

KEYNOTE SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

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AT THE

AFRICA SPORTS VENTURES GROUP

AND UNESCO ONLINE SPORTS CONFERENCE

ON THE FUTURE OF SPORTS IN AFRICA - POST COVID-19

VIA ZOOM / LIVESTORM ON AFRICA DAY

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EXCELLENCIES, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

I would like to express my thanks and appreciation for the invitation extended to me by the Africa Sports Venture Group and UNESCO to give the Keynote Address at this Online Sports Conference, which is being held as part of the activities marking the observance of Africa Day. I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the leaders of Africa and its People a Happy Africa Day!

The theme of the Conference, "THE FUTURE OF SPORTS IN AFRICA POST-COVID19", could not be more relevant and timely in these difficult times, when the entire world is undergoing the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

As we are all aware, there have been millions of people who have contracted the disease in the past few months. Sadly, many hundreds of thousands have now lost their lives, and I want to use this occasion, on behalf of the People of Liberia, and in my own name, to extend our deepest sympathy to the families who have lost their relatives, friends, and loved ones to this deadly disease.

In addition, many of the world's largest and most prosperous economies have been shattered by the effects of Covid-19, causing business failures, massive unemployment, and a reduction of productivity and growth.

We have also observed that many of their health systems, considered to be sophisticated and robust, are struggling to cope with the unprecedented medical challenges posed by the disease.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

Even as we highlight the damage that Covid-19 is causing in most of the developed world, we realize that all countries of the world are now affected in some way by

the pandemic. With our relatively fragile economies and weak public health ecosystems, we in the developing world are particularly vulnerable.

In Africa, although the number of infected persons and deaths is relatively low when compared to many other continents, the fact remains that the negative impact of even a small downturn in our economies is magnified and aggravated, and our inadequate health systems can be easily overrun by even a slight increase in our numbers.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

In response to this global threat, many governments, international institutions, and companies from the private sector have taken various actions to address the negative socio-economic impact of the virus on our populace. Various special Funds have been established to provide loans and grants to businesses, debt relief, salary payments to the unemployed, food for citizens, purchase of medical equipment and PPE's, construction of new emergency hospitals, and many other measures.

However, to the best of my knowledge, I am not aware of any provisions being made for some of these funds to be set aside or earmarked for the support of sport programs, which are an important part of the socio-economic fabric of our various societies.

Without a doubt, sports has been an important unifying factor in maintaining social cohesion, youth development, and peace in our respective countries. Sports have not only provided an outlet for recreation and the reduction of social tensions for people of all ages and from all walks of life, but it has also been an inspiration for many young people who see sports as a pathway to success and to the achievement of their dreams. I am sure that you may remember that I chose that pathway, and, as they say, the rest is history.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

You will be aware that pre-Covid-19, almost all of the sports programs in Africa have been historically under-supported financially. Low investment have left them in a very fragile state of development, depending mostly on sponsorships from private businesses or individuals for their continued existence.

It is therefore reasonable to assume that the precautionary measures being put in place by our respective governments to contain the spread of Covid-19, such as lockdowns, social distancing, quarantines, and curfews, will have a devastating and drastic negative impact on sports in general.

The lifeblood of sports consists mainly of attendance fees and sponsorships, and where these no longer exist, many clubs will collapse, and many leagues will close permanently. On the African continent, where effective scouting feeds our young talented players to the bigger international leagues, these opportunities will no longer exist.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

It is therefore my considered opinion that the future of sports in Africa after the Covid-19 pandemic is bleak and problematic, and is not guaranteed to recover even to pre-Covid-19 levels for many years to come. This crisis will negatively impact all clubs and all leagues in Africa and all national teams.

There will be an urgent need to resuscitate football and all other games, and to recognize that the people and institutions involved in sports also require some form of sustenance or support to survive until the crisis comes to an end.

We fully recognize that this is a health crisis, which is now causing an economic crisis, and that restoration of health and the recovery of our economies take absolute priority to return to normalcy.

However, it is important that the global funding that is being raised to fight Covid-19 should recognize the social importance of sports in our economies, and the important contributions that sports make to unity, peacebuilding, and social cohesion. It is therefore important that some consideration be given to making provision for the sustenance and recovery of the sports sector.

In soccer, for example, organizing bodies such as FIFA should use their special skills and fund-raising networks to raise awareness of the plight faced by the beautiful game. Special appeals should be made to international bodies such as the United Nations and its agencies, as well as with other large financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the Afeximbank.

It is unfortunate that this pandemic should have occurred just when the new leadership at CAF had begun to embark upon programs that would have contributed to significant improvements in sports infrastructure on the continent. It is our hope that FIFA will continue to lend its assistance and support to CAF.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

The Covid-19 pandemic should allow us step back and examine these challenges. This will give us new perspectives that will make us launch into the post-crisis era with new thinking to meet the new realities.

While the virus might have disrupted sports, it has not changed our love for it. And it is that deep love for sport that will give us the strength, wisdom, fortitude, and resilience to survive and chart a new course for African sport for the future.

I thank you!