

**ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, THABO MBEKI, AT THE
OPENING CEREMONY OF THE UN GLOBAL FORUM, FIGHTING CORRUPTION
AND SAFEGUARDING INTEGRITY: SANDTON CONVENTION CENTRE, APRIL 2,
2007.**

Director of Ceremonies,
Distinguished delegates and guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank you most sincerely for giving me the opportunity to address this important meeting convened to deal with one of the most critical challenges facing all nations of the world. We have gathered here to engage the difficult problem of corruption, which obstructs the achievement of the important objective we all share, the objective of liberating billions of human beings from the scourge of poverty.

The theme that informs the work of this conference, “fighting corruption and safeguarding integrity”, correctly presumes our ability as political leaders, business leaders, civil society, public intellectuals and academics, and others, to identify the root causes of corruption and accordingly work out the most effective ways and means to combat it.

All of us are agreed about the negative consequences of corruption on the lives of especially the ordinary people but also all the citizens of our countries. We are equally agreed that for corruption to occur there must also exist mutual agreement and collusion between the corruptor and the corrupted.

Indeed, both the corrupter and the corrupted would, as a matter of principle, agree to subject their souls to the dictates of graft, illegally to line their pockets against the interests of the people to whom the stolen resources are due.

From the experience of many in this room, we know that that corruption is not necessarily caused by poverty. In any case, by definition and in general, the poor are so excluded from the levers of power that they do not have the possibility to extricate themselves out of poverty by corrupt means.

Rather, in many instances corruption serves as a sufficient condition for the further entrenchment of poverty, negating the potential for development. We know of many examples where corruption robs a large section of humanity of their right to homes, food, transport, education, health, clean water, and many other essential services.

The incidence of corruption in modern society seems to reinforce the view postulated by the English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, when he wrote about what he considered to be what has been described as ‘the natural condition of humanity’.

He advanced the concept of “bellum omnium contra omnes” – the “war of all against all” – and the notion that in a so-called ‘state of nature’, human society, not governed by a benevolent dictator, renders all human life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Specifically, in his “Leviathan”, he wrote that:

because the basic condition of man... is a condition of war of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; it followeth, that in such a condition every man has a right to everything; even to another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to everything endureth, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time, which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live.

(Leviathan, Collier Macmillan, 1974, p 103).

The incidence of corruption, especially as it occurs within the context of a global social order that deifies the personal acquisition of wealth regardless of the social cost, that advocates the creation of a world in which wealth, profit and conspicuous consumption are pursued by individuals and corporations at all costs, naturally raises the question whether Thomas Hobbes was not correct after all.

But if he was, the question would arise – is contemporary society therefore obliged to accept that to avoid a situation of “war of all against all”, it has no choice but to accept rule by benevolent dictators!

I am certain that all of us proceed from the position that we cannot accept any suggestion that we can revert to the ‘natural condition of humanity’ as conceptualised by Thomas Hobbes, and therefore accept the inevitable consequence to accommodate ourselves to the necessity of a benevolent autocracy.

Instead, we would advance the proposition that the ‘natural condition of humanity’ dictates the need to govern human society according to a value system based on the principles and practice of human solidarity, caring and compassion towards one's neighbour.

In this regard we would argue that social cohesion in all communal societies, before their fragmentation in class terms, was guaranteed by the pre-eminence of the principle and practice of sharing, rather than the notion - everybody for himself or herself, and the devil take the hindmost.

Ousmane Sembène's character Houdia M'Baye, in his well-known novel, *God's Bits of Wood*, recalls the words of another character (Ramatoulaye) who said, “Real misfortune is not just a matter of being hungry and thirsty; it is a matter of knowing that there are people who want you to be hungry and thirsty – and that is the way it is with us”.

Here Ousmane Sembène is pointing to the relationship between poverty and power, and the conscious abuse of power for personal enrichment at the expense of the powerless. For Sembène, there are people and, by extension, systems and institutions, whose existence and success is predicated on the deprivation of another, as a consequence of which Ramatoulaye said – “that is the way it is with us”.

In this setting, corruption becomes the way it is with us. Thus the knowledge that there are others who intend that others should be poor becomes even more painful than the resultant poverty – which constitutes the “real misfortune” that Ramatoulaye decried.

The real misfortune lies in the fact that “there are people (in positions of power) who want (others) to be hungry and thirsty”, whose apparently unstoppable actions distort and pervert the very essence of what it means to be human.

Sembène’s message is perfectly clear. It is that corruption implicates in shared guilt both the corrupter and the corrupted, and defines both as offenders against humanity itself. The ordinary folk who constitute his ‘God’s bits of wood’ understand this very well that corruption, in all its forms and manifestations, constitutes a process that negates the democracy and development the ordinary people need to transcend the boundaries of their world of poverty, underdevelopment and disempowerment.

We have gathered here today from all corners of the globe because together we understand the simple and obvious fact that corruption benefits the few, and harms the majority. It is inimical to pro-poor sustainable growth and development.

It distorts human values, exacerbates market inefficiencies, undermines democracy, its institutions and ethos, engenders citizen frustration with elected and appointed officials, seriously erodes confidence in the process of governance, and is detrimental to the effective and efficient delivery of goods and services to those most in need.

The corollary of this central thesis is that any anti-corruption strategy and the necessary anti-corruption instruments while obviously absolutely necessary, must not be seen as ends in themselves. They must be firmly located within a development and anti-poverty discourse that promotes citizen engagement, a people’s contract that binds the democratic state to the citizenry and promotes the values of human solidarity and public accountability.

The anti-corruption discourse therefore is inseparable from broader goals of socio-economic development. In the era of globalisation when vast wealth and asset gaps exist among individuals, regions, and nations, the fight against corruption must be rooted in common understandings across borders. It must go beyond the rhetoric of perceptions and blame. It must constructively utilise approaches developed in the multi-lateral setting, and must involve global co-operation.

There can be no effective global anti-corruption strategy unless it is intricately and intimately linked to a global agenda that promotes pro-poor sustainable development.

This is because in the current conjuncture of globalisation, unregulated markets have become somewhat of a fetish and a universally dominant value-system has increasingly put on a high pedestal possessive individualism as the pinnacle of human success.

In September 2000, our country joined the rest of the international community of nations to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration and its eight Millennium Development Goals. We agreed to “spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanising conditions of extreme poverty, to which more than a billion of them are currently subjected”.

In this context, we too recognise the fact that while globalisation has created immense opportunities for growth and the accumulation of wealth for some, it has produced socio-economic conditions that make it difficult for many countries on our continent to meet their Millennium Development Goals. In this regard, the historic Millennium Summit Declaration proclaimed that:

We believe that the central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalisation becomes a positive force for all the world's people. For, while globalisation offers great opportunities, at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed. We recognise that developing countries and countries with economies in transition face special difficulties in responding to this central challenge. Thus, only through broad and sustained efforts to create a shared future, based upon our common humanity in all its diversity, can globalisation be made fully inclusive and equitable.

Globalisation, unfettered and unchecked, creates an environment in which the wealthy and the powerful can prey on the vulnerable in all countries, but especially those of the South. Today and for the remainder of the time this Forum engage in discussion, we need to remind ourselves that corruption worsens this painful reality, and fundamentally hinders the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals.

Our own people have assumed that we agreed to the MDGs because we are determined to eradicate poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment, and that, consequently, we are equally committed to creating a non-racial, a non-sexist, prosperous and democratic society, in which the wealth created and generated is more equitably distributed especially to favour the poor, while guaranteeing the possibility to create more wealth.

Accordingly, they will be entitled to ask of us what progress we have made towards the realisation of the MDGs, and what we have done to fight corruption, which they, God's bits of wood, know from their experience undermines the possibility to realise these Goals.

They have a right to hold us accountable for any lack of progress with respect to the MDGs. They will be correct to inquire from us what we have agreed to do collectively to deliver on our vision of a corruption free world.

They will be correct to ask whether we are not continuing on an unproductive path as we devote an inordinate amount of time to the task to apportion blame for corruption, in many respects relying solely on perception projected as a scientific measure of corruption.

In his novel, *Wizard Of The Crow*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o writes of a Ruler and his three sycophantic ministers who had undergone plastic surgery to enlarge, respectively, their eyes, ears and tongue – the better to see, hear and denounce dissent. For his birthday one of the Ministers suggests the Marching To Heaven project - the building of a tower tall enough for the Ruler to be able regularly and easily to consult the God-on-high.

The government then tried to persuade the Global Bank to provide loans to fund the Marching To Heaven project. However, this initiative, which the Bank would otherwise have funded and earned its returns, suffered a setback because of opposition by the poor – and in particular by a group of militant women.

Reflecting on one of the central themes of the novel, Ngugi says that there is a way in which the West tries to imply that corruption, longing, starvation are peculiarly African – something to do with the biological character of the African. Of the developed world he says:

They wash their hands of what is happening, as if they have never had anything to do with the corruption, with massacres, with backwardness. My concern is with these colonial distortions. There are elements which are indigenous, but they are also external. You can't understand one without the other. The tendency is to leave out one of the elements in the equation. But an equation without all its elements is no longer an equation.

And therein lies a particular complexity and a shared complicity. The global discourse on corruption and anti-corruption must begin with the recognition that corruption distorts human values and fundamental freedoms in all countries. Everywhere it undermines democracy and good governance, accountability and transparency. It also seriously compromises the beneficial operation of economic markets, globally.

Corruption is a multifaceted, systemic and institutional global phenomenon involving all sectors of human society. It takes a variety of forms including theft, fraud, bribery, extortion, nepotism, patronage, and the laundering of illicit proceeds.

Corruption exists in both developed and developing countries and destroys the positive value systems of all societies and institutions. It replaces the concept and practice of

human solidarity with the unfettered pursuit of individual gain, grafted onto the imperatives prescribed by free market ideology.

It emasculates development and democracy and undermines the fight against poverty by diverting key resources away from programmes designed to improve the quality of life especially of the poor, globally.

In many instances, the response to corruption has been to blame either the bribe givers or the bribe takers rather than to understand its structural character as well as how it has embedded itself in relationships among individuals and organisations in both the developed and developing world.

Its measurement has become the subject of a sophisticated statistical modelling of perceptions rather than the greater effort we need to understand the concrete circumstances of its social origin, as well as achieve the systematic and sustained computation of the frequency and occurrences of specific forms and types of corruption. The perceptions I have just mentioned shape the understanding of the powerful and influence the manner in which resources have been committed to poor countries, and donor assistance provided.

We have an obligation properly to understand and to fight corruption in all its forms and manifestations, as we seek to create a new world order that will be responsive to the needs and aspirations of the poor billions we represent.

The obvious need for us to respect our obligation to account to the people will require that we deal with all these issues honestly. We will also have to do this because our decisions will have to give real meaning to the corruption-free social compact we seek to create.

Accordingly, we need to seize the opportunity provided by this Global Forum constructively to strengthen the foundation we all need to carry out our historic task to rid our world of the ravages of poverty, disease and underdevelopment.

As we engage in the global fight against corruption, let us also be fully conscious of the need to work on all the varied tracks and affirm a clear role for the responsive democratic state in the fight to eradicate poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment.

As an affirmation of our resolve to defeat corruption and its outcomes, we must work together to deal with market related and market induced inequalities. We must provide equality of opportunity to all our citizens. We must work to develop social cohesion. We must promote peace and stability in our countries, as well as regionally and globally.

Again as an affirmation of our determined opposition to corruption, we must promote sustainable growth and development, as well as ecological and environmental

sustainability. We must address the glaring unequal division of wealth at the global, regional and national levels.

All this we must do with the necessary sense of urgency and a common resolve to act together to end the circumstance that billions across the globe are still condemned to lead lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

On behalf of our government, the people of South Africa, and in my own name, I wish the Global Forum against Corruption success in its deliberations.

Thank you.