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A rising tide of servant leaders is transforming Africa

By Kristin M. Lord

While it is hard to tell from the media coverage, 20 other countries besides the United States will be holding presidential elections in 2016. More than half of them will be in Africa. Not all of these elections will be free or fair, and not all of them will lead to transformative change. Nonetheless, they are illustrative of a wider tectonic shift in leadership that is now underway across Africa, at every level of society.

Africa is the youngest continent on the planet, with 200 million people aged between 15 and 24 years. And, by 2040, Africa will have more than 1.4 billion people of working age – more than China or India. Yet its leaders are disproportionately old. As of 2015, Africa's ten oldest leaders had an average age of 78.5. In contrast, the leaders of the G7 countries have an average age of 55, even though their populations are rapidly aging.

This massive demographic shift is both a cause and effect of a continent not just in transition but in transformation. Sixteen years into the 21st century, Africa's narrative is shaping up to be very different than those of earlier centuries. Africa is, right now, richer, healthier, safer, more peaceful, better educated, and more democratic than anytime in modern history. Substantial challenges persist, to be sure, but overall Africa is on the move – and, mostly, on the rise.

Across Africa, there is an explosion of entrepreneurship, artistic creativity, cutting-edge design and scrappy tech-savviness. There are three cell phones for every four Africans; and, in Nairobi, the Silicon Savannah, it is easier to pay for a cab by cell phone than it is in New York City. Business incubators are popping up at a steady clip, and more than half of Africa's 49 countries now have a start-up type tech hub that is providing critical digital and business infrastructure to a burgeoning class of technologists. And these new entrepreneurs and business people are not just enriching themselves. In visits to five African countries in the last several months, I witnessed among young people a stunning commitment to positive social change, as well as economic growth.

This optimistic perspective on Africa does not deny the Continent's all too many challenges. But it is worth amplifying, if only to counter the incessant and disproportionately negative barrage of images we see of military coups, al-Shabab attacks, child soldiers, Ebola victims and Boko Haram kidnappings. Global investors seem to agree. According to the global accounting firm EY, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in sub-Saharan Africa grew seven percent last year, making the region one of only two regions globally that saw growth

in FDI. As importantly, that FDI is shifting from extractive industries to consumer-facing sectors, which reflects the economic reality of a growing middle class.

Africa's transformation stems not just from shifting demographics, but from changing conceptions of leadership as well. Young Africans are turning from a past dominated by leaders like Sani Abacha, Idi Amin or Charles Taylor, and instead are embracing the transparent and hopeful model of "servant leadership" embodied by Nelson Mandela. They are also bringing leadership to every dimension of their societies. Across the continent, young Africans are taking control of their futures and doing the same for their towns, cities and countries. They are rejecting clientelism, corruption, greed, authoritarianism and fear-mongering; and, instead, they are innovating a distinctly-African form of leadership that draws its energy from what Mandela calls the "endless heroism of youth."

Nowhere is this emerging tide of new African leader more manifest than with the nearly 2000 young women and men from every country in sub-Saharan Africa who have been selected as [Mandela Washington Fellows of the Young African Leaders Initiative](#) (YALI) since 2014. They are a microcosm of Africa at its best with established records of accomplishment in promoting innovation, inclusion, diversity and openness in their organizations, institutions, communities, and countries. They are start-up entrepreneurs, environmental champions, LGBTQ advocates, paralympians, journalists, media content providers, AIDS activists, judges, city council members, mental health pioneers, mayors, and members of parliament -- to name just a few. The 2016 Mandela Fellows convened in Washington, D.C. earlier this month, meeting with U.S. congressional, administration and civic leaders, culminating [with a spirited and inspiring Town Hall with President Obama.](#)

Mandela Fellows are exemplars of servant leadership, the main characteristics of which are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. For example:

- Satir Bahati of Rwanda lost his sight to glaucoma in 2003 and had to give up his dream of being a surgeon. Nevertheless, he went on to create [Uwezo](#), which advocates for and trains disabled Rwandans, helping them find internships and ultimately permanent jobs.
- Munya Dodo is a Zimbabwean television director and producer who created [TVYangu.com](#), an award-winning video-on-demand and content aggregator, which is curating some of Africa's best social media content, in spite of the crackdown recently issued by 92-year old President Mugabe.
- Mutaru Muqthar from Ghana is combatting terrorism by working with youth groups to counter violent extremism and radicalization.
- Sherry Tumusiime not only launched one of the best e-commerce sites in Uganda ([www.thebabystoreug.com](#)), she is also CEO of the Zimba Group, a small business software company, and ZimbaWomen, which seeks to provide full tech support to women entrepreneurs.

In just three years, the Mandela Washington Fellowship has already begun to yield a dramatic return on investment. It is effective, cost-efficient and personally and professionally transformative for the participants. And it is emboldening an entire generation of young Africans to reinvent what leadership means by giving them both hope and the practical tools they need to reshape a continent that is at a critical tipping point. Africa is beginning to show

the world what the new face of servant leadership could look like, and it serves us all to recognize and encourage this movement.

Dr. Kristin M. Lord is President and CEO of the international education and development organization, IREX, which implements the Mandela Washington Fellows program in partnership with the U.S. State Department and USAID.

The views expressed by authors are their own and not the views of The Hill.