

**Van Leer Lecture  
By Akwasi Aidoo**

**“Social Justice and Philanthropy in Africa: Transforming Power Relations and the Balance of Stories”**

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**Introduction**

It gives me great pleasure, and it is indeed an honor, to be asked to give the 2010 Van Leer Lecture. When my long-time colleague and good friend, Lisa Jordan, invited me to give this lecture named for one of the most intriguing industrialist and philanthropist of the last century, a series of questions immediately crossed my mind: Why me? I asked. What has packaging got to do with me? Why now? How do I get around all the air travel complications caused by the Iceland volcanic eruption?

But these questions were quickly answered by a great Van Leer quote that I picked up many years ago. Apparently, each time someone on his staff would highlight any obstacle to an innovative idea or change, Bernard Van Leer would quickly respond: "You mustn't tell me it can't be done." I have actually collected quite a few Van Leer quotes in recent years. He once reportedly said to his son, Wim: "If they ask you for money, give. But never get involved." In 1956, he reportedly wrote to someone who wanted to meet him:

*“In your letter of July 10<sup>th</sup> you ask to see me and I will be pleased to receive you, providing it is not your plan to ask for money, no matter how worthy the case may be! During latter years, I have become both*

*embarrassed and disgusted by the number of people who ask to see me and just as soon as they are in my neighborhood they ask for money.” (A Legacy for Humankind, Van Leer Foundation publication, 1999, p.17)*

Of course, he always gave generously. One of his favorite responses to fundraisers who made a compelling case for support was: “See what you can drum up yourselves, then I’ll double it.” (A Legacy for Humankind, *ibid*)

In the end, I asked myself: What can I say about such a fascinating philanthropist? And then I reminded myself that this is not really about Bernard Van Leer or packaging. Well, it is about packaging of a different sort. It is about the African social justice narrative. It is about the African condition and philanthropy’s response to it.

So, I decided to talk about Africa and to focus on three main points. The first is the obvious point that Africa does indeed have daunting social justice challenges. The second point is that the conventional way we often think about Africa is one of the most challenging social justice issues confronting the continent and its people. On this point, I’m going to be very critical, for criticism, just like charity, must begin at home. Finally, I want to address the complicated question of what is wise to do in Africa and how to do it for lasting change.

## **The Challenge of Africa**

Undoubtedly, Africa has more than its share of daunting problems. It is a huge, diverse and rich continent that is bedeviled by exploitation and bad governance. As a result, over 700 million of the continent’s people live in abject poverty and under dictatorships. Many of Africa’s largest countries are often crisis-ridden, such as Nigeria, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo where the International Rescue Committee estimates that 5.4 million people have died from what it calls the “World’s deadliest documented conflict since WW II.” Africa has some of the most intractable conflicts in the world: Sudan (since 1955), Western Sahara (since 1976), and Somalia (since 1991). Over 300 million people live in conflict countries, and the two rape capitals of the world are in Africa (South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo). Africa also occupies a highly marginalized position in the global economy and polity, and exemplified by the fact that it contributes less than 2% to global trade, due to trade barriers and subsidies, especially in the Global North. Finally, although Africa has the lowest level of external aid in the world (at a meager \$19 per capita), overall such aid has a deeply negative influence on Africa.

At the core of these daunting challenges and problems are the hugely unequal power relations that characterize the continent’s landscape. I will briefly highlight three key aspects of this. The first is patriarchy, which is at the source of women’s oppression, male supremacy, devastating civil wars, violence against gay and lesbian people, female genital mutilation, and other unjust practices.

The second platform of injustice is gerontocracy. Just consider this simple fact: Half of the ten oldest presidents in the world are Africans, even though it is the continent with the youngest population. The first prize, of course, goes to an African: Robert Mugabe. Typically, an African president will stay in power until death and, unless replaced by his son, the chances are that he will be followed by another old man. Until recently, the longest-serving president in the world was African: Omar Bongo; followed by Muammar Gaddafi. Why is gerontocracy a problem? Because it stifles the innovative and daring spirit that comes from young leadership. Gerontocracy is also at the base of most of the age-related injustices in Africa, such as child exploitation. In Senegal where I currently live, there are 50,000 street children, called Talibés, whose childhood are daily wasted begging and severely abused (see Human Rights Watch Report: "Off the Backs of the Children: Forced Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal, April 15, 2010).

Finally, I must highlight the role of the big powers in spurring injustices in Africa. We are a continent with centuries of oppression, starting with slavery through colonialism, Cold War manipulations, global corporate exploitation to the current role of China, which is now the white elephant in the room. To my mind, China's role in Africa is a cause for concern. To be sure, China has been engaged in Africa for a long time. Many "friendship stadiums" dating back to the 1960s testify to this. From the 1960s through the 1980s, China armed and expressed solidarity with many of the continent's liberations movements, and during the Cold War between, China was often seen as a powerful non-aligned partner of Africa. Today, China is heavily investing in Africa's infrastructure in return for much-needed natural resources. This exchange seems reasonable and fair, for after all who can be against infrastructural development in Africa? But we must temper any such conclusion with the understanding that a road is not a road is not a road. It all depends on whether the road is constructed merely for resource exploitation or for equitable development. Worse, we must bear in mind that China supports virtually all of Africa's repressive governments and dictators from El-Bashir in Sudan to Mugabe in Zimbabwe to Nguema in Equatorial Guinea to Afewerki in Eritrea and more. We should not forget that, in the heat of the post-election violence in Zimbabwe in 2008, China's response was to send a ship-load of weapons to support that country's dictatorship. Thanks to the resistance of the dock workers of Durban, the courageous stand of the Zambian government and the mobilizing efforts of the International Transport Workers Federation, the ship was unable to unload the reported three million rounds of ammunition, 1,500 rocket-propelled grenades and 2,500 mortar rounds to be transported through South Africa to landlocked Zimbabwe (BBC Report, *China may recall Zimbabwe weapons*, April 22, 2008). Two years earlier, in November 2006, African leaders from forty eight countries went to Beijing for the Sino-African summit during which agreements were signed and deals struck for "strategic partnerships" that many African democracy and social justice advocates find problematic (*The summit in Beijing*, Stephen Marks, *Pambazuka News*, 2006-12-14, Issue 282).

In addition to the above challenges, I want to highlight another dimension of Africa's social justice challenge. It is the way we think about and approach Africa. On a global scale, the "balance of stories" is heavily weighed against Africa. In fact, one can argue that the way we think about and approach Africa is at the very core of "the African problem."

### **The Way We Think About Africa**

Centuries ago, Africa was the "dark continent" in need of a civilizing mission. Today, that image has not changed. At the turn of this millennium, a special issue of the renowned *Economist* magazine dubbed Africa "*The Hopeless Continent*" (May 13<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> 2000 issue). Less than a year later, it followed this with another issue headlined "*Africa's Elusive Dawn*" (February 21<sup>st</sup> – March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2001 issue). In a 2003 New York Times article, Daniel Bergner had this to say about Africa:

*"It (Africa) is a continent suspended, trapped somewhere closer to the ancient than to the modern, a continent where so many visas lead to places that feel utterly lost, not only for their wretched poverty and cataclysmic civil wars and devastating histories of exploitation and neglect but also for the primitive understanding their people have of all that happens in their world, an understanding that may, along with the wretched and the cataclysmic and the devastating, allow for little in the way of modern development." (New York Times magazine of October 26, 2003: "The Most Unconventional Weapon," by Daniel Bergner).*

As a result, Africa's own positive narratives are hidden or below the radar. Its humanity is often in doubt. The imagination of its children never quite makes it to the matrix of our calculations for their salvation from facial flies and protruding bellies. Africa's humanism constantly begs for salvation. Africa is a mere victim with ample bodily scars to prove it. Africa's soul is sore and troubled and pitiful. Africa is hapless, helpless and hopeless. This is the overriding image, and it's an image not shared only by some non-Africans; otherwise, how does one explain the absolute lack of faith and hope constantly demonstrated by our thieving dictators who stack away billions in foreign banks when our children are dying from malnutrition? And, how else can we explain the following views by two renowned African-Americans?:

*"Whenever I was with an African, we would both be uneasy... The terms of our life were so different we almost needed a dictionary to talk... They disgusted me, I think." (James Baldwin quoted in Talking at the Gate: A Life of James Baldwin, page 109. James Campbell. Penguin Books, NY, 1991)*

*"I dislike this idea that if you're a black person in America then you must be called an African-American. I'm not an African. I'm an American. Just call me black if you want to call me anything." (Whoopi Goldberg, in Irish Times, 25 April 1998. Quotes of the Week)*

Or this quote from a young Ivoirien man called Madness:

*“Africa is misery. Africa – really – it’s hard, hard, hard. People of good will are interested in us. But there are others, with means, who aren’t interested at all. Because Africa – it’s a continent of hell.”* (Quoted by Gorge Parker in his letter *From Ivory Coast* in The New Yorker of November 3, 2003, Gorge Parker too ends his letter *From Ivory Coast* with a quote from a young man called Madness:

All these fly in the face of a continent that helped lay stones on the foundations of our world as Agostinho Neto captured so well in this evocative poem:

### **Confidence**

The ocean separated me from myself  
while I forgot myself over the centuries  
and here I am  
reuniting space in myself  
condensing time  
In my story  
is the paradox of the dispersed man

While the smile shone  
in the song of pain  
and hands built wondrous worlds

John was lynched  
his brother whipped on his bare back  
his wife gagged  
and his son continued in ignorance

And from the intense drama  
of an immense and useful life  
came certainty

My hands laid stones  
on the foundations of the world  
I deserve my piece of bread.

This is a call to justice. It is also a call to innovation and lasting positive change: *“From the intense drama / of an immense and useful life / came certainty / My hands laid stones / on the foundations of the world / I deserve my piece of bread.”*

Hence, I will stress the point that the way we see a people and approach them when we seek to help them says everything we need to know about whether or not our help will really help or harm them.

### **How Should We Approach Africa?**

I will start with another Van Leer quote that Lisa Jordan shared with me a few days ago, this time from another of his son, Oscar Van Leer. He said: *"You have to be clever to make money and wise to give it away."*

Now, what is wise in Africa? I will call it the ABC basics: The "A" is for aggregating our philanthropic efforts. It must all add up; if it doesn't add up, please don't do it. And, please don't work alone for working together is the only way we can go to scale. Also, please avoid what I have termed the syndrome of "projectitis." It is the syndrome that comes with donors focusing on a series of projects with very limited time-lines, perhaps a nice report at the end, and absolutely no lasting legacy left behind. As we say back home, we need forests not just a few scattered trees that easily wither away

The "B" stands for business approach and business behavior. As the German philosopher, Friedrich Von Hugel, once famously put it, *"The golden rule is to help those we love to escape from us."* Another colleague, the former CEO of Resource Alliance, Simon Collins summed it all up this way: *"If the rhetoric of civil society is to really mean anything funders need to start investing in helping non-profits become financially independent and sustainable."* We also need to keep an eye on business behavior for far too often all the good work we support can be wiped off in no time through the actions and/or inactions of the business sector (the example of human rights struggles in the Niger Delta of Nigeria readily comes to mind).

Finally, the "C" stands for change; that is structural change, not charity. As Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, *"Philanthropy is commendable, but it must not cause the philanthropist to overlook the circumstances of economic injustice which make philanthropy necessary."* Hence, we must always ask ourselves: "What innovative and lasting change can our philanthropic efforts help to produce?" We shouldn't help Africa merely out of our charitable instinct; we must help Africa achieve structural transformation, always paying attention to empowering disadvantaged and marginalized people to speak for themselves as well as getting government policies changed for the public good. The "C" also stands for civil society. We must be careful not to damage this vital sector, especially at its lowest and popular levels, with irresponsible funding. Increasingly, I shudder when I hear over-enthusiastic funders race to "strengthen" grassroots civil society organizations, for it doesn't take much to know that roots don't thrive when they are unearthed. Much of what keeps ordinary Africans and their communities going is civil society that is not donor-funded. How do we responsibly relate to that as philanthropists? That is a question we must constantly ask ourselves in Africa, even if the question is never easy to answer or might often lead us to inaction.

### **What Are the Strategic Pillars?**

First, let me start with a little story: In the early 1980s, a group of us (radical academics at the University of Dar es Salaam) went to see President Nyerere about the struggle for social justice in Africa. We wanted to know where and how to begin “the long march to freedom”, and he told us the story of the baby millipede that had just been born and was asking the mother: “Mama, Mama, which foot should I move first.” The mother said, “Baby it doesn’t matter, just move.” The lesson here is that it doesn’t matter where we start or what our program entry point is, so long as there is movement (in this case a social movement) and so long as we give each foot/person a chance to move as well. That’s the essence of social justice philanthropy.

Second, philanthropic institutions can do a lot to help tilt the balance of stories. One lever or pillar for doing this is by promoting the development of local philanthropic institutions. Fortunately, over the past ten years, there has been a phenomenal growth in philanthropic institutions in Africa. The philanthropic spirit in Africa is alive and well. Many years ago, Africa was the weakest link in the global chain of philanthropy. Not anymore. Our time has come! African philanthropy is actively engaged in addressing some of the most intractable social justice challenges facing the continent. In the year 2003, at the height of the genocide in Darfur, the first philanthropic response came from a group of South Africa philanthropists who together mobilized nearly \$1 million in humanitarian assistance for the victims of that genocide. In Zimbabwe, the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe is playing a major role in helping to cushion the impact of that country’s crisis on the vulnerable communities in Matabeleland (and the Midlands), where as you know over 20,000 people were massacred in the mid-1980s by the security forces of the Mugabe government. In Kenya, Burundi, Mozambique, and Liberia, community foundations are actively engaged in helping to address the challenges of post-conflict reconstruction and democratization. Everywhere on our continent, African foundations are busy at work, and some of them are represented here at this summit: Kenya Community Development Foundation, African Women’s Development Fund, Uthungulu Community Development Foundation, Urgent Action Fund-Africa, Foundation for Civil Society in Tanzania, and TrustAfrica, which I represent. My plea to you is to work with them, support them, learn from their leadership in the field, for that’s the only way we can change the balance of stories in favor of African agency and against the misguided idea that Africa is a hopeless continent. In any case, the best help we can ever give a people is to help them strengthen their self-help capacity.

A third area of work is the arts and culture. As Chris Abani recently aptly put it, “*African artists and writers are the curators of our humanity and dignity*”. And yet the arts and literature in Africa receive far too little philanthropic attention. That should change, for we know that all humans (including Africans) do not live by bread alone. For Africa, the arts and literature have two powerfully redeeming qualities: First, they serve as a mirror to see the injustices, and second they are a source of imagination of a better future. In her delightful book, titled *Living by Fiction*, Annie Dillard makes the poignant point that fiction is the only discipline that seeks to interpret the world in terms of human meaning. James Baldwin makes the same point in his short story, *Sonny’s Blues*: “*For while the*

*tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all of this darkness."*

In addition, we must have the courage, flexibility and wisdom to support social movement building and cutting-edge efforts to advance the rights and conditions of children, the empowerment of women, and environmental justice. There is certainly no paucity of exciting African initiatives and organizations working for these critical social justice goals. They include the African Child Policy Forum which has produced a pioneering continent-wide study and advocacy tool for child-friendly policies; the 10,000 Girls Organization and Tostan in Senegal which provides once-in-a-life time opportunities for young girls to emerge out of poverty, and the African Women's Development Fund which is engaged in creative efforts for a vibrant African feminist movement, and Tostan (based in Senegal and works cross-nationally). One of TrustAfrica's flagship initiatives, titled "Enhancing Women's Dignity in Africa", is also note worthy. Coordinated by a dynamic woman, Sandra Zerbo, from Burkina Faso, this initiative seeks to transform gender relations of power across seven African countries where violence against women and women's political participation leave much to be desired. This is an innovative initiative to watch for it portends many insightful lessons for how to achieve a more democratic gender relation of power in a continent bedeviled by patriarchy through movement building.

Another pivotal pillar is the African Diaspora. If Africa is to reduce its marginalized position globally, we must seek to connect with the Diaspora and help building global alliances for African initiatives, and the Diaspora is a good vehicle for delivering on this. There is now more African presence globally than at any time in history, and this is one of the most inspiring developments of our time. Africa has come out of seclusion, so to speak. It is embracing the world with confidence, and without complexes or anger. To be sure, the brain drain is an issue, but we must bear in mind a statement I recently heard from an African scholar (Francis Nyamnjoh), who said: *"Not every brain that is drained goes down the drain."* There is now an exciting potential for building global alliances for Africa in ways that we have never seen before. This is, for example, one of the most important levers for achieving appropriate US foreign policy towards Africa.

Finally, we need more philanthropic support to promote more international exchanges, understanding and solidarity among civil society organizations and leaders, human rights activists and pro-democracy advocates, especially among young people. The value of this is captured by Jack Mapanje in this poem written soon after his release from prison in Malawi under the Banda dictatorship:

#### **On David Constantine's Poem**

Your poem for Irina Ratushinskaya  
On your birthday has reached these  
Putrid African prison walls it  
Was probably not meant for;

What cheer distant voices must bring  
Another poet crackling in the Russian  
Winters of icicle cells.  
Yet even in this dungeon where  
Day after day we fester within  
The walls of the tropical summers  
Of our Life President  
And his hangers-on, even here,  
What fresh blood flushes  
When an unexpected poem arrives,  
What fire, what energy  
Inflames these fragile bones!  
Indeed we have the verses in common,  
Notwithstanding  
The detention camps  
The laws against poems  
The black or white  
Traitor or patriot  
Binaries;  
But secure in your  
Voices of solidarity,  
We'll crush the crocodiles  
That crack our brittle bones.  
Do not falter then, brother,  
Do not waver, dear brethren,  
But craft on the verses  
Whose ceaseless whisper resonates  
Beyond the Whitehalls of our dreams!

### **An Invitation**

In closing, may I, on behalf of my beloved continent, invite you all to visit Africa at least once a year? We have sunshine in abundance. In most parts of our land, the hospitality is legendary. One of the best ways you can help Africa is to understand it and its many people, and to become a passionate friend of the continent. And, if you love soccer, this is definitely the year to visit Africa! The World Cup is coming to Africa. So come to Africa and we will say to you: Welcome! Karibuni! Terranga! Welkom! Marhaban! Akwaaba! Mwaiseni! Ingileni! Emukela! Here's to Africa! Thank you!