

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

by

First Lady Jeannette Kagame

at

the Meridian Global Leadership Summit

on

The Rise of Global Health Diplomacy

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Kigali, Rwanda

Ambassador Stuart Holliday, CEO and President of Meridian,

Eminent guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Warm greetings from Rwanda!

It is with much enthusiasm that I join you today, at the 2020 Meridian Global Leadership Summit, on the “Rise of Global Health Diplomacy”.

What an opportune time, to bring this important discourse, to the global table when precisely, a multi-level, multi-faceted, multi-sectoral and multi-skilled approach, is the only way to face this daunting, unique challenge, that is COVID-19.

What began in December 2019, as a localized health pandemic, quickly spiraled into a global developmental catastrophe, setting countries miles behind their national development goals, with the unlikelihood of full recovery within, the stipulated Sustainable Development Goals decade of action, which ends in 2030.

Ten months down the road now, there are – according to WHO statistics – some 39 million confirmed cases of COVID-19, including over 1 million deaths globally. A sobering reality.

Never before, has a disease had such, a negative impact on the global economy.

The UN Economic Commission for Africa (UN-ECA) estimated earlier this year, that COVID-19 could cause Africa's economies to shrink up to 2.6 percent, potentially pushing 27 million people into extreme poverty.

Given that Africa is demographically the world's youngest continent, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has especially, exacerbated the problem of youth unemployment.

Moreover, it has been estimated that the incomes of informal workers in the region have dropped by 81 percent.

The political and social ramifications of COVID-19 are equally grave.

Distinguished participants,

COVID-19 is one of those health pandemics, that rapidly transcend national borders, and affect multiple sectors.

It goes without saying then, that global health diplomacy at a time such as this, is an imperative.

We need to build national, regional and international solidarity to overcome, the unparalleled impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced us all, to reimagine old structures and has accelerated the need for innovative diplomacy efforts.

By leveraging partnerships among governments, the scientific and research communities, private sector, innovators and civil society, we can promote the sharing of evidence, and best practices to fight the pandemic, revamp our economies, build trust, and strengthen the spirit of solidarity in these very trying times.

For example, let's take the case for regional collaboration in Africa.

When the first case of COVID-19 emerged in Africa, institutions within the African Union, convened to study the policies and actions that the majority of the member states had followed.

Under the leadership of the Africa CDC, and others, several member states developed common approaches to handling the pandemic.

In addition, taskforces were established at regional level, to mobilize financial and technical resources, as well as to mitigate social and economic impact.

This collaboration allows for the sharing of information and technological expertise across our borders.

On the international scene, it is important to note that new levels of diplomacy, and international solidarity have been forged, in the fight against COVID-19.

For instance, the **COVAX**-COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access, being a multilateral initiative, relies on negotiation among engaged partners to provide a safety net for all countries across the globe.

Led by the WHO, GAVI, and other players, COVAX has committed to provide vaccines to all countries regardless of ability to pay, to cover 20 percent of their population.

So far, 172 countries have joined this global initiative.

Allow me, distinguished delegates, to share as requested, some perspectives and experiences based on Rwanda's response to the COVID-19 by highlighting our efforts in health, education, technology and climate change.

COVID-19 has taught us that the health sector, can no longer solve health issues alone.

Healthcare professionals, all across the world, have been the most exposed, yet they remain at the forefront, of fighting this novel pandemic, with insufficient knowledge of its full dimension.

In Rwanda, our strategy from the onset, was to lean towards a coordinated, and multi-sectoral approach, in order to stand a worthy chance, at containing this fast spreading pandemic.

Thus, the government set up a National Crisis Committee of key Ministries, and a COVID-19 Joint Task Force to guide our preparedness and response plan.

When the first case was reported in Rwanda, in March 2020, a 6-week countrywide lockdown was immediately declared.

Over the following weeks;

- there was an early enrolment of thousands of agents engaged in contact tracing, mass testing was conducted in labs across the country,
- Localized lock-downs,
- Proper care in treatment centres which were kept separate from hospitals in order to avoid contamination of both patients and healthcare workers.
- And gradually, so as not to overwhelm the healthcare system, a home based care approach was introduced, through which, community health workers monitored the symptoms of people quarantined in their homes.

Over the course of the pandemic, the standard prevention procedures were enforced: social distancing, wearing of face masks, frequent hand washing and sanitizing, as well as moving from total lockdown to curfews, and back depending on the patterns.

The country activated its traditional solidarity mechanism in distribution of essential food item provisions, and PPE, to vulnerable families to prevent community transmission.

In each village, four community health workers, are trained to monitor and raise awareness on COVID-19 and ensure adherence to the preventative measures.

In addition, treatment centers are using high-tech robots to administer temperature checks, monitor patient status, and keep medical records of COVID-19 patients.

By the way, should you plan to travel to Rwanda, be ready for similar robots stationed at the airport to welcome you!

In keeping with the principles of global health equity, testing of contacts, especially high-risk groups, are offered at no cost.

On the other hand, voluntary testing or mandatory testing such as for incoming visitors, are provided at a modest cost, set by the Government.

As a result of these anti-COVID-19 measures, 96% of close to 5,000 positive cases diagnosed have recovered, while a total of 34 patients sadly passed away.

Throughout this period, we have experienced, invaluable collaboration when navigating the complex supply chains of testing materials and PPEs. This helpful collaboration was true of both global and bilateral partners.

Here, I would like to acknowledge the US government for contributing to our national response, by providing PPEs and other critical equipment.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentleman,

According to the United Nations, the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption, to the education system in history.

Teachers have been forced, to devise new ways of learning through, digital access and other distant learning resources, and students have had to adapt to this “new normal”.

Although this situation has increased digital disparities, especially for the most vulnerable, it has opened doors to new opportunities, that hold great promise for a leapfrog into the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), with the potential to reboot economies and fast-track development dividends.

Rwanda’s early digital strategy and programmes, have proven invaluable in setting the stage to multiply our efforts towards upgrading technological skills and categorizing Rwanda as an e-government.

Now, we know that the Coronavirus, as previous SARS before it, are zoonoses.

We can therefore anticipate that, unless we reverse the destructive course of climate change, and its negative impact on biodiversity, other pandemics will follow COVID-19.

In Rwanda, we believe that we cannot be healthy in an unhealthy environment, but also that we are not an island unto ourselves.

Which is why, in October 2016, the world came together in Rwanda and agreed on the landmark “Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol”, with the ambitious target to eliminate pollutants and harmful gases used in cooling systems.

To date more than 105 countries have endorsed the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this juncture, let me turn to the work of the Foundation I chair.

Imbuto Foundation — Imbuto meaning ‘seed’ in our Kinyarwanda language — was created in 2001, out of a need to support families affected by HIV and AIDS, following massive rapes during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Formerly known as PACFA, our focus at the time, was on mobilising resources and medical care desperately needed, to ensure that families affected could live their lives with dignity.

As we gained ground in the fight against HIV/AIDS, PACFA expanded its scope to embrace more programs in the areas of health, education and youth empowerment.

In 2007, it officially became Imbuto Foundation to reflect this evolution and strategic expansion.

Over the years, we have worked closely with communities, and by doing so, we are responding to the most urgent needs of our people while adhering to continental and global goals such as the African Union Agenda 2063 and the UN SDGs.

Today, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Imbuto Foundation continues to pull resources, and align its efforts with the Rwandan Government's socio-economic priorities as a contribution to the national response to COVID-19.

Distinguished Audience,

The astronomical speed in which, this virus has engulfed our world, and wreaked havoc in our societies, is a sober reminder that we are all interconnected beyond space and geography.

We have also gone from the question of where this evil is coming from, to how to overcome it together. Looking back at 2020, I can confidently say that it's been a year filled with numerous lessons.

Even though, many lives were lost, many communities around the globe, have shown incredible resilience in the face of extreme adversity.

The constant fear of the “other” carrying this invisible lethal enemy, is omnipresent but noble hearted essential workers have kept our societies moving.

As a New York Times bestselling author Dan Buettner wrote in his book Blue Zones, one of the core elements for longevity was human relations and the ability to connect in person with one another.

Henceforth, the global pandemic has robbed us of an essential pillar of our humanity, which is the longing we all have for connecting face to face with each other, and made us realize that, its consequences are not just health issues.

This virus has hindered, our basic capacity to fully enjoy our normal human connections. We owe it to ourselves, and to future generations, to mount a vigorous collective fight in order to restore normalcy, and hope for the future of our humanity.

We can achieve this together, and we will look back with pride, on how in the face of a global pandemic, we stood up as one and overcame this formidable enemy.

I would like to conclude my remarks by quoting this wise and timeless African proverb:

“If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together.”

I thank you for your kind attention.