we'd be well out of the terrors of this pandemic, and I'd be able to address you in person, but it appears that events have overtaken us, and we find ourselves yet again relegated to this imperfect mediated, but hopefully still meaningful mode of exchange.

Before we move further, I want us to take a moment to remember those affected by Covid.

I was asked to join you today to share my story about my successes. How I came to be an author and CEO, and how my journey reflects this year's conference theme of 'Leadership for the Future: Resilience and Inclusion.'

I really hate talking about myself, so I beg your indulgence to speak at length about someone else. As the state department has much to do with our gathering here, today I would like to start with a man named Thomas Jefferson, the first Secretary of State and third President of the United States of America.

He was on the one hand a profoundly intelligent, sensitive, and sophisticated thinker, with a real love of learning and an awesome vision for the future. On the other hand, he was a real scoundrel: a racist slave owner who refused to acknowledge his own biracial children.

This, by the way, is me being nice. I have other words for Mr. Jefferson, but as we are here at the invitation of the State Department, and in the spirit of diplomacy, I shall choose my words carefully.

Here in the United States, the founding fathers--of which save for George Washington, Thomas Jefferson is perhaps the most recognized--are often considered exemplars of leadership, secular gods if you will, lionized and mythologized in ways that they themselves would have considered preposterous. We have got to the point where, for some to even mention that Jefferson was indeed a man with serious and consequential flaws, is on par with blaspheming the Lord.

I have struggled long and hard with how or why I, a black man who Jefferson saw as subhuman, addressing a gathering of Africans, who Jefferson might have bought and sold with consideration only for his bottom line, can find him not only fascinating, but also an important example of leadership,



from both his time and for our present moment. I won't concern myself with whether Jefferson was a good man; that I leave to God, or the Universe.

As to Jefferson the leader, in real-time the reviews were mixed. His contemporaries were ruthless, who actively and ruthlessly criticized his tenuous Governorship of Virginia, a position which he resigned, leaving Virginia leaderless at the height of the Revolutionary War. Even his presidency--lauded though it was for the nation-shaping Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of this country--was also condemned for numerous shenanigans and intrigues.

Jefferson's own party colleague and fellow Virginian John Randolph called Jefferson a hypocrite: a man who preached small government and anti-federalism while doing just the opposite, increasing the size and power for the federal government and the power of the executive branch while circumventing the Congress to achieve his policy goals.

So considering we have by some accounts a morally questionable man, whose contemporaries judge his effort to leadership middling to all-right--why do we remember him? What makes his leadership so compelling, both then and now?

I've thought long and hard about this, as you can tell. Not just because the history of the United States of America as a great nation intrigues and inspires me, but also because the answer, I think, has profound lessons for each of us, as individuals who aspire to be leaders.

That lesson boils down, to me, to one word: resonance.

What do I mean by resonance? If you'll permit me to digress for a moment, perhaps I can give you a clear idea of why resonance is an important attribute of leadership.

Earlier this summer, in my capacity as CEO of The Africa Center, I had the opportunity to attend a concert of the stellar Ghanaian-American musician Moses Sumney. This was a special occasion, sponsored by New York City, to mark the end of Covid restrictions, and to announce that New York was back in business. The concert took place in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, by volume the largest cathedral here in America--an imposing edifice high atop Morningside Heights, limestone towers still in construction, even after 100 years. Inside was no less amazing: vaulted arches and carved reliefs soaring over and bearing down on once queue-filled, now coronavirus-emptied space, dotted with socially distanced chairs in pods of two and three.

I took my seat, both in awe of the structure and hot anticipation of what it would mean to listen to the effect of an openly queer, black African man in a space full of religious iconography. A space that once probably did it's best to keep that very human out. And then in walked Moses, black robed and bare armed, in high-heeled platform boots. He stopped dead center, stood motionless, while the lights dimmed and we watched, all silent, all still.

And then what power, what voice. Small at first, then growing, rising, until all was full, and my body vibrated to the sound of the song. That my soul suddenly released from this off articulation of awkward appendages, floated free to join with the spirits of all others in attendance. We were, for a

moment, transfigured: ourselves but not ourselves. Individuals, but also as one, now imbued with all manner of worldly force and power. Yes, something stronger than ourselves. Something more terrific. What rapture.

This, my friends, is resonance. I know you've felt it before. As artists, novelists, even in my work at The Africa Center, this is what I strive for. This is power, pure and simple. And it can be supremely transformative, both for good and in the service of evil.

This idea of resonance has become so important to me when I teach my classes at New York University, I no longer talk about books in terms of "good" or "bad." Those terms fall flat: they lack depth and thus meaning. I think about the texts, the texts that I teach, I think about the narratives in terms of resonance. I ask my students, did this book resonate? Did this narrative resonate? And if so, why?

I return to Thomas Jefferson and this question of leadership. I would argue that Jefferson is a leader of consequence due to a deep understanding of resonance, and his mastery of narrative to affect this resonance in the hearts of, to use his language, men. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," from the Declaration of Independence, which he wrote.

In his slave-owning mind, "men" may not apply to men that look like you and me. But whether by divine inspiration or luck, Jefferson touched on something deeply resonant; not only for people of his era, but for times to follow. He was able to articulate a new narrative that shaped the movement to build one of the most powerful countries and empires in global history. And for this, Jefferson deserves enormous credit.

I'm certain that you've heard this word I just mentioned, narrative, before. What is your narrative?

We must take control of our narrative. Africa must forge a new narrative, and so on, and so on. I say this as someone whose whole career is built off of telling stories. This word has come to annoy me in recent months, because it is so disarticulated from its complexity, which renders it almost meaningless at times. And yet it is still so very important, especially for those of us who fancy ourselves leaders of today and tomorrow.

Narrative in this Facebook, Tik-Tok, Instagram-addled world in which we find ourselves has been individualized, and commoditized. It's been reduced to a base form, with our leaders as people who shout the loudest, in the hope that this bludgeoning resonates with enough people, so that they can accumulate enough money or power to accumulate even more money, and more power. Does this sound familiar? This is not a uniquely African phenomenon, as political life in recent years in the United States has shown us. Nor is it a phenomenon unique to our time. It is, however, an acute problem, at a moment in our collective human existence where the challenges we face as a species could be species-ending.

The scope and pace of the transformation today is far more disorienting and consequential than anything Mr. Jefferson and his contemporaries, with the probable exception of Benjamin Franklin, possibly could have imagined during that western European period of Enlightenment and sometimes violent global expansion.

But what is this narrative? I swore I would do everything possible from letting this devolve into a literary theory lecture. But I am a creative writing professor, so all you doctors, and software engineers, and accountants buckle up; I promise it will be quick.

For me, the most serviceable definition of narrative is, ‘a representation of a particular situation or process in such a way as to reflect or conform to an overarching set of aims or values.’ I like this definition because it moves narrative away from the exclusive and mysterious province of the creative class, away from the consumer-capitalist marketing mumbo-jumbo that is all the rage today, and fully into the public and political sphere, where we all exist.

A narrative provides a framework for our existence. A resonant narrative provides a framework that can mobilize groups of people, to take action, to transform the surrounding world. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”--Jefferson. “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also unto them”--Jesus. These are probably some of the most consequential narratives for the modern world.

But there are others which have been equally consequential; thoroughly beneficial for the western world, and devastating for us as Africans. Narrative frameworks that we have internalized, which help to govern how we Africans exist. That for some reason we are less-than, we do not deserve or are incapable of being stewards of the resources that we have. That we must be superhuman to be considered human.

These are also resonant narratives--negatively resonant narratives, that have allowed for a shaping of Africa that benefits almost no one on our great continent, save a very small elite. Oh, and of course, the whole range of external powers seeking to instrumentalize us for their own gain. Enough, I say. And to adopt and modify Mr. Jefferson's words, it is our right, it is our duty to throw off such narratives, and to provide new narratives for our future security.

Jefferson's legendary leadership rose from his acute understanding that the moment he lived in needed a fundamentally new narrative. He, along with numerous others, stepped forward to write that new narrative. He championed a new narrative of equality that ultimately had a more profound resonance than the older, and up to that point supremely resonant narrative of strict hierarchy, and God-sanctioned inequality.

There's a huge caveat here that we need to take notice of. It's clear that Jefferson did not fully buy into the new narrative of equality. On the one hand, he wrote all men are created equal. On the other hand, he owned 600 or so slaves. On one hand he sold the virtues of liberty and pursuit of happiness, on the other, for his own convenience and pleasure, he kept in bondage a teenage girl.

Jefferson's ambivalence towards his own narrative is evidenced by his personal behavior, and would later have profound negative consequences for the idea of the America he helped to birth.

There are two intertwined points I want to make related to the birthing process of new narratives. First: just because you come up with a new narrative, especially if it's resonant, does not mean other people will suddenly accept it, or you as a leader. The Americans, as we know, fought a whole war to get the British to acknowledge the tenets set forth in the Declaration of Independence. And second, and perhaps more profound, is that for a leader pushing new narratives, seeking to propagate a new resonance, the harder, more consequential battles between narratives are often fought internally.

How many here recognized Mr. Jefferson's behavior, and the people currently in power across some of our countries? The most obvious is when someone preaches anti-corruption on one hand, and on Tuesday, conspires with his--and sadly, it's mostly his--cronies, to enrich himself at the expense of his own people. This happens when the old, externally-generated, internally-accepted narratives of African worthlessness battle the narratives of African abundance. Instead of dealing with the dissonance, those in power look for individual escape, often with disastrous implications.

We as young leaders have to be acutely aware of this challenge, because it is the unconscious, internal struggle of individuals or groups seeking to drive change that can often, as Mr. Jefferson shows, derail movements to build a truly better future.

Pulling a little harder on this strand of thought allows for an illustration of what narrative-driven leadership is about. This narrative is comprised of three equally important parts, only one of which is what you say. The others are what you as a leader do, and with whom you do it. And to be very concrete, considering all of the lyrical waxing that I've been doing, I see three vaguely correspondent leadership tiers here. A leader has the ability to scan the world and create a resonant narrative; effective leaders create resonant narratives that inspire collective, transformative action; great leaders create resonant narratives that broaden our understanding of what is possible, that inspire people to act and achieve that possibility, and also expand our understanding of who is included in the sense of possibility.

I know that Jefferson was a leader. I am 100 percent certain he was an effective leader, though again, some of his contemporaries may say otherwise. Haters.

But was he a great leader? I don't know. To me, his failure to see the humanity in black people, and to extend this era-shaping narrative of equality to us, when so many of his contemporaries could, is a glaring flaw, and perhaps a bridge too far. But again, this is instructive.

I recognize that none of my reasoning might follow as scientific--but it works for me, and they asked me to speak, so take it or leave it. Effective leaders are not necessarily good people, but great leaders almost always are. Effective leaders can accomplish amazing things, both for good and for evil; great leaders almost always work on the side of good. And for those of you who want to become ministers or presidents--political systems often breed leaders who are very effective at maintaining existing narratives, and oftentimes these leaders lose the ability to perceive when resonance has petered out.

Great leaders often materialize outside of political systems, and create new narratives that bring more people into the political sphere. Jefferson's record is mixed in this sense: he did proclaim an ideology opposed to the status quo on the one hand; on the other, he was an established figure extraordinaire, upholding the most exclusionary of social and political mindsets. I find him very confusing.

But enough of Jefferson, and more about you, and the leadership you will need to exhibit in this crazy, crazy world. Some advice, since you asked. If you want to be an effective leader, you need to have a real

understanding of where the narrative needs to change. This means, first and foremost, you need to be a receptacle for information. You need to read widely, and provocatively; and, you need to listen widely and provocatively, as well. By this I mean, you need to open your eyes and your hearts, and you'll find that people not only tell you their concerns about the old narratives, but they will also tell you their hopes for a new world. And it is in the space of hopes that resonance occurs.

A great leader listens with his or her heart, or their heart, because a truly open heart allows you to broaden your understanding of who is included and what's possible. And broadening the coalition of participants and the building of possibility generates a lasting, inclusive change that we humans definitely need to survive the next couple of centuries.

I know I don't need to tell you where narratives must shift; many of you are already working very hard in this area. The fact that you are all here is proof that you are already leaders--effective ones, at that. Congratulations.

The goal now is to continue learning what it takes to be even more effective. But over and above this, is to cultivate a sense of greatness. And that isn't so much taught as it is practiced. Maybe some people are born with a truly open heart and open mind, but for many of us--certainly the person for whom this program is named, Nelson Mandela--that process takes years.

I realize I've gotten this far without saying much about myself, and I'll probably finish having said very little. That is by design, because I don't know that my circumstances have much to say. I was born on third base, much of my life has been conditioned by being the child of some very influential people, offered every opportunity in the world. As my grandfather always used to remind me, much is expected from those to whom much has been given. My journey--all of our journeys must be towards an open heart, because the project ahead of us is so much about the connections between people, and between narratives. This requires an open heart, and an open mind, to be inclusive.

Jefferson was not necessarily inclusive in his thinking; he had a very narrow, concrete idea of who was included in the sense of possibility created by his narrative. But you, we, young Africans, have the chance to be fully inclusive in our thinking. That's where greatness lies.

I'm not exactly sure how to do this; only certain that I must, in my personal journey. That we must. Imagine if Jefferson had operated with a truly open, inclusive heart. Imagine what a country, how much greater America would be.

I've been pretty hard on the old man, and no apologies here. That said aside, the shock of criticism coming from a black man, I don't think he'd be all that offended. Plus, being dead and all, he's got better things to do. And you all have better things to do, as well, rather than listening to me pontificate.

But before I go, I want to leave you with one last quote from Jefferson. Uttered in his first inaugural address, delivered March 4th, 1801. "Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high minded to endure the degradations of the others, possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation, entertaining a due sense of our equal right to the use of our own faculties, to the acquisitions of our own industry, to honor and confidence from our fellow citizens, resulting not from birth, but from our actions and their sense of them, enlightened by a benign religion, professed indeed and practised in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude and the love of man, acknowledging and adoring an overruling providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here, and his greater happiness hereafter; with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people?"

Jefferson may have been writing about the United States, and he may not have been addressing us, but these words resonate with me. Indeed, it sounds like he could be talking about our beloved Africa. "With all of these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and prosperous people?"

Jefferson answered the question for a nascent United States in his next sentence; but I'll let that question hang, and ask how will you answer this for our countries, our continent, our world? That's where leadership lies.

Thank you.

Yolanda Sangweni: Thank you so much, Dr. Iweala, for those inspiring words. We will keep them close to our hearts.

And I want to open it up to some of the questions that some of the fellows have for you. Myra Labiche, who introduced you, she's from Seychelles, Dr. Iweala she has a question for you, to begin our Q & A session.

She begins by saying, "I believe that Africa has so much potential, and we are far from reaching even half of our true potential. In terms of development, we have an amazing people, natural resources, rich traditions, and yet we have a deeply rooted culture of corruption, power struggle, violence, poverty, and poor health systems, etcetera. All of this persists to overshadow the continent. The question is, do you feel that the next African generation will remove such barriers to the development of the continent, and justify why you believe such a belief."

Uzodinma Iweala: Goodness gracious, that is a question.

Yolanda Sangweni: These are the fellows.

Uzodinma Iweala: These are the fellows. Look, I think--I'll say two things. I think we're in a lot of trouble if the next generation doesn't, and therefore I believe that the next generation will. But I also think that it is important to consider, you know, again, some of these narratives and the frameworks with which we're operating from.

You know, all of these things exist--they're not awesome at all. At the same time, they're not everything that defines us. So you can dwell in these more negative narratives of corruption, and deprivation, and whatnot. Or, as all of you are doing, you can focus on the abilities you have as leaders to shift the conversation, both inside yourselves as well as within the cohorts and sets of people that we associate with. And that's where the change lies. So, I am super optimistic, and I really do believe that a lot of these things can be pushed to the side, and that we can develop a more perfect society--or societies, I should say, in each one of our countries and communities.

I think we should not be under the illusion that this is something that just happens. As I mentioned, when you fight to change a narrative, people who are invested in the old narrative--and even you, sometimes, being invested in that old narrative, will fight yourselves. And that struggle is intense, supremely important to engage with. But also let's not forget also it's a struggle, something that we're going to have to really really fight very hard to overcome, and push to the next level that we're looking to go to.

Yolanda Sangweni: Thank you for that. Adaora Oji, another fellow, made a comment in the chat. They write, "it's so common for leaders to be hypocrites and the first defaulters of change." What are your thoughts on that?

Uzodinma Iweala: Yeah. I mean, again, I think it is--it's an unfortunate thing. But you know, I go back to this idea of this internal struggle. I think, if you look at some of our independence leaders--you know, the folks who shaped some of the nations that we live in, post-colonialism--some of these people had really profoundly important ideas. And again, some of these people had profound internal struggles that really actually lessened the strength of their ideas.

I think Jefferson is no different, and I used him for that example. This is somebody who had profoundly important ideas about equality, but in many ways was a total hypocrite when it came to practicing that, by owning people.

Our leaders--whether you're talking about some of the ethnic divisions privileging one group over another in our countries, or some of the talk around corruption--that internal struggle, that tendency to hypocrisy is a very human trait, and it's something that we have to be aware of. But again, it's about how do people come together to 1) create really strong, resonant narratives about a new system that we can build, and 2) how do you create systems or structures that help to mitigate the impacts of the hypocrisy that we all carry. That's what's important, that's why it's about systems and not just necessarily just individuals. How do you construct a large unit, which helps to guide and govern us all.

Yolanda Sangweni: Thank you. Maletsie Letsie of Lesotho writes, "I hear how Dr. Iweala talks about effective leadership and great leadership, and how difficult it is for a great leader to easily venture into

politics. How can great leaders be helped to transition easily to become effective leaders, in order to function in politics, while still holding up their greatness?”

Dr. Uzodinma Iweala: That’s such a good question, a difficult one. I should say that I really think that great leaders are fundamentally effective leaders. I just also think that politics, by its nature, is in many ways about preservation of the status quo. And the thing about a great leader is, you know, preservation of the status quo necessarily excludes people, and I think a great leader is somebody who fundamentally wants to bring more people into a conversation and expand the scope of who benefits from the work that we’re all collectively doing.

Going back to Nelson Mandela--who I would consider a great leader, but I also know gets mixed reviews in many ways--it’s something that is very much a timed thing. You don’t just wake up--and maybe some people do, I don’t know, Jesus or whatever--but you don’t really wake up and all of a sudden, you’re great. I think you have to learn this idea of openness. I think we all have to learn this idea of openness. And we all have to learn because we all have blind spots, we all have things that we’d like to push to the side, that we would like to exclude, and that causes complications.

I think, it’s--how do you cultivate that sense of self and that sense of openness, and then move into the political sphere? I think there are people who have done it, I think there are people who have done it and who are then perhaps changed by the political sphere. I think there are people who have done it for a period of time and then the narrative has changed, and they don’t realize that.

It’s hard for me to give a concrete answer to that, not being a politician myself and not having tried to make that move. Maybe one day, I’ll be able to tell you thoroughly. But for right now, I think it is that how do you 1) try and cultivate a really strong sense of self that will help to guide your decision-making when you move into that sphere. And that’s something that I think we’re all capable of doing, even if it’s very, very hard.

Yolanda Sangweni: I think many of us, Dr. Iweala, are hoping that you will become a politician. But that’s another topic.

I have another question from Bohlale Buzani from South Africa. They ask, “the greatest leaders in history were most effective in their prime youth years. However, today, there is a prevalent narrative that suggests that young people from Africa lack substance or character to lead; therefore, they should be beneficiaries, because it takes time for leaders to develop. My question for you, Doc, is how do we then shift this narrative to one that views young people as co-creators to one that views young people as co-creators?” [2:03:44]

Dr. Uzodinma Iweala: I think a couple of things. First and foremost, I totally disagree with this idea that somehow the youth of our continent are somehow, somehow feckless and unconvincing. I find that to be completely wrong.

I also at the same time have been one that says that sometimes, when you look at the age of the folks on the continent who are in positions of power, we say that they’re very old, and that’s not the case elsewhere in the world. And then, you think about the fact that here in the United States, when

you kind've take a look at some of the people who are in power, we've got sort of everybody holding positions of leadership over the age of 70, pushing 80. So, it's not just an African thing. I think this generational conversation exists wherever you are in the world.

So, I want us to take a moment to remember that. That that tension, that struggle between the way that youth perceive themselves as leaders, and the way that an older generation perceives the youth, is a constant and enduring thing over generations, time immemorial and across all geographies.

That said, I think the thing here is to 1) figure out how to push people of our generation, or generations coming behind us, into more positions of prominence, and give them the megaphones to help change conversations. I mean the thing about arguing with people who hold power is that they hold power, and they can do a lot to stop the argument, where you can't. And that's something that we have to be very strategic about, that's something that we have to be very, very strong about. Which is making sure that; however we need to do it, even when people might ban social media or ban platforms for conversation, that the young folks actually find ways to step up, and share the ideas that will transform the world that we live in.

Because the thing about that older generation of septuagenarians, and octogenarians, and in some cases nonagenarians, is that those folks are going to die soon. And I just put it that starkly. The world that they are trying to preserve is a world that benefits them, and not a world that is, again, open, and provides possibility for us.

And I should say that, again, that's not every single person. I don't think age necessarily means--just being old doesn't mean that you aren't focused on the future, or focused on expanding the conversation to include younger generations. But unfortunately, I think sometimes, like now, we have a set of folks across the continent and in other parts of the world who are really focused on consolidating for themselves at the expense of a younger generation. That has to change. And that change is a constant, but it can be frustrating to watch, and the pace can be frustrating.

But I think a lot of the youth across the continent are doing commendable things to step up. I mean a lot of you guys are out here, really making noise, trying to push that change, even if it is frustrating. And I think everyone should take a step back and pat themselves on the back. But don't let up.

I also would say that, if you think about so many of the revolutions, whether on our continent or if it's America or whatever--you know, Thomas Jefferson was in his 30s when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. A lot of those folks who are quote-unquote "founding fathers" are pretty young. You know, that should provide some inspiration to anybody around the world.

The same is true for our own independence leaders. A lot of those folks were pretty young, and you know some of them are still alive today, which will tell you how young they are. You can put away the bad that some of those folks have done, and just look at it as an example of what courageousness, and stepping up with a voice to shape the world that you live in, means. And work that, even if some of the other stuff that has been done isn't so great.

Yolanda Sangweni: Thank you so much. From Kenya, we have a question from Stanley Ratemo: “do you think the narrative regarding corruption in African leaders can change in this generation?”

Dr. Uzodinma Iweala: Yes, I do. I also think that the narrative around corruption is an interesting one. Because I think we often think about it in very stark terms. We often think about it as a, and I probably shouldn’t say this, but I think that we have to be honest about the systems that we’re dealing with. And this is true, again, everywhere in the world.

People, only when it comes to Africa do, we somehow, somehow, think that we have to just immediately and permanently eradicate all corruption completely. And if you look at other political systems, you’ll find that these folks managed to figure out a way to kind’ve weave and limit corruption within their systems. But corruption is still part and parcel--when we talk about humans being hypocrites, we talk about humans having moral failings. That will always exist. We will never live in a pure world. So, the issue is not necessarily completely eliminating it. The issue is figuring out a way to make sure that it doesn’t go off the guardrails. And to make sure that you can do--and I know I shouldn’t be saying this, because we’re on a U.S. government, but I think we have to be realistic.

Like, to fight corruption, if you try to say we’re going to get rid of it entirely, that’s an impossible goal. But if you say, we’re going to try and provide structures within the way that our government operates so that we can hold people accountable--somebody’s going to find a way to steal money, but you equally have to find a way to bring that person to account, and make sure that it’s public, and it’s fair. That people can see that there are consequences for corruption. But this idea of eliminating it entirely is unrealistic. And I think that we need to make sure that our conversation, for each of our societies, is not just about eliminating. It’s about forming ways that are locally-inspired to deal with the corruption that exists.

Yolanda Sangweni: Wonderful. So, our last question comes from Cameroon. It comes from Alice Besong asks, “what future do you see for young African leaders?”

Dr. Uzodinma Iweala: Far be it for me to start prescribing things for anyone. But I think that the futures I see are challenging, because I think that the environment in which we find ourselves today--the pandemic, climate change, etc--are challenging. But what I really do see is I see a set of folks who if given the chance, and who also take the chance to step up in these areas and hopefully reshape the conversations and also provide some solutions to some of these things.

I mean, I look at a lot of folks on the continent working in what has now become the rage, people saying things like ‘oh, the circular economy,’ like it’s something super sophisticated--forgetting that we’ve gotten people all across the continent who are practiced in the arts of recycling, in the arts of reduce, reuse. How do we make sure that those folks are pushed up as representatives, the best and the brightest of who we are?

We’ve got folks who are writing and creating profound narratives in the creative space, about who we are, about African futures, about what we want to see. I think, again, it’s about privileging those folks. You know, I feel like the future is bright, and I feel like this change will happen, and I feel that there’s a new generation of folks who has the mindset and the ability to say that 1) enough is enough for the

things that don't work, and 2) Africa is the center of the world. Like our continents, our countries are points to develop the solutions for a lot of the challenges that we may not have created, but will impact us. And it's going to be hard, and it's going to take a while. We don't have awhile, but it will take some time. And it's going to hurt. But I think as African young folks, as African leaders, the solutions for the issues that we're going to face as a globe are going to come from you guys, from us. And that's just my confidence, that's my inspiration.

Yolanda Sangweni: Wow. Thank you so much. And before you leave, Dr. Iweala, I also want to toast you, because you are an African leader that we can all sort of look to. Doctor, author, and now CEO of The Africa Center. I mean, you are an example of the ways that we can use our talents to further and shine the light on the continent and the diaspora. So, thank you so much.

And if you're ever in New York, anyone, please go visit the Africa Center in Harlem. Before you leave, I just want to ask if you have any departing, concluding thoughts, Dr. Iweala?

Dr. Uzodinma Iweala: Well, first I want to say thank you, Yolanda. You're far, far too kind. And the admiration is mutual, completely. And I do want to extend the invitation to anyone who has the chance to travel to New York: come up to the Africa Center, come see us. We'd love to bring you into our community and our home.

And really, it's just to say that I'm so inspired by all of you, the work that you're all doing, and the ways that you're approaching changing this world that we live in. God knows that we need it, that we need you, and we need you to be leaders of this, and the next generation. Thank you so much for having me.

Yolanda Sangweni: Thank you.

So, Fellows and guests, I hope you were as inspired as I was. Thank you to Dr. Iweala for his words of support. We will now have a 10-minute break. When we return, you will see the first of the Ignite talks, and have an exciting policy discussion addressing the U.S.-Africa policy relations. Please join us back on the main stage at 10:35 [a.m. EST]. Thank you.