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Keeping Africa's Turnaround on Track



By Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

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For more than a decade, much of Africa has been moving forward. Economic growth is rising, poverty is falling and democratic governance is spreading. But the global financial crisis threatens to undo this progress by reducing investment, exports and aid just as they should be expanding to build on these successes.

While international attention has been understandably focused on events in Darfur, Somalia and Zimbabwe, countries across the continent including Ghana, Tanzania, Mozambique and Liberia have been quietly turning around. Economic growth rates regularly exceed 5 percent in many nations. Since 2000, 34 million more African children are in school. More than 2 million Africans are on lifesaving HIV/AIDS medicines. Malaria deaths have been halved in Rwanda and Ethiopia, and the disease has been virtually eradicated in Zanzibar. Poverty rates are falling fast, from 58 to 51 percent across the continent in just six years, according to the World Bank.

The key to this progress is stronger African leadership and more accountable governance. Today, more than 20 African countries are democracies, up from just three in the 1980s; they have competitive elections and improved human rights, and their news media are much freer. These efforts have been supported by increasingly effective development assistance from the United States and other partners.

Consider what has happened in my country, Liberia. After 14 years of devastating war, we faced enormous challenges but had precious few resources. Our democratically elected government has worked with international partners and a growing number of private investors to turn things around. In the past three years, we have doubled primary school enrollment nationwide, refurbished hundreds of health facilities, and begun rebuilding roads and generators. We have taken steps to root out corruption and remove unscrupulous officials. Growth has exceeded 8 percent per year. And, most critical, we are at peace. We are restoring our once-vibrant nation, and the crucial component -- hope -- has already been revived. Without international support, we would not have made this progress and would be at much greater risk of returning to war.

The economic crisis threatens the progress in my country and elsewhere on our continent. An estimated \$50 billion in income could be lost in Africa during the next two years. Declining remittances, trade flows and investment could undermine new businesses, throw millions out of work, and increase tensions and instability. The crisis -- which Africa did nothing to cause -- demands a strong response. African nations must do their part by continuing to address corruption, eliminate red tape and reduce obstacles to private-sector growth. But just as industrialized countries need a stimulus, African economies need a boost to keep their progress on track. The Group of 20 meeting last week produced a helpful first step. Going forward, five additional steps are critical.

First, the G-20 pledge to provide the International Monetary Fund with new resources must be fulfilled, and the IMF needs to get those resources to countries quickly and without onerous conditions.

Second, the World Bank and the African Development Bank must better leverage their resources; aggressively front-load support; and better target growth, jobs and safety-net programs. The International Finance Corp., the World Bank's private-sector affiliate, must be especially creative in keeping private investment on track.

Third, bilateral partners must build on their promises to increase aid and make it more effective by reducing bureaucratic delays, speeding disbursements and better aligning programs with African priorities.

Fourth, export credit agencies must use their resources to attack risk and other barriers to trade finance, such as liquidity issues.

Fifth, all countries must resist protectionist pressures so that trade can be the critical engine for restoring global growth.

The citizens and leaders of donor nations should recognize how important their assistance has been to the new leadership in Africa and how appreciative most Africans are for this partnership. Critics say that African economies are shrinking, that poverty is rising and that failing aid is the culprit. But this argument is at least a decade out of date. Africa's turnaround is real, the evidence indisputable. Africans themselves have been the key to this reversal, but more effective aid has played an important role. Reducing aid would slow private-sector growth, stall poverty reduction, and undermine peace and stability in countries that are struggling to become part of the global economy.

It would be a cruel irony if, just as Africa began to succeed, its prospects were cut short by a crisis beyond its control. Strong action by African governments and robust support from the international community can keep Africa's recovery on track. Both should continue to do their part.

The writer is president of Liberia and the author of "This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa's First Woman President."

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