

Africa's failure to stand up for itself leads rest of world to despise it and its people - Graca Machel

Johann Barnard

22 Dec 2014 14:11

Africa can't be at the big table if we are still children, and every time we have a challenge we go out and beg as if we haven't grown up - Okeahalam



Graca Machel. BELOW panel (L-R): Moderator Nozipho Mbanjwa; Shabodien country director ActionAid, Prof. Richards Wits University', Machel, Dr Coovadia KPMG Healthcare Markets; Makhubele, Black Management Forum; Dr Okeahalam, AGH Capital Group.

THE Ebola outbreak in West Africa—by far the worst on record of the tropical fever—has killed around 5,500 out of

15,351 cases according to the World Health Organisation (WHO).

It is perhaps not surprising then that very serious soul-searching and plain speaking are beginning to come out of leading African public figures.

Speaking at the *Mail & Guardian Africa's* most recent *African Truth* dialogue series in Johannesburg Friday, keynote speaker Graça Machel best represented this view, deploring the slow and offhand response. The different thing is that she was critical of a sector that has so far escaped scrutiny - business.

She cited the threat to Ivory Coast's cocoa exports as an example of how the Ebola outbreak has the potential to devastate other countries in the region. Ivory Coast is at risk of the virus spreading from neighbouring countries, causing investors and export destinations to give it a wide berth.

Pointing to the deplorable response from business, she said the World Cocoa Foundation had committed US\$700,000 to fight Ebola. This contribution has to be seen in the context of an industry that generates in the order of US\$200 billion annually.

“This raises the question of how businesses have been affected and [how they have responded]. The chocolate industry's response is a case for serious reflection: why would such a big industry whose main raw material is from the region most affected not see the repercussions of not responding on a bigger scale to contain and resolve the outbreak?”

As long as business ignored the widespread effects on their sectors, economies across the entire continent would suffer. She said the impact was already being felt in tourism in countries far removed from West Africa, and that the same

effects would filter into mining, retail, financial services and manufacturing.

Back to Africa when Ebola is over

KPMG's Head of Healthcare Markets, Dr Anuschka Coovadia, said the World Bank's revised impact figure of US\$3 billion was still significant, with the most concerning aspect being that it was driven by "aversory behaviour".

"It's being driven by panic and people who see it as a problem of the poor: let them get over it and we'll go back to Africa next year when it's not that bad.



"More than ever the world is married to Africa and Africa is married to the rest of the world. And that is why the state of a fragile healthcare system in rural Guinea can have a direct impact on the streets of New York City. The role of business is fundamental to containing the epidemic."

Dr Charles Okeahalam, CEO of investment holding group AGH Capital Group, called the Ebola outbreak a “shock to the system” for a region that had been showing strong growth.

“The challenge that we face is to maintain the momentum that we had. What we have to do on the continent is for a reassessment of the debate about infrastructure because in many ways this issue of Ebola is a function of the absence of a healthcare system,” he said.

The underlying issue, he suggested, was that Africa needed to stand up for itself and take responsibility for the challenges it faces.

“We need to do this and show the world we are responding: we need to take responsibility ourselves. We can’t be at the big table if we are still children, and every time we have a challenge we go out and beg as if we haven’t grown up, sorted out ourselves and if we can’t act responsibly.

Rising the challenge

“Ebola presents us with an opportunity and we should rise to this challenge and take responsibility ourselves,” Okeahalam said.

This point ties in with Graça Machel’s view that Africa’s inability to stand up for itself leads only to the rest of the world viewing the continent and its people with disdain.

“We don’t seem to take ourselves seriously. It is only when we take ourselves seriously that other people will take us seriously. If we don’t do that we will continue to be marionettes in their hands. They despise us, and it is us who have to act in a way that projects ourselves with dignity so people can respect us.”

Countries affected by the virus, Machel said, stand to lose many millions of dollars in income, with Liberia's GDP expected to sacrifice a whopping 12 percentage points, Sierra Leone 3.3 percentage points, and Guinea 2.3%.

That said, counting the cost of the Ebola epidemic wreaking havoc on West African economies is proving to be something of a guessing game: in September this year the World Bank estimated the worst-case scenario upward of US\$32 billion over the next two years; two months later this was revised down to between \$3 - 4 billion.

Big risks remain

These huge disparities aside, the picture that the panel painted is of distress over the longer term economic impact, and a need for the continent to do more for itself and not be seen mostly as whiners.

The United Nations Mission for Emergency Ebola Response (UNMEER) and its resource mobilisation requirements now exceeds US\$ 1.5billion. Only \$ 740 million has been funded to date (50%). The Ebola Response Multi-Partner Trust Fund currently has US\$ 71.9 million in commitments and a total of \$ 121 million has been pledged.

Furthermore, while in recent weeks there have been signs of significant progress against the disease in parts of worst-hit Sierra Leone and Liberia – and even Guinea – experts warn that all affected countries are “zero cases”, the worst might not be over.

Experts tell *Mail & Guardian Africa* the continent as a whole was “very lucky”, because Nigeria quickly snuffed out the disease after it landed in Lagos in the middle of the year. One of the biggest risks for African business, they say, is the

confirmation of a single Ebola case in another unaffected regional hub – like Nairobi, Johannesburg, Tunis or Abidjan.

There could a big run for the door, with a potentially crippling effect on local economies and a much bigger international “image blow” for Africa.