

**Video Message by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
To the “Mbele Africa” Inter-College at Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
Theme: The Youth’s Role in Taking Africa Forward”
Organized by *Students for Africa* at Dartmouth College
November 19, 2011**

Greetings to you, Students for Africa at Dartmouth College, and my thanks to the “Mbele Africa” Planning Committee for the invitation to send a message to your Convention.

I am honored to do so, on a topic that is so important for Africa, namely, the role that you, as African youth, young professionals, academics and young leaders interested in Africa can play in “Taking Africa Forward.”

Ours is a young continent, with half or more of the population less than 25 years old in some African countries. Needless to say, then, that the future belongs to the youth. Our responsibility is to help prepare you for that future. You must grasp that opportunity, so that what we leave in your hands, you’ll build upon it and expand it and make it even more than what it is today.

Africa’s future will rest in your hands. I am, therefore, most impressed that you, as students in America, are exploring the opportunities and challenges across our continent to see how you can help secure Africa’s future for your and future generations. I hope that your discussions will motivate you to take concrete action leading to the changes you wish to see in your communities.

Africa is on the move. In terms of governance, democracy is increasingly becoming the norm. Some two dozen African countries, including my own, held free and fair elections this year. Yet, democracy is not only about elections. It is also about building vibrant institutions that protect the rights and civil liberties of the people; promoting an independent press and a functional civil society; essentially, creating the necessary conditions for all members of society to achieve their full potential. While some countries lag in certain areas, most are progressing. Two decades ago, there were only four functional democracies in sub-Saharan Africa; today that number stands at 18 -- almost one-third of the region.

Macroeconomic indicators also point to rapid and steady growth. According to the IMF’s recently released “Sub-Saharan Africa Economic Outlook,” the region’s economies are expected to grow by over 5 percent on average this year, and nearly 6 percent in 2012 – very impressive figures in today’s global economy, with a rising middle class now numbering 313 million out of a population of 1 billion.

Accompanying these impressive growth figures are massive improvements in the quality of life of our people. In my own country, Liberia, we are building schools, roads, and health facilities throughout the country; restoring running water and electricity; rebuilding and strengthening our legal system, and much more. For many of our children,

this is the first time that they are enjoying these basic amenities. After decades of war and deprivation, we are restoring hope and putting smiles on the faces of Liberia's children.

However, a central question remains: how do we sustain these gains? While many governments across Africa are focused on developing institutions and the infrastructure necessary to bolster growth, we cannot sustain long-term development without a critical mass of talented and competent human resources.

Training is, therefore, absolutely essential. I believe that education is the cornerstone of development. In order to compete in today's global economy, we need well-trained scientists, entrepreneurs, teachers, economists, doctors, lawyers, and more. You who have gathered at Dartmouth are privileged to be enrolled at some of the best universities in the world. Take advantage of this opportunity to unfailingly seek knowledge. Inquire, question, dream, innovate, explore and, most importantly, give back.

Some of you students have already started to make those first steps. William Kamkwamba, a sophomore at Dartmouth, used locally available materials to create windmills to provide electricity to his village and provide irrigation to his family's farm in Malawi. Liberia's own Mahmud Johnson, also at Dartmouth, started the iMHere! Project back home, to provide academic scholarships and mentorship opportunities to hitherto out-of-school young men. And this past summer, a team of Dartmouth students traveled to Kenya to start "Design Generations," a program that empowers youth to design simple solutions to everyday problems they face in their communities. These are a few of the thousands of brilliant initiatives that young people are leading across the continent to promote innovation, education and entrepreneurship – all of which are very essential for the future of Africa.

Over the next two days, I am sure you will be hearing about other initiatives which your peers have undertaken in Africa. No doubt, you will inspire each other with your stories and passion. I urge you to seize this opportunity to expand your network of young change makers. I also encourage you to work together where your interests intersect, as you strive, collectively, to make an impact in Africa.

In closing, let me warmly congratulate all of the participants, as well as the presenters of community development projects. You are, indeed, living up to the saying that the youth are not just the future leaders; they are the leaders of today.

Good luck in all of your endeavors, and I wish you a successful and productive Convention!