



REMARKS OF HER EXCELLENCY MRS JEANNETTE KAGAME

FLEX 2024 Plenary



NOVEMBER 12, 2024
KIGALI

Honourable Ministers,

Dear Victoria Kwakwa, World Bank Vice President for Eastern & Southern Africa

Dear Etleva Kadilli, UNICEF Regional Director for Eastern & Southern Africa,

Development Partners and Technical Experts,

Distingués invités,

Je vous souhaite la bienvenue au Rwanda! C'est pour moi un réel plaisir de m'adresser à vous aujourd'hui sur ce thème pressant et existentiel qui répond à l'avenir de notre continent.

I am thankful to be here today.

- On this second Foundational Learning Exchange,
- On this year of Education - as declared by our African Union;
- On this final stretch towards the targets of the Continental Education Strategy for Africa,

It is both humbling and encouraging that Rwanda would be entrusted to host this important forum and participate in these essential discussions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I believe that the caliber of senior officials, education and finance experts, agents of continental development and pan-African champions for the 2063 Africa We Want, must be fully appreciated, for their contribution to the body of knowledge, and for the wisdom they share with us today.
- Therefore, I will not attempt to rob these experts of an opportunity to discuss, for one, the progress thus far in achieving literacy, numeracy, and essential skills for elementary-aged students across the continent. Neither do I wish to occupy too much of the space that they have been aptly allocated, to raise concerns on the challenges that remain in Foundational Learning, notably in learner psychosocial health and well-being, and the accompaniment of children with special needs.
- However, **Honourable Guests**, I am compelled to remark on the current landscape of education – particularly foundational education - across the world, and more specifically, on our continent.

It seems, I worry, that while literacy rates have improved in all of our countries, while recognition of the vital importance of early-childhood education, appropriate nutrition for infants, psychosocial support,

and toddler and child development has significantly increased, a problem persists, threatening to worsen over time.

- **Ladies and Gentlemen**, reading and comprehension (of simple text), as has been pointed out by the Rwandan Ministry of Education, is still an issue for 9 out of 10 of children aged 10 and below, in the majority of African countries.
- What a loud alarm bell this statistic rings!
- Let us picture this child aged 10, who cannot read properly, write properly, count properly; a child whose environment is not fertile for the development of strong personal qualities, either.
- And let us go even further still in discomfort, and picture **a society**, where the majority of children do not develop soft values like kindness, empathy, respect, flexibility, patience, integrity, and teamwork through foundational learning - preventing them from building healthy relationships, navigating social environments, and contributing positively in personal and professional settings.
- We are living in times that are, let us admit it, pulling parents in all kinds of directions, away from their core responsibility to raise families. Our children are offered up to the education system, and seldom do we engage with educators, in an attempt

to create a thread of communication so that there is a sustainable continuity of care between school setting, at home, and in the community.

- How can we tap into the expertise of our educators, to make them active stakeholders in the full context within which the child is evolving? How do we put the child at the center of all interventions during their foundational learning age so that their individual needs are catered for? A collective conscience across all caregivers will help us develop protection mechanisms, while at the same time, eradicating any and all handicapping factors. This re-thinking of our approach, I believe will yield more targeted policies that address the issue at hand in a more holistic manner.
- For we all know that **education (most especially foundational education) is the bedrock upon which skills are built.** And skills must be adapted to changing times. The skills that were needed for the stone age, agrarian or industrial ages are not all relevant for today's technological age or tomorrow's AI revolution.
- How we educate, train and skill our young people for the future of work and development, is critical. This will include the policies we put in place, the agility of our curricula to adapt to the pace of changing times, the quality of teacher training, equitable resource distribution, parental and community

engagement, as well as the ability to build - in the formative years of a child's development - those precious qualities of character and confidence.

- In an age where the human capacity for humane discourse, creativity, and intellectual curiosity are all increasingly threatened, by highly performant but sometimes regrettably applied artificial intelligence....
 - *What is to become of the future young African's mind, if devoid of essential knowledge?*
- Should we fail to strengthen foundational learning and critical thinking, increase primary education completion rates, and to allocate more resources to education, specifically to the more financially-vulnerable learners, what is to be the long-term cost to the youth of this continent, their skills development, employability and overall welfare?
- And in turn, what is to be the psychological and security toll across Africa, if the citizens of, I believe, the most promising continent on earth, are denied the essential tools they need to succeed and self-actualize, as the world **finally** makes space for new players in global development?

- Within our individual and shared capacities, we must pledge to integrate every inspiring insight, and all valuable foresight shared today, in our efforts for improved Foundational Learning in our country and on our continent.

Esteemed Guests,

- Yes, Rwanda has come a very long way: Prior to the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, the local education system was exclusionary, divisive, underfunded, fragile, and both inept and inapt. At that time, higher education was dominated by one institution, the National University of Rwanda. The system graduated merely 2,000 students in three decades between 1963 and 1994. In contrast, as of 2019, there were 40 Higher Education Institutions in the country with a total enrollment of 86,140 students and growing. This was a steep hill to climb, and we must recognize the political will that has fueled this investment, prioritizing the education of a previously severely illiterate population.
- It is said that *“Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope and hope breeds peace”*. For Rwanda, peace will always be the ultimate goal, and therefore, diligent investment in education is for us, a “no-brainer”. As is often expressed in old

wisdoms, education cultivates character and confidence, which in turn inspire the optimism through which peace thrives.

- We commend our government for many efforts geared towards the betterment of the whole ecosystem, from the students, the teachers, the parents, and community.

Honourable Guests,

- Imbuto Foundation, which I am honored to chair, launched a pilot Early Childhood Development project in Kayonza District over 10 years ago, serving 5 areas key to child development namely brain stimulation, health, nutrition, hygiene, positive parenting, and child protection.
- The programme has now expanded to 14 additional districts, and Early Childhood Development (ECD) has become a national and policy priority with the launch of the National Child Development Agency (NCDA).
- With the conducive policy and planning framework set up by the Government of Rwanda, and collaboration of invaluable partners, our pilot project has translated into, a decade later, over 138,000 children and their parents having received services, through our 16 model ECD centers, and home-based services. These numbers are on a constant, yet rapid rise.

Honourable Guests,

- It is my deep conviction that solid early education will become all the more vital, as time advances. Achieving sustainable development will require our children, and their own, to wield every available ounce of intellectual, social and emotional intelligence, to ensure that education and growth actually translate into progress for all.
- My parting words on advancing foundation learning, **Dear Guests,** are a wish that:
 - our budgetary allocations for education,
 - our policy co-ordination,
 - our efforts for collaboration,
 - our unrolling of training programmes for educators and caregivers,
 - our parental and community engagement,
 - our educational infrastructure development,
 - The agility of our curricula in rapidly changing times,
 - And, lastly, our solemn accountability to our pledges,
- Will all match the level of urgency that our ambitions require.

- Africa will only achieve a desirable 2063, if we build solid roads and highways today, for tomorrow's youth to drive our continent fast and surely, to its rightful destination. May quality education, at foundational level and above, cement our path to the continent's development.
- Pour conclure, Excellences, Distingués Invités, je vous remercie de votre attention et vous souhaite de profiter pleinement de l'hospitalité de notre pays.
- Puisse Kigali, notre chère ville, vous donner envie de revenir plus souvent pour de tels échanges fructueux .
- I thank you for your kind attention!