

The Backbone of a New Rwanda

H. E. Paul Kagame
President of the Republic of Rwanda

Kigali, Rwanda

Recently, I spoke to a young person on the streets of Kigali. I asked him, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” He said he wanted to go and start his own business and move into the private sector. This is wonderful news. I felt like I knew this young man by the height of his ambitions. It’s very exciting and interesting that people are beginning to think like that, and indeed, it shows the shifting in mindset away from when people thought the only jobs they could do were with the government.

In the old Rwanda, everyone looked for a job in government, for the benefits and the security. But nowadays they are thinking the private sector holds the promise of a better life for their family and themselves. I think broadly and more meaningfully it’s better if they join the private sector because there are more opportunities, opportunities that have higher pay back than simply working for the public sector. I believe that this is a huge step forward for us, given our history, given the whole history of Africa.

Rwanda is a nation with high goals and a sense of purpose. Our vision is to create prosperity for the average Rwandan citizen. We are attempting to increase our GDP by seven times over a generation, which increases per capita incomes by almost four times. This, in turn, will create the basis for further innovation, creative thinking, and a host of progressive human values: interpersonal trust, tolerance, and civic mindedness; thus, strengthening our society.

We know that this is a tremendous challenge given our status as a land-locked nation emerging from conflict, with few natural resources, little specialized infrastructure, and low historic investment in education. But in fact, we have reasons to be optimistic: we have made a clear and explicit strategy to export based on sustainable competitive advantages. We sell coffee now to the most demanding purchasers in the world for very high price points; our tourism experience attracts the best customers in the world and Dubai World invested two hundred and thirty million dollars to participate in our tourism vision; and market research reveals that perceptions of Rwanda tea are improving at a rapid rate. In all three cases, we have learned to integrate a complex customer experience with product development. This has resulted in wages in key sectors rising at more than twenty percent on a compounded annual basis. While this is

encouraging, we believe the road to prosperity is a long one.

We understand that achieving prosperity requires a metamorphosis of our economy. We are fundamentally changing our economy to move away from a dependence on agriculture towards a knowledge economy. The Rwanda of tomorrow will be a regional hub for Eastern and Central Africa.

Rwanda must become a world-class competitor in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), logistics, financial services and education. This metamorphosis will significantly increase average wages and help us graduate into a middle-income nation.

How can Rwanda join the ranks of the more successful developing countries, those that have transformed themselves in a single generation?

It is increasingly clear to us that entrepreneurship is the surest way for a nation to meet those goals, and to develop prosperity for the greatest number of people. In fact, government activities should focus on supporting entrepreneurship not just to meet these measurable targets, but because it unlocks people's minds, allows innovation to take place, and enables people to exercise their talents.

In all people you find different kinds of talents, and entrepreneurship is about harnessing that and making sure that it takes them to another level in terms of their personal development. So for us in government, it is essential to develop the private sector, and to create an environment that enables entrepreneurs to flourish. We have much more to do, and it will take time. We are focused on lowering the costs of electricity, access to finance, building roads, and training managers.

We decided after our liberation struggle, that if we could develop economically, then there might not be the basis for conflict. To achieve this, we needed to create our own strategy. Many leaders are overly influenced by the multi-lateral institutions and by bilateral donors. We have had the strange benefit that, early on, not a lot of nations wanted to give us foreign aid, and we turned that into an advantage.

We insisted that Rwandans would create their own strategic vision. We began by seeking to change some of the thinking that is common with many of our people. And that is the belief that aid will come and solve everything, or that people will come from somewhere else and do what we ought to be doing for ourselves.

It very simple, nobody owes Rwandans anything. Why should anyone in Rwanda sit back and feel comfortable that taxpayers in other countries are

contributing money for our own well-being or development? Why shouldn't we be doing what we're able to do and raise ourselves up to higher standards and achieve more and better and get out of this poverty that we find ourselves in. It has to start from the mind. And that's what we have been working on over time. Once the mind gets correct, the rest becomes simple.

This is the reason why we are focusing on creating an entrepreneurial mindset in every Rwandan. This mindset begins with a sense that one's life, choices and action matter to the whole country. It begins with a clear understanding that business as usual is not acceptable. Everyday, every Rwandan from all walks of life has a unique opportunity to change our country for the better.

The Rwandese entrepreneurial mindset must be characterized by ambition, moral purpose, respect and openness to new ideas, and self-determination. This entrepreneurial mindset must inform our actions whether we are in the private sector, government or civil society. This mindset must inspire our entrepreneurs to aim ever higher. It must compel our civil servants to reinvent government. It must encourage our civil society to work for the greater good.

Ultimately, this mindset holds the key to our prosperity, our development and our future.

We do appreciate support from the outside, but it should be the support for what we intend to achieve ourselves. And no one can assume that they know better than us, what is good for us. They should also start to value the fact that we really want to be the ones to decide where we go and what we do, and that we are capable of defining what we want to achieve.

One thing we have decided is that competition in an economy is good for poor people. I think competition is good everywhere. Competition is compelling because it stimulates people and unleashes people's capacities and potential.

The most interesting part I see in competition is that it gives people a feeling that they are valued, have meaning; that they are as capable, as competent, as gifted, as talented as anyone else. Asking our citizens to compete is the same as asking them to go out there into the world on behalf of Rwanda, and play their part.

On the other hand, shielding them is something that travels deep in the mind. If you allow a process where some people are shielded from the forces of competition, then it's like saying they are disabled.

Our job in leadership is to provide opportunities. We must use all the means available, institutionally, to do the things that will help people develop their

capacities, their potential, their talents, and then allow them to compete.

I consider entrepreneurship to be, simply, the backbone of a new Rwanda. It is, indeed, my hope that others will know Rwanda, like that young person to whom I spoke on a Kigali street, by the height of our ambition for the private sector, and our commitment to achieve it.