

AFRICAN EVENTS AT HARVARD: THE YEAR IN REVIEWHeather Dresser¹

For the African enthusiast, Harvard University is rich in opportunities to engage with African policy debates, leaders and culture. Over the last academic year alone, Harvard has hosted a range of Africa-focused events, ranging from public addresses by African heads of state and Nobel Laureates, to cultural nights, policy discussions, and conferences. While the events' topics spanned the spectrum from economic development to responsible activism to public leadership, they all leave their audiences with a richer understanding of the continent. We hope this review gives our readers a window into 'Africa at Harvard'.

September 2005 began with the President of Zambia, Levy P. Mwanawasa, addressing the Harvard community. Hosted by Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, President Mwanawasa, whose country's per capita GDP growth has been positive over the past five years, discussed the challenges facing Zambia through the next decade. President Mwanawasa explained that his government's focus on economic growth, fostering the economic empowerment of all Zambians, and encouraging foreign direct investment was critical to continuing growth.

This speech occurred one year after another African president, Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, came to Harvard and presented a different view of the keys to, and role of, growth. Having guided his country from civil war to peace and relative prosperity since taking power in 1992, his address focused on the role of peace and security in promoting economic development in Mozambique and in Africa at large. Where there is growth, he said, the potential for conflict diminishes. But no one country can be content to grow on its own, he said, explaining that islands of prosperity are not sustainable when they are surrounded by deprivation. As a result, Mozambique under President Chissano, was not satisfied with its high rates of economic growth—among the highest in the world for much of the 1990s—but instead was working, through the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development, among others, to spread prosperity throughout the continent.

¹ Heather Dresser is a Candidate for Master in Public Administration in International Development (2007) at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She thanks Mark Canavera, Mutsa Chironga, Nishan Degnarain, and Doreen Lwanga for their assistance.

In February 2006, Harvard Business School's 8th annual **Africa Business Conference (ABC)** maintained the ABC's tradition as a perennial highlight in Harvard's calendar of African events. With several hundred delegates, arguably no other annual gathering in North America brings together so many of Africa's most successful business professionals. Delegates included leading African chief executives, company directors and public officials, representing an array of sectors such as finance, banking, energy, management consulting, healthcare, government, law and non-profit. Evening entertainment included an electrifying performance by Soukous legend Awilo, a dazzling display of some of the continent's most sophisticated fashion designs, and a colorful closing banquet.

This year's conference theme was 'Seizing Opportunities in Africa: A New Paradigm for the Future'. The conference opened with a rousing keynote address by Managing Director of Diageo Africa, Nick Blasquez, who argued that "a new paradigm" for Africa rested on three pillars: improved political and economic governance; renewed engagement between Africa and the rest of the world; and improving macroeconomic trends in Africa's GDP and Foreign Direct Investment levels. Taking this momentum forward, the conference's 20 panels covered a rich diversity of topics including "The New Face of Financial Services in Africa", "The Diaspora Returns" and "Africa's Media Industry: Challenges and Growth Opportunities".

The Kennedy School of Government's **Africa Night in April 2005** featured dance, music, poetry, drumming, and fashion from across the continent. The fashion show, with models drawn from both the African and non-African communities at the Kennedy School, took place between artistic acts, and showed that people of all ages and heritages can look smart in African attire. Even the Kennedy School's Dean Joseph McCarthy, who introduced the night, wore a kente piece. The Kennedy School Africa Night also included several educational segments, including an uplifting multimedia presentation honoring 28 great Africans, past and present.

Celebrating Wole Soyinka's seventieth birthday in April 2005, Harvard's W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African-American Research convened a **gathering of four Nobel Laureates in Literature** for a "feast of words" celebrating Soyinka's life and work. Soyinka, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, was joined by Nadine Gordimer, Toni Morrison, and Derek Walcott, who each read a selection of their writing in Soyinka's honor. The selections celebrated justice, freedom, belonging, and truth: major themes in Soyinka's writing, as well as his life. Indeed, Soyinka's

commitment to peace and human dignity are well-known and his attempts in 1967 to encourage a ceasefire during the Nigerian civil war resulted in his solitary confinement for twenty-five months. Each of the Nobel Laureates gathered exemplified the role of literature and writers in encouraging social change.

Other events at Harvard focused more directly on human rights, such as those to education and security, and the rights of children. The **Conference on African Development and Education**, which took place at the Graduate School of Education in February 2006, concentrated on its theme of breaking down barriers, and included panels on the role of technology policy in education and overcoming public health issues and stigma in education. The conference aimed to encourage and inform understanding of the educational issues facing African countries and the role of innovation in overcoming these challenges. The day's events included opportunities to discuss the tension between outside imposition and local ownership of education policies and activities in these spheres, as well as the role of government commitment in achieving education policy goals.

Later in the spring, a one-day conference focused on human rights and practical policy issues surrounding the estimated 300,000 child soldiers in the world today, primarily—though not exclusively—in Africa. The conference, titled *Children on the Frontlines: A Crisis in International Security*, featured speakers from the U.S. foreign policy community, non-governmental organizations and academia who joined students of public policy and international affairs to consider the various policy strategies for preventing the recruitment of child soldiers and for successfully reintegrating former child soldiers into the community. These discussions were enhanced by the opportunity to interact with Charles Bongomin, a former child soldier from northern Uganda, who delivered the luncheon address.

A third group of events focused on leadership at all levels: the traditional leadership of the king of the Asante people of Ghana, the public sector leadership of the director general of a Nigerian government agency, and the grassroots leadership of Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai. Nearby, Boston University held an event attended by twelve former heads of state, as well as many Harvard students and faculty.

In November 2005, Harvard was visited by the king of the Asante people of Ghana King Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, the Asantehene, who delivered the annual Distinguished African Studies Lecture, given by a prominent non-academic leader who plays a pivotal role on the continent and can provide an informed insider's perspective on African affairs.

Noting that chieftaincy, like democratically elected government, is based on a social contract predicated on good governance, the Asantehene spoke of his vision of the incorporation of traditional rulers and chiefs as partners in development. Whereas elected officials necessarily have a short time horizon, the Asantehene spoke of the long-term view that traditional leaders can take, leading to complementary approaches to defining problems and enacting solutions. He cited his World Bank-supported initiatives in the legal arena to complement formal courts with a revival of traditional courts' arbitration function as just one example of the many ways traditional rulers can work with elected governments and the international community to jointly pursue the interests of their people in stability and development.

Another respected African leader, Dr. Dora Akunyili, director general of Nigeria's National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC), spoke to an audience of students, faculty, and members of the Nigerian diaspora at the Kennedy School of Government in February 2006. At the start of the new millennium, Nigeria was infamous for its rampant counterfeit pharmaceuticals businesses. Dr. Akunyili described her efforts to reform her agency and tackle counterfeit drugs in Nigeria since being appointed director general in April 2001. By reorganizing NAFDAC, ensuring that staff understood their mission and its importance, rewarding hard work and integrity, and monitoring and punishing corruption, Dr. Akunyili was able to change the agency's culture. The reorientation of the organization together with a number of measures such as registration and inspection of drugs and increased surveillance of retail outlets and points of entry has seen a 90 percent decrease in the prevalence of counterfeit drugs, under Dr. Akunyili's leadership Nigeria, saving the lives of millions of Nigerians and countless others abroad.

In September 2005, Harvard was honored to host 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai. Dr. Maathai addressed the Harvard Community at the **John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum** at the Kennedy School of Government, where, using the same powerful metaphor employed in her community activism in the Green Belt Movement, she urged the audience to break out of the easy role of victim and into the role of leader by taking charge of their lives in whatever ways they could. The first African woman, to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. Maathai explained that she interprets the Nobel Committee's selection as the recognition that sustainable development, an equitable distribution of resources, good governance, and peace are ultimately inseparable; as a result, they must be handled by governments and in policy as one. She described her

vision of a democratic space in which all people are treated with respect and dignity and their human rights are respected. In that democratic space, she said, people can work together towards peace.

Whether the speakers were heads of state or students, Nobel Laureates or business leaders, all these events presented the positive role individuals can play in effecting change in Africa. These leaders serve as role models and inspirations for us all at Harvard, in Africa and beyond.