



**Address  
by the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at a seminar on Africa  
University of Iceland  
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Distinguished guests

It is a welcome initiative by the University of Iceland, the Nordic Africa Institute and the Icelandic International Development Agencies to organise jointly a conference on “Youths in African Cities” along with a seminar, and to invite an impressive team of scholars from that continent to pass on their knowledge and vision, to take part in discussions on the most urgent interests of the African population and how the West can be of assistance.

In many respects Africa has been the forgotten continent. The death throes of the Cold War, the labour pains of the new world order, the loosening of the grip that superpowers and power blocs once held, and then the struggle in recent years against terrorism – all this served to direct our attention elsewhere. Europe, East and West alike, America, Russia and other pillars of the 20th-century world order were preoccupied with their own problems.

Africa tends to enter the agenda through news reports about dictatorships or military coups. Occasionally there was coverage of poverty and the growing health problems, especially the spread of AIDS, the disease’s terrible consequences for women and children. The abolition of apartheid in South Africa and Nelson Mandela’s leadership in the development of democracy and reconciliation, in their day, were nevertheless bright spots.

Now, however, there are many indications that Africa’s time has come. Influential leaders from many parts of the world have added a new tone to the dialogue. The recent visit to Africa by the British Chancellor

of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, testifies to new emphases by the wealthy nations; in fact, the UK government has decided to make African issues a priority in the forum of the G-8.

It is in the spirit of this new attitude that we launch these discussions and seek advice from African experts as to what could be of most use.

We Icelanders have various things in common with the nations of Africa despite the geographical distance and differences of climate that separate our worlds.

For centuries Iceland was the poorest country in our continent, a society of farmers and fishermen who battled with hardship, epidemics and the merciless forces of nature. The infant mortality rate was high and for centuries our population remained stagnant.

We were subject to colonial masters; had no rights. All power was in the hands of a foreign king and absent rulers. The campaign for independence became an urgent task and a young generation of intellectuals, many of them living in the capital of the colonial power, took the lead. Admittedly our campaign for independence was more peaceful and did not take the same toll in human lives as the conflicts in Africa, but it was nonetheless difficult for us and lasted for a hundred years.

We had to seek the material for progress from our basic livelihoods on land and at sea, secure a new economy based on fisheries and agriculture, make our natural resources the driving force behind an era of welfare and improving living standards.

This identity that we feel with Africa, even though much is also different and remote by comparison, is an ideal subject for discussions of what Iceland can provide in particular to Africa in the coming years.

In my view, four fields are especially relevant:

- 1) Our experience in fisheries, the success we have achieved in utilisation of marine resources, has been and will continue to be a part of our contribution to development and economic improvement in Africa. We can cite various examples, some of them successful and others less so, but the profitable utilisation of

marine and inland water resources is undoubtedly a major matter of interest for many African countries.

- 2) Geothermal resources are much more widespread in Africa than has generally been thought and Iceland's experience, knowhow and technology could be useful here. In many ways geothermal resources are a more economical source of energy in poor countries than large-scale projects, harnessing of large rivers for hydropower or huge oil facilities and nuclear power stations. Geothermal energy can suit the needs of a handful of houses, a village or part of a city, depending upon the circumstances at any time, and projects can be tailored to the development needs of different areas.
- 3) The health service, training of staff and organisation of activities, the best arrangements for networking of medical services in rural areas and at hospitals in larger cities, are another area where we can do much better. The fight against AIDS and other illnesses must be a priority and here both our experience from our successful battle against a tuberculosis epidemic in the past and the achievements of new Icelandic pharmaceutical companies in recent years can prove useful. Health services are perhaps one area in which our cooperation with Africa can be most radically transformed in the years to come.
- 4) Public administration, systems of government, the development of democracy, an institutional infrastructure for meeting modern requirements, transparency and responsibility, decision-making based on integrity and professionalism which is at the same time forward-looking and fruitful – all these are tasks that we ought to put on the agenda, and here Iceland's experience in evolving an independent state from a colonial background could be useful. Also because many African countries are small or medium-sized, while much of the theoretical and practical modelling for public administration is designed more for the largest countries such as the US, UK, Germany and France, and are less relevant for addressing the challenges of smaller states in Africa. Here, however, the Icelandic experience can serve as a roadmap.

I have named four areas but obviously many more deserve consideration and the seminar here today is an ideal forum for examining these issues in depth.

Proposals and advice from our African guests will be welcome in this discussion. We have gathered here not least to learn from them, find out their visions for the future, acquaint ourselves with the course that they consider most favourable.

Africa is a fascinating continent in many ways. We have discovered this on our visits, visits that have enriched our stock of experience and encouraged us to take further action. It is an enchanting vocation to be able to help the people of Africa on a larger scale.