





*KIGALI*



Kigali, Rwanda

**K**igali is the capital of Rwanda, which experienced a tragic genocide in 1994 before its transformation into ‘the Singapore of Africa’. Vet-turned-politician **Dr Aisa Kirabo-Kacyira** became Mayor of Kigali in 2006 and Governor of Eastern Province in early 2011. Under her leadership, Kigali was recognised for its cleanliness, greenness, safety, sustainable and affordable housing initiatives, and pro-poor job opportunities. In October 2011, she became Assistant Secretary General and Deputy Executive Director of UN-HABITAT. Here, she reflects on Kigali’s experience as well as urban leadership in today’s world.

Rwanda symbolises the incredible resilience of the human spirit. I often recall the words of President Paul Kagame who, on reflecting on the state of the nation and in part Kigali City in 1994, observed, “It was like completely a dead city, you could see devastation in the faces of the people... It is something I can share with others, that if we can do it, if we can come out of the situation we were in 17 years ago and be where we are today, nobody should despair.”

### A Focus on People

The lesson from Rwanda is: put people first, get the systems and structures right and the rest will follow. But this is not to say that it is easy! As a former Mayor, I can tell you that it can be a very lonely job! On the one hand we are the most visible and therefore accountable official on any project. Yet we often lack critical financial and human resources. This is equally true in both developing and developed countries, as we have seen from the recent spate of natural disasters showing us that even a mega-city like New York is vulnerable. Partnerships are key given the complexity and demands of urbanisation on cities and their leader today. Financial and human resource mobilisation is both an obvious priority and a never ending task.

Leaders need to create enough space in their busy schedules to strategically think

- 01 Vendors and customers at a thriving market.
- 02 An auto-stop hand washing unit in a school.
- 03 Orderly and well kept streets and buildings.
- 04 Pupils learning to use laptop computers.

not only *what* is to be done, but more importantly *how* it is to be realised. Keeping the focus on the real day-to-day needs of the urban poor is essential. Without this discipline, the benefits of urbanisation are lost and social inequalities deepen. It is often helpful to stop and ask: “Are our decisions adding dignity to people’s lives?” Leaders are called upon to listen, learn and share – something that is easily said but difficult to practice given the demands and pressures they face. Last but certainly not least, as leaders we are called to be mentors whose values and character are consistent with what we say. We must invest not only in our communities but equally in our institutions and the people who make them work.



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### **Invest, Deliver, Unleash**

For Rwanda as a landlocked country in the heart of Africa, investment in infrastructure has been key, but so too have been investments in learning, education, skills development and a willingness to embrace change while remaining true to our heritage.

Certainly the progress that has been made has required concerted efforts and hard choices. It required visionary leadership – leadership that inspires and builds trust and understanding by listening to its people and building consensus from the ground-up. But government must also work to deliver basic services to its people and put in place policies that unleash the potential of both communities and the private sector. As Mayor, I led a number of important initiatives not only to make Kigali a world-class city, but equally to transform the relationship between the city and its people.

Just as citizens have a right to expect quality services provided in a healthy and liveable environment, they must be prepared to play their part – because government can never do it alone. Initiatives like improving garbage collection, a ban on plastic bags, improving public transport, promoting security and safety, beautification of streets and pavements and slum and housing upgrading were only possible because communities supported these initiatives. Beyond the immediate benefits, these projects played a key role in helping communities become more cohesive and harmonious. I am pleased to say that the City was awarded the UN-Habitat Scroll of Honour in 2008 in recognition of these achievements, and I am often humbled and honoured by the interest shown in the Kigali experience.

### **Rural-Urban Integration**

I was born in a village surrounded by family and many good neighbours. As a child, I was aware of how much our village depended on nearby towns and the city so that we could trade our farm products, attend good schools, access healthcare and purchase what was needed. Today, I am often surprised

at how we create artificial boundaries between urban and rural, as if an improvement in one does not bring real benefits to the other. Yet, all of us aspire to an integrated life where family, work, school, food, social and economic facilities are all closely woven into our neighbourhood.

As former Mayor of Kigali City and Governor of Eastern Province, I saw for myself how the rapid development of the capital city has transformed rural lives thanks to development being planned at national, regional and local levels. But this was not by accident; it was a deliberate choice of working beyond the confines of traditional administrative boundaries and thinking. It often strikes me as peculiar that integrated thinking is so difficult to realise within typical bureaucratic structures. I have seen that in many countries this holistic approach is often overlooked.

As part of Rwanda's vision 2020, at least 30% of the population will be urbanised through a proactive, people-led integrated development plan that will support communities to access basic social and economic infrastructure ensuring that this growth is socio-economically and ecologically sustainable.

## Partner, Commit, Succeed

Cities are incredibly complex. Success is only possible if there is a robust platform for partnerships between the city and other levels of governments and with communities, key stakeholders and the private sector. In early September, UN-HABITAT hosted the Sixth Session of the World Urban Forum in Naples, Italy. This event is so much more than simply a conference; it is a global microcosm of how cities should work. It brings mayors, ministers, planners and women's groups, academics and engineers, the private sector and youth all discussing, engaging and innovating together.

In 2016 the world will gather once again for Habitat III. This will present a unique opportunity for leaders to commit themselves to a new urban agenda which leverages the power of urbanisation to feed the development needs of our nations. It may seem like a mammoth challenge, but as I have seen for myself, with purposeful action and commitment, success is sure to follow.

