



Future of Africa Podcast Episode 4: The Trust Deficit Transcript September 5, 2025

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The views and opinions expressed in this episode are those of the guests and hosts, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the podcast's partners.

Mark Leon Goldberg [00:00:10]

Welcome to the Future of Africa, a special series on Global Dispatches. I'm Mark Leon Goldberg, the host and founder of Global Dispatches, and in several episodes over the coming weeks, we will bring you in-depth conversations designed to explore Africa's future in the context of today's challenges and opportunities.

This series is produced in partnership with the African Union, the Elders, and the United Nations Foundation, and is hosted by the Kenyan journalist Adelle Onyango. I am truly thrilled to bring you this special project of Global Dispatches. We have some amazing guests in this episode and throughout the series. Enjoy!

Adelle Onyango [00:01:02]

Welcome to the Future of Africa podcast. I'm your host Adelle Onyango and this is a show where we explore the bold ideas and leaders shaping Africa's place in the world. Now, effective governments depend on something deeper than just policies. It hinges on trust.

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Transcript

Trust between citizens and governments, between institutions and the people, they serve. So, in this episode, we explore how to rebuild and strengthen that trust from grassroots communities to multilateral platforms using transparency, civic engagement, and inclusive leadership.

Joining me are four dynamic voices across generations and sectors. First is Samson Itodo, the Executive Director of Yiaga Africa, and he is a leading advocate for youth political participation and Founder of the very famous and impactful Not Too Young to Run campaign.

Samson Itodo [00:01:59]

And, all you need is that anger and that energy, harness them and then transform that into the power that they need to get the change that they want.

Adelle Onyango [00:02:11]

We're also going to be joined by Joseph Asunka, the CEO of Afrobarometer, and they offer powerful insights from public opinion data on how citizens view governance across the continent.

Joseph Asunka [00:02:22]

That myth has been busted for a long time now, that Africans are not just interested in the bread-and-butter issues. They want their government to be accountable.

Adelle Onyango [00:02:34]

Minister Chernor Bah is also going to be joining us, the Minister of Information and Civic Education in Sierra Leone. He brings a unique perspective from both grassroots advocacy and national leadership.

Minister Chernor Bah [00:02:46]

It is the job of us who hold power to adapt for them and not expect them to adapt for us. That's the problem.

Adelle Onyango [00:02:56]

Last, but not least, we're going to be joined by Chimdindu Neliaku, who's a member of the Africa Union's panel of the future and Special Assistant to the Honorable Speaker of Nigeria's House of Representatives on Interparliamentary Affairs and Public Relations. She's representing youth voices at the highest levels of policy dialogue.

Chimdindu Neliaku [00:03:17]

I fundamentally believe that no generation can achieve the Africa of our dreams, or the world of our dreams, the Nigeria of our dreams alone. It must be intergenerational collaboration and co-leadership.

Adelle Onyango [00:03:32]

So, let's get into it. A good place to start is with the data. What do citizens feel about their governments right now and why is it important to regularly research and tap into this data. Helping us do that is CEO of Afrobarometer, Joseph Asunka.

Adelle Onyango [00:03:58]

Thank you so much for making time to be with us today.

Joseph Asunka [00:04:01]

Thanks so much, Adelle, for having me. It's a great pleasure to meet you.

Adelle Onyango [00:04:06]

Why do you think it's important for us to understand Africans' perceptions when it comes to governance, when it comes to democracy, to when it comes to leadership? Why do you feel like this is something integral as we look to put Africa on the global stage?

Joseph Asunka [00:04:23]

Why it is important? In Afrobarometer, if you look at our history, we started in 1999. And for people who have followed African democratic governance trajectory, we know that the late 1980s and early 1990s was when Africa started to become more and more democratic. We had elections happening across the continent and multi-party electoral competition was becoming the norm. So, at the time, the folks who founded Afrobarometer, there were three professors who founded Afrobarometer in 1998, around 1998. The principal objective was to make clear that as Africa become more and more democratic, if we want governance to be about the people, for the people, and by the people, they should not be confined to only election years to have their voices heard. When African citizens elect a government, they should in between elections be able to voice their experiences, their opinions, and share those with governments. So, governments first are aware of what their experience, their priorities are, so that when you're developing policies, you take into account what your citizens are prioritizing.

Second, you also want governments to know how citizens are experiencing the implementation of public policies on the continent. So, if a government adopts a policy and they start to implement; how do citizens experience that policy implementation? And in what ways do they see or how do they see the performance of their elected leaders in serving their interests? So, we collect in the range of things. First, what they experience. So, for example, do you have electricity? And we get to know whether people have electricity, or they have healthcare or they can get a doctor when they go to the health clinic. So, we provide them the opportunity to give that feedback to their government. The second component being asking people to assess the performance of their leaders in power so that the leaders know how their citizens are assessing their performance. So, this is what we've been doing over the past 25 years, and it is critical to have this data because it provides government with feedback of what citizens are experiencing and feeling. It gives them feedback in terms of how their citizens view them and it also provides them useful information about where their priorities are so when they're developing policies, they take into account those priorities.

Adelle Onyango [00:06:58]

On a personal level, Joseph, are there some findings in research that really stand out for you? Maybe you found them interesting, or they affirmed something you always thought about?

Joseph Asunka [00:07:11]

So, on the governance front, on the governance and democracy, when we started Afrobarometer in 1999, the thought was that Africans would not care about human rights and democracy, all they care about is food on their table, so, they care about economic issues and not the governance and political issues. So human rights would not be an issue, freedoms is not an issue. As long as people can get to eat, they'll be fine. And that myth has been busted for a long time now that Africans are not just interested in the bread-and-butter issues. They want their government to be accountable. And this came to light, especially between 2010 and 2015, whenever we asked African citizens, do you want a government that can deliver economic benefits, even if it is not accountable? Or you want an accountable government, even if it is not able to deliver the economic goods effectively? It used to be the case that more and more Africans who wanted the economic benefits, they were like the one their government to deliver on the economic front. But from 2015 onwards, it flipped. And now increasingly more and more Africans say they prefer a government that is accountable to them than one that just gives them the economic

benefits. And that has been a surprising result. It has stayed the same. It has increased since then and is now a majority view across the continent.

Adelle Onyango [00:08:46]

Based on the research that you've been doing at Afrobarometer, what key insights on public opinion do you think African governments need to use to strengthen their credibility?

Joseph Asunka [00:08:58]

So, the data that we have has shown generally that there are a number of core things that when they happen people lose confidence in their elected leaders and unfortunately, it also goes to affect their confidence in democracy. The top issue is views about corruption.

When people feel that there's corruption in government and interestingly what we find is that especially corruption at the local government level, it really damages people's confidence in government. So, when you ask about trust in elected leaders, whenever they see incidents of corruption at the local level in particular, it completely erodes their trust in governments. And we think this is just because people experience government more intimately at the local level. The only way governments can get out of this is to really deliver a government that is of integrity and a clean government, or at least at a very minimal, be very open and transparent about what you do so citizens know. So, it's not like a black box, they have no idea what is happening in government.

The second component in terms of the erosion of trust is usually about, you know, elections and electoral outcomes. When elections are conducted in a peaceful, transparent manner, you see that the trust in public institutions goes up very significantly. And the opposite happens. When people feel that elections were not of good quality, there was violence, and that the outcome is not really what people voted for, then it just deflates people and it becomes like the source for erosion of trust in government leaders, but also public institutions. And so, the quality of elections and the integrity of governments are the key things that erodes public trust in governments. And if you now think about it, what can governments do? Delivering good quality elections is the beginning. Like if you get the elections rights, it does two things. First, people have confidence in the institutions, but it also gives people the confidence that they can hold their elected leaders accountable through the ballot box.

Adelle Onyango [00:11:20]

If we move on to the youth and African youth and you will hear the conversations around youth in Africa, but I'm not too confident that our governments really grasp what that means. But, even away from our governments, we have to ensure that the African youth are not just a statistic we bring up as the youth bold, but that they're true reflections on how they want to be involved in their views, in there, what are their pain points, what are some of the solutions they're thinking of. How can we make sure that is captured in forums like the UN or forums like the AU that maybe a lot of African youth struggle to feel included in?

Joseph Asunka [00:12:15]

When we talk about the youth bulge, there are two ways you can think about it. It can become a dividend, and it can be a time bomb. It depends on what governments do to harness the benefits. So, if you want the youth bulge to be a dividend then you need to be a very proactive and practical in thinking about all the ways in which you can harness the energies and talents of young people for the advancement of your country. If you don't do certain things, this can be a really explosive situation that would just blow in government's face at a point where things you just can't control anything again. And of course, we've seen some elements of that happening in such certain countries where young people just get frustrated with the system and who would just blow things up. And that also creates unfortunate opportunities for, say, terrorist groups if they want to recruit young people and as a holy source of income you know it's like what is there to lose.

And so, but on the hopeful side, I do think there are many ways that governments can harness their youth power because African youth are very talented, you know, very creative when it comes to technology, the banking sector, thinking about the arts, these are young people who are really creative. They just want the opportunity to be able to put their talent to use.

But over time, our data does show how we ask people what is the most important issue you want your government to address? Unemployment always pops up as the top issue. Now people are not just looking for government to create jobs for them. They want there to be the policy space that allows private sector and entrepreneurship to thrive. So, because of that we do think that just creating the enabling environment that allows young people to use their talent to contribute to the economy would be the biggest way to get young people or to harness the benefits of this youth bulge that we are talking about. But the traditional institutions of governments do not give them the room to operate. So, take for example, political parties. It's really hard for young people to break into the barriers that have been

set up by the older generation in terms of active and impactful participation in the political processes, the internal affairs of a political party. The proportion of Africans who say they are close to a political party has been declining over the years, and it is a very low number now, but more so for young people like young people or barely 9% of young people feel close to a political party across the continent. And so, the question is, how do we make it accessible or are there alternative structures that can allow for young people to participate? And I think that's where government need to work more.

Adelle Onyango [00:15:09]

As we close, do you have any parting shots that you feel like you haven't brought out?

Joseph Asunka [00:15:16]

Credibility at the global stage is important. Sometimes we see government leaders from outside the continent, when they come to the continent, they try to position their messages on what Africans are saying, drawing an Afrobarometer today. I remember in the previous regime of the United States under Joe Biden, when they were developing the Africa strategy, it was actually launched at the University of Pretoria and the folks that actually presented the strategy at the University of Pretoria made reference to what African citizens are seeing and thinking about democracy and why the U.S. is working in that space. So, if African governments will do one thing well to position themselves and leverage this data when they're having conversations about what African priorities are. For example, if the African Union is going to adopt, let's say, a theme for the year, what theme should we adopt that is consistent with African citizens' priorities? I think sometimes the leaders just meet and make a decision about the theme for the year without any consideration of what citizen priorities are. And I think sometimes they miss the point by doing that. And so, I hope that African government will use this more and more. I mean, recent examples have included Prime Minister of Senegal, they take our data where young people say they prefer entrepreneurship. And he was launching a program to promote entrepreneurship in the Senegal. And he cited that data as a reason why the government is actually investing in, putting in, creating space for the private sector to thrive. The same thing happened in Ghana where the President said, well, from the data that Afrobarometer has, more and more Ghanaians are losing faith in democracy. So, his government has to do something to restore people's faith and trust in democracy and leaders. And I think that's the one thing I want to pass out that if African leaders want to really consolidate their credibility wherever they are. Leaning on what your citizen views are, what their priorities are is so important in the process. It's one piece and an important piece in your messaging at the global stage.

Adelle Onyango [00:17:35]

Thank you so much, Joseph.

Joseph Asunka [00:17:37]

Thanks so much for this and for having me.

Adelle Onyango [00:17:47]

Now let's get into how to ensure on a policy level, we make sure more young Africans have access to running for public office, helping us do that at Samson Itodo.

Adelle Onyango [00:18:13]

Samson, thank you so much for making time to be on the podcast with me today.

Samson Itodo [00:18:18]

Well, thanks, Adelle.

Adelle Onyango [00:18:20]

I want us to dive into, because I'm so interested to know more about Not Too Young to Run. Just from the name, it really captures our feelings right now, even in Kenya, about getting more young people involved in running for office. So maybe we can unpack that campaign first so that everybody knows what it was about.

Samson Itodo [00:18:40]

So, when you think about Not Too Young to Run campaign, it was just a campaign driven by young people who were just tired of the status quo. It's a status quo of a political process, a political system that celebrates mediocrity and not meritocracy. A political system that is dominated by old and expired politicians who don't have public interest at heart. A political system where every politician that was is going into an election thinks that the only way they can secure electoral victory is if they manipulate elections. And lastly, it's just a political system that wasn't delivered on the promise of democracy. And young people were just frustrated. You know, often young people are told they are the leaders of tomorrow, not the leaders of today or leaders of the future. But the same young people have what it takes to serve politicians and when they actually are in office. As a young people wanted to challenge the status quo and get involved in politics. And one of the impediments at that point was the legal framework.

So, in Nigeria, prior to 2018, you needed to be 40 to run for President. You needed to be 35 to run for Senate or be a Member of Parliament at the national level. And it doesn't make sense that citizens were enjoying partial franchise. So, on one hand, you say when you're 18, you have the mental capacity to determine which political party, and which candidate is best suited to represent your interest. And making that decision requires a lot of cognitive qualities. And so, on one hand, you say at 18, you can vote, but on the other hand, you say you have to wait 22 years to run. That was really injustice. And so, it starts to organize young people to push for the amendment of Nigeria's constitution. And those young people who transform their constitution from the streets with their phones and with engaging an older generation that cared about generational equity, got the Niger National Assembly and the States to amend the Constitution to reduce the age we're running for office and currently the entry age is 25. So, at 25 you can run to be a Member of Parliament, and all this was just driven by the Not Too Young to Run campaign.

Adelle Onyango [00:21:07]

What are some of the parallels and insights that you learned when it comes to youth mobilization and really getting African youth involved in matters democracy in matters governance?

Samson Itodo [00:21:19]

First, it's understanding that young people are not a monolithic group, that there are different types of young people and these different types of young people have different needs, they have different interests, they've got different language. But, of course, there are connecting features and one of them is that they are young, they they're energetic, they have creativity and innovation. And all you need is that anger and that energy, harness them and then transform that into the power that they need to get the change that they want. So, that's one.

The second is digital activism. I just say that social media is the most powerful tool that young people have, but even much more powerful is just the numbers that young people have. So, when you look at digital activism, the Not Too Young to Run was a 10-year struggle. It wasn't a two-year struggle, even though the campaign itself was launched in 2016, but it took us 10 years to achieve this outcome. And what was the difference between the previous effort and the effort in 2016? It was social media. Ability to use social media and the hashtag to galvanize and put pressure on political elites is one sort of parallels that I see and something that also in terms of convergence that I see across them.

The third it's resilience and consistency. This whole protest, the Reject Finance Bill protest started as you know I think in June of 2024.

Adelle Onyango [00:22:57]

Yes.

Samson Itodo [00:22:58]

One year down the line Gen Z's are still on the street because they haven't gotten answers. It's the same thing with the Not Too Young to Run. Started in 2007, there were two attempts it failed but we kept on pushing and that's what democracy is about. Democracy isn't an event. It's a journey, you have to keep pushing, you have to keep knocking on those doors until those doors are open.

There's something I need to add is this power of building alliances. You're able to be resilient when you build alliances with unconventional actors. And it's what I see actually play out in the Gen Z's protest, but also what play out in the Not Too Young to Run, because building alliances, it builds strategic capacity to stay the course.

Adelle Onyango [00:23:49]

Yes.

What do you think the governments need to adapt when dealing with the younger generations so that the younger generation have an increased trust in the government?

Samson Itodo [00:24:03]

I think, first, we're having this conversation because there's a collapse of leadership across the continent. And this collapse, the blame cannot be put on young people. I think that's the first thing we need to understand because often when people talk about social tension, talk about issues within the continent, they always point at using fingers at young people. And for heaven's sake, to a large extent, young people are not the ones who are responsible for unconstitutional changes of governments across the continent. Young people are not the ones responsible for those dictators that you have in the region. I think our ruling political elites need to appreciate that.

The second, they need to admit that they have failed in delivering on their promise and that is why citizens don't trust the State because it's simple. You say during elections you would deliver quality healthcare. You get into office and all you're doing is increasing taxes to

subject the people to economic hardship. It doesn't match what citizens and young people want. Is they want a government that cares and a government that listens to them. And so, you ask me what government needs to do? First, you need to listen to young people. You need to talk with young people and not talk at young people. Because this generation of young people you're dealing with, they're a generation that will not take no for an answer. They're a generation that are here to renegotiate the social compact between State and society and so there have to be mechanisms that facilitate inclusive governance.

The second, is government need to respond when citizens ask questions of accountability. And I see situations where it only takes civic activism to get political leaders to then negotiate with young people.

And, lastly, is that we need to respect human rights. When you think about the whole concept of rights and political participation, we are in democracy because they are rights that need to be respected. If it's an authoritarian government, then you can say goodbye to human rights. And that's what's happening in Mali, where the former Prime Minister, it's currently being intimidated under detention for expressing a view on social media. That is unacceptable. You don't build trust by suppressing and oppressing your people. You build trust by creating a level playing field and open space where citizens can express their rights. That is what distinguishes democracy from other forms of government. And until our State recognizes this, you're going to continue to see broken trust that would lead to disengagement from the State and then put the question of democratic legitimacy of political elites into jeopardy.

Adelle Onyango [00:27:20]

Do you have any thoughts around civil society or even international partners? What do they need to do more of to strengthen accountability, which is really at the core of building that trust.

Samson Itodo [00:27:33]

I think civil society needs to first rethink and reimagine its identity. And it's whether it wants to continue to be viewed as elements or agents of the West. And secondly, it needs to rethink its identity within the framework that it exists first to serve as an interlocutor between the State and citizens. It does not mean that being an interlocutor you take the place of citizens. It simply means you facilitate that engagement between citizens and the State and step back and allow the States to engage directly with citizens. Because often you've seen situations where the preferences of civil society are projected as the demands

of citizens and that disconnect has led to the delegitimization of that space. Because there's a crisis of legitimacy that civil society faces. Despite all the great and fantastic work that civil society has done over the last three decades.

I think the second thing that civil society needs to do more, it needs to focus on mass mobilization because we're losing touch with the people that we seek to represent. And so, constant engagement with the citizens is critical and mobilizing citizens and supporting citizens. One of the things that Gen Z's are telling established traditional organizations is we don't trust you well enough to negotiate on our behalf. We want to do the negotiation ourselves, because there's the NGO-ization of the space and NGOs have become bureaucrats, even more bureaucratic than what you call traditional bureaucrats. So how do we break that?

I think the other things civil society needs to do more is to standard in solidarity with each other. There's a lot of fragmentation within the civil society space. And all that does, it creates cracks within the movements and allow for political capture of the space. So those are the things that I think civil society needs, an internal reflection. But more importantly, this ad hoc engagement in advancing human rights is something we need to stop. You know, the whole funding landscape has been distorted as a result of either the shrinking funding space. And so, the time for civil society to reimagine itself become mass based, mass driven, but also try to look for innovative ways of new revenue models that depending on the West, 100% for survival, it's not what's going to sustain this journey of reclaiming the State from authoritarian or protecting our democracy.

Adelle Onyango [00:30:33]

I wonder as we close, what about international partners? Because I think rethinking even the financing model for a lot of civil society means collaboration amongst the organizations, but it means rethinking the relationships with international partners. So, what do you think needs to change there?

Samson Itodo [00:30:54]

Power dynamics need to change. But I think that civil society means to set the agenda and listen to people. This is not a time where international organization will dictate to local organizations what should be the messaging, what should be the tactics that they employ. No, I think they require the humility to listen to those organizations. And that's where solidarity actually comes from. Having part of a project on strength and solidarity, and we think about solidarity differently. And the first principle of solidarity is to defer to the people

who are on the front lines and not dictate or assume what the solution is. And so that form of solidarity is what we require for international organizations, defer to the leadership of those who are on the front lines and not dictate to them.

Secondly, it's to continue to amplify the concerns, the demands of those groups and these young people. That's another form of solidarity that these groups actually and this movement is to require and is amplifying their cases and amplifying their needs.

Thirdly, I would say international organizations also need pressure, their role they can put pressure on established international organizations like the UN, like the African Union, you know, to uphold some of the commitments that nations have made to regional instruments.

Yes, we are in a rapidly changing global world in view of the multi-polarities that we're dealing with. I wouldn't advise that, you know, as Africans we should look to the West 100% because our liberation as Africans lies with us. We have the power and what it takes, but we need to cultivate global partnerships and alliances, but it's not one that subjugates us and make us the lesser partners, but one that recognizes that we are on the same pedestal. And as Africans, we bring value to the table because in the final analysis, every region needs Africa and Africa needs every other region, but it has to be based on certain principles. And one of them is mutual respect.

Adelle Onyango [00:33:26]

Thank you so much, Samson. Like, that was such a wealth of knowledge that you shared.

Samson Itodo [00:33:31]

Oh, thanks. The pleasure is mine.

Adelle Onyango [00:33:43]

Speaking of effects of having young people in office, let's head over to Sierra Leone and listen to Mr. Chornor Bah giving us insights into being part of grassroots communities pushing for change and now being part of the government.

Adelle Onyango [00:34:08]

Minister Bah, thank you for making time to be with us today.

Minister Chernor Bah [00:34:12]

Thank you, it's wonderful to be with you.

Adelle Onyango [00:34:14]

You have a unique placement because you've been doing incredible work from the age of 15 outside of government and now you are inside the government as a Minister. How have your views on building trust and civic engagement changed, if at all, now that you're in government.

Minister Chernor Bah [00:34:34]

First of all, I think what I'm doing in government is a continuation of what I've always been doing, which is stick to make society better, better outcomes for everybody. A good process produces good outcomes. If people feel like they're involved, they're connected, they trust the system, they understand what is happening, they are all invested in the outcome. So, good outcome is not necessarily a very specific value. It's not that, oh, this everybody gets this, but I know what went into this process. So, what has changed for me is that, you know, I've been an activist all my life. I still think of myself as an activist in government. I think it's a useful perspective to have in government. I'm an agitator. When activists, what we seek to do is to break the door open, is to seek reforms, is to change things, is to call things out when they are not working and to be unreasonable. That's important.

Activists are unreasonable because, you know, when I'm in government, I want to say, well, government has multiple priorities, the reason this is not being done is because we have to balance this and that and activists say, "No, this is important, this must be done." And I think that's the balance that you have to hold and so when I was outside of government, I understood that again my job was to hold government accountable but I also, my form of activism, was also to focus on outcomes. What do I really want? My intention is not to shame the President. My intention is to get the President to pass the legislation that I seek. My intention is not necessarily to bring this government down. There are some governments that need to be brought down, by the way, but in context of some of the work that I was doing. But my intention was, hey, I want a policy that will make sure we have a progressive youth policy in Sierra Leone, that will end FGM, that will remove the ban on pregnant girls. So, to do that, I understood that there always have to be different touch points. We take the government to courts, we organize protests, we march in the streets, but we also have to engage them. People in the inside need to see why the people in the outside are feeling the pressure, because the other thing that power does to you is, isolates you from the reality. You're not feeling the effects of everything that everybody else is

feeling. You know, you're not folding the queue. You're not feeling all the pinch of what people are feeling. That's just the reality. You know, it's not a question of even economics, because for me personally, I was in a frankly better economic position than being in government. But still power will insulate you. It insulates you from so many different things. So that's why you need that connection. So, you feel that urgency. You feel how people are feeling and you're making decisions not just to keep yourself in power, but to solve the problems that people want you to solve.

Adelle Onyango [00:37:34]

What have you found most effective in that opening up process in your role as Minister?

Minister Chernor Bah [00:37:41]

So, the way I approach transparency and openness in government is from a position, an assumption that people are reasonable. People will understand if you're honest and open with them. When I became a Minister, and my job is actually primarily, part of my job is to build public trust. And that's what, that was my commitments when I went to Parliament, is that I will use my background as a civil society activist, as somebody who has been calling for government to change, to be that change, to build trust, to build an open government. And I started with the most simple thing. The primary language we speak in Sierra Leone is Creole. It's the common language spoken and understood by about 90% of the population. English is spoken and understood by less than 20% of the population, yet the business of government has always been conducted in English. No campaigns were conducted in English. When people campaigned, they campaigned in Creole. And when they governed, they govern in English. It was not rocket science to see the disparity there that you cannot campaign in one language, and you govern in another. It's a shift that I'm gonna speak to your heart. You know, they all say that when you want to speak to people's hearts, you speak their language. When I'm seeking your vote, but as soon as I get it, I'm going to speak in this elite language that most of you don't understand and that's my way of keeping you out of the governance process. And so, if I don't even understand what you're saying, if you're speaking over my head, then everything just looks complicated. So, one of the first things we did, we said the business of public engagement with our citizens, now from a governance perspective, we'll be done in the language that everybody understands. And it was shocking, because we also have a colonial mentality where English is supposed to be the language of aspiration and the language of governance. But it was also the language of exclusion. So, we pushed and said, "No, we're going do everything in Creole." And just that, people feeling like, whoa, they can engage, they can ask questions, they can

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understand what we're saying. We've gotta speak to them in a way that's too simple. That's number one.

Two is to bring the principles to talk to people and do it consistently over a period of time. So just every week we're gonna do public engagement. You start by giving them as much information as possible and they're gonna be like, you know what, we understand. This is it, this is the reality. But people in government, in my mind at least, I've always started from thinking that, oh, you can't trust the citizens with this information. You know, there's many American movies where it's like, you don't know the truth, you don't want the truth, you know? I feel a few good men, you know? It can't handle the truth. But I come from opposites of that, thinking people can actually handle the truth and you got to trust them with that. And there's going to be some inconveniences in that process. They're going to always also be idiots. They're going to be people that are wild, who kind of take advantage of their feeds and sick. But I think the mass of people are reasonable. And that's where governance happens. And you find that mass that you can work with.

Adelle Onyango [00:41:03]

So how do you balance pushing for transparency with, you know, the political realities of that landscape, as you've mentioned, of power, of the dynamics that come with that.

Minister Chernor Bah [00:41:17]

I've always said that power is an intoxicant, and it does get into your head, and it's capable of getting you drunk. Look, you move one day from opening your own door, walking into a room and finding a place to sit, of joining the queue with everybody else at the airports and everything. And to the next day, now you have an armed guard that's in front of you. You're in the motorcade here and there when the President is traveling. If you're lucky, you're on flights, you get to the airports now, there's somebody waiting for you. You don't have a line. It can get into your head. So, it's important to table that and I think for me, because I'd also been such a critic of power and a lot of my friends also had been in power for a while, I went in knowing that I am not immune to the intoxication of power and that's also really important. And so, then you ask yourself, okay, so what are my guardrails? How am I going to make sure that I stay true to who I want to be, to the values that I have. And I think it's the most simple things. It's the most simple things. And one is the friends that you keep and the friends that you've had all your life and making be intentional about having that same relationship and openness and candor with the friends that you have with your family, being rooted in my family and the values that I have with my family, you know, coming home every day, making sure I'm around for dinner, almost 100% of the time, I still got something to say,

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you know, putting my kids to bed, it keeps you grounded in an extraordinary way, engaging them and understanding and then doing the things that you used to do even before you got a mask into the power. So those things keep you human, keep your feet on the ground, in that respect, and then making space for reflection, constant reflection. You know, I come from a tradition of peace studies, and I studied at the University of Notre Dame where the Kroc Institute's value on peace studies is the idea of a practitioner reflection and that constantly you have to like make space to think, okay, what did I do this week? What could I have done different, how am I pursuing the values that I set myself up for and where I'm farming those values. So, in my team, publicly, when I speak, whatever I do, I hold myself to a very different set of standards and those are the standards that I want to be held by. So, it's a complex way of trying to balance that, and hold that, and reflecting, and writing, and thinking, and engaging, and having people that are mentors, peer mentors, that hold you accountable for you to really, I think, have the antidote to the intoxicant that is power.

Adelle Onyango [00:44:14]

So how do you think governments can adapt to the expectations of the young people that they serve?

Minister Chernor Bah [00:44:22]

I'd like to push back on the exceptionalism of every generation of young people, you know, I've read enough of history to realize that each generation thoughts the young generation that was coming through is so wild and so unreasonable and so crazy. I feel like you can go back each generation thought the same about the young generation that was coming back. And so it's really important perspective to hold that it is just the natural way of things that our reality in this generation and I think of myself, you know, I'm just 40 and young in government and we're radical in government, and yet the tools that we have, the ways that we operates, the ways that we use those tools, are very different from the way that the different generation that's coming up, generation of my kids or people that are 10 years younger than me will have. And so, I think, having that perspective that this is the way that history works, that the young generation is going to come through this door they're going to come with their own tools, their own set of values, and that it is the job of us who hold power to adapt for them and not expect them to adapt for us that's the problem. And this is the same problem, by the way, in youth advocacy. Like, I've been a youth activist, I've been knocking on UN doors, Security Council, so I've been trying to change the system my whole life. And I know one of the challenges often is that the people in the room with power think, "Yeah, you want to come into this room, just adapt, put on the suits, have the degrees, dress like us, tick all the boxes, and come into the room." And actually, young people are

saying, "Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. We want to change that room. We want to change the idea of a room. We want to like remove that table. I don't want to sit on the table. I want to upend this institution." And that's a tension; it's a real tension. And so, I think what governance is in my mind at least and what I try to say to my colleagues, "Where do you find the middle?" Because you don't want to scare the colleagues and thinking that, "Oh, everything's going to just change and when our lives are going to be different." Because that's also not going to necessarily lead to good outcomes. It's not necessarily guaranteed good outcomes. But hey, the world is changing. You've got to adapt, or you are going to be left behind. That change is coming. What do you manage of that change? How are aspects of that that do you facilitate? And how do you adapt? And as young people too, because here's another uncomfortable truth, young people do get old. I'm here, I was a young person just yesterday I think, and I'm getting a bit older. So, they also adapt and they're bringing enough of the radicalism and the passion to hopefully you find that balance and you merge it.

Adelle Onyango [00:47:30]

I think just to wrap up our conversation because of you've given such tangible points in the mindset shift that needs to happen within government, tangible steps that government can take. But maybe if we open it up to civil society, global partners, when it comes to making sure that democratic systems really do work for citizens, work for the youth, do you feel like there's some practical steps that civil society and maybe global partners can take as well?

Minister Chernor Bah [00:47:59]

I think the first thing I would say is to understand that we're all partners and we're all seeking to make the system or make society work better and so find ways to see the good in each other. And that's very difficult from starting from a position of, oh, these people are evil. These people are bad. I've learned I've been on both sides, and they are good and bad people on each side. And I've seen the worst of civil society, I've seen the best of civil society, the worst of governments and the best of governments, you know. And, also, international institutions have worked for the UN as well. So, understand that nobody has a monopoly of the truth. Nobody has a monopoly of what is righteous. and I think that that's one. But in terms of like practical steps, I think be willing to listen, be willing to engage, create platforms for engagements, this idea of reasonable conversations and not BS people, not conversations where you just kind of reinforce what you want to hear, but different platforms. And I say, listen to different groups in the way that they want to be heard. Some people don't want to be heard by being on a podcast, some people want to be heard by singing music, and so you should listen to the lyrics of the song. Some people

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want to be heard by art, some people want to be heard by protest. You've gotta be willing to listen to how people want to be heard. And listening is not just hearing, it's also incorporating that. And again, listening to government, listening to the challenges that we face, while we're government having to balance the different things that we need to balance. And be propositional with different ideas and steps that we can all take to make things better.

Adelle Onyango [00:49:40]

Thank you for making time to be on the show with us and just being so open.

Minister Chernor Bah [00:49:45]

Thank you.

Adelle Onyango [00:49:53]

Last, but not least, let's head over to Nigeria to talk to Chimdindu Neliaku and really understand the power of having young voices at the highest levels of policy dialogue.

Adelle Onyango [00:50:17]

Thank you so much for making time to be on the podcast with us, Chimdi.

Chimdindu Neliaku [00:50:22]

Thanks for having me, Adelle.

Adelle Onyango [00:50:24]

I wanted to dig into your grassroots work and work as a member of the Panel of the Future in how the government can specifically with young Africans get them in and support them in contributing to transparent and accountable governance. What are those tangible steps that have worked outside of, let's say, the regional town halls? But how can we specifically get African youth in?

Chimdindu Neliaku [00:50:52]

The first is really just listening and engaging. That is super important because you can talk at the people, you can share this is what we want to do. But, that doesn't make as much effort or as much impact, I must say, as when you are listening to the people and when you are engaging with the people. Two separate things.

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The second part, I think, is training and mentorship. I fundamentally believe that no generation can achieve the Africa of our dreams or the world of our dreams, the Nigeria of our dreams alone. It must be intergenerational collaboration and co-leadership. I recognize that the older generation has wisdom, has insights that young people can benefit from. Young people on our part have a lot of vibrancy, a lot of ideas, innovation, and just amazing things that we bring to the table. So, the best of both worlds is having that meeting in the middle and bringing the best of both worlds into government. That means that we should then have intentional efforts of governments to train young people to lead. That's something that we increasingly see across the continent. If we don't intentionally start grooming young people to lead, then we're preparing to have a generation of leaders that will fail the country and will fail the continent.

The final thing I would say is to then create access and give opportunities to showcase. Now that does maybe two or three things. One, if you train people you have to give them the opportunity to showcase what they've learned. I always say that leadership is an action word. You don't lead by just knowing the principles in your head. You lead by leading. You learn to lead by leading. So young people have to have the opportunity to be in spaces where they can showcase, they can learn, they can improve, they can hone their leadership skills.

Two, when these opportunities are given to young people, we start to create a new narrative around youth leadership. I can't speak for all countries in Africa, but I will say that in Nigeria, we have had a few examples of youth leaders that have not been so positive. And that then becomes the example to say, well, when we gave XYZ the example, what did he do with it? What did she do with it? But I always say if you give two people, for instance, out of 100 people, an opportunity and they fail, that's not, you know, such a bad statistic. If you give, you know, 20 or you give 10 or you give 30 out of 100, I'm sure the numbers wouldn't be the same. You know, so there will always be bad eggs, whether it's in the older generation, whether it's in the younger generation, whether it's in women, whether it's in persons with disability. But when we widen the scope and we give more opportunities and we, you know, streamline the process for giving these opportunities, then we will see better results, and we will see young people that will deliver. So, we really need to give more young people that opportunity to lead and to be part of the national development process.

Adelle Onyango [00:54:25]

Based on the work that you're doing and the experience you're having with what you're doing in Nigeria, what are these actionable steps that perhaps governments can take or

even international partners and regional partners to strengthen accountability? Because I feel like without accountability, hoping that there can be trust is just a hope. It'll never come.

Chimdindu Neliaku [00:54:47]

I feel that government has to, one, be proactive. That is the word. Government has to start, government has to initiate the engagement, government has to initiate the dissemination of information. It shouldn't be the people saying what happened here, it should be that government has already put that information out there and it is accurate. Because we have seen a few times where information will be put out and then Nigerians and, again, young people would call that out and say, no, hold on. That's not very accurate. And that could cause more issues around trust. But then I will say that there could be situations where there's some sort of a mistake or a gap that leads to the wrong information going out. But then the next line of action is then, how do we address that situation? So, the governments that do take responsibility and say, yes, you're right, we're sorry, this was a gap on our part, we take responsibility for this, and they put out again the correct thing that helps to manage the issue of trust. But where you find a government standing on a lie or standing on something that is not accurate, then it further deepens the trust deficit. So that's what I'll say.

And then I'll say overall, when they see it this way, government will be able to find creative ways to deepen trust, whether it's through involving technology, more technology in what we're doing. For instance, in the National Assembly, we're starting an e-parliament system where Nigerians would access all parliamentary records, would be able to engage with their lawmakers on this technology will be able to, even in real time, share with their parliamentarians on the floor of the National Assembly what their views are on debates taking place in parliament. When you understand where people are coming from and you engage with them and understand and ask them what their challenges are, you can then creatively think of the solutions that can fix the relationship. So, government and people have to have their own sort of joints therapy session and then work out ways, you know, to address issues.

Adelle Onyango [00:57:09]

If you could talk to young Africans who are listening to you right now on the podcast in terms of pushing for a better Africa, what is the one thing you will tell them to start off with in relation to connecting with, engaging with their governments. What's the next smallest step young Africans can take? And I just threw that in there because I just feel there's a lot

of inspiration coming off when you're speaking. And I would love that to hit home with the young Africans listening.

Chimdindu Neliaku [00:57:40]

One, young people don't give up on Africa. Africa is destined for great things. And African youth will solve not just African problems or global problems. The statistics are clear. The numbers are there. The resilience of Africans, you know, it's all there. We have all these things in our favor. You have to be blind to not see the fact that Africa is the future and Africa, the future is here, you know, Africa is destined to be the number one continent. I will put it that way. So don't give up. There's a lot of work to be done. But I truly, truly encourage young people to not give up and to commit themselves to be partners in progress, not to tear down our countries but to build. And we have a lot of conversations in Nigeria and I'm sure in other countries, in fact, we've termed it JAPA. I'm sure you may have heard the JAPA syndrome, where a lot of young people are leaving the country and going abroad because they're in search of greener pastures. And I've said that that may not be a terrible thing if the idea that these young Africans are going out with is that we're going to learn, we're going to take up all these experiences and take up space to bring all that back home. If that is your goal, then I think that we're on the right track because if you see all the other countries who've done it, China has done it. So many other countries have done it. They've gone out there and they've come back to build home. There is no place like home. And if young people, young Nigerians, and young Africans have that mentality that we must build home, just give Africa a few more years. We won't recognize how amazing our continent will be.

Adelle Onyango [00:59:42]

Chimdi, thank you so much.

Chimdindu Neliaku [00:59:44]

Thanks for having me, Adelle, I enjoyed the conversation.

Mark Leon Goldberg [01:00:04]

Adelle, that was such a great series of conversations. So, I'm curious, as someone who has lived in Kenya, traveled extensively throughout the continent, how have you experienced that trust deficit? Is it something that you feel, does it impact your daily life in any way?

Adelle Onyango [01:00:19]

Mark, that trust deficit is so real. It's like my companion through everything. And just to bring it home in Kenya, last year, June 2024, I think the entire world saw that we were frustrated during the finance bill protest. So young Kenyans flooded the streets. I went to the streets as well. And one of the main things we were amplifying our voices against is the moves by government and these moves that work not in the best interests of Kenyans actually fueled the trust deficit that was already in existence, right? And even today, you hear it in everyday conversations, so communities see funds announced for schools, for hospitals. But, when you visit these areas, sometimes the projects are there, but they're unfinished, or they're nonexistent. So, the gap between what's promised and what's delivered just feeds mistrust daily. And on a personal level, just day to day, for me to be able to be a tax-compliant businesswoman in Kenya, I have to pay my taxes. But whenever I do, I'm always questioning, will that money actually improve services? I don't see the benefit around me, which then makes me lose a lot of trust in the government. So, the trust deficit is real, not just in Kenya, but across the continent.

Mark Leon Goldberg [01:01:43]

You know, it's interesting. In your answer just now, you really reflected a lot of the perspectives that I heard in this conversation, which is that, yes, governments and institutions urgently need to take steps to reverse the widening deficit. But, you know, ordinary individuals as well have a role to play. I mean, you mentioned the protest in Kenya last year, particularly it seems like youth have a role to play.

Adelle Onyango [01:02:10]

Yes. One thing that came out in this episode, which is a very humbling moment, a lot of times we're constantly pointing the fingers, our fingers at the government. I mean, I just did that a few seconds ago. But we were really reminded that as citizens, we have a role to play when Samson was talking about the Not Too Young to Run campaign. I mean, it even showed how young people can organize, can use digital activism, and really force real change. Then you have Afrobarometer. If we didn't have a role to play, then they wouldn't need to look at data that looks at how citizens play a role in holding governments accountable. So, yes, institutions must lead in rebuilding trust, but the citizens, and really on the continent, it's the youth. The youth have enormous power. So, through advocacy, through voting, in Kenya we're gearing up for elections in 2027, and through consistent civic engagement, we have a role to play in pushing the system forward.

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Mark Leon Goldberg [01:03:13]

Well, Adelle, again such a great episode. Thank you so much. I really am enjoying this series tremendously.

Adelle Onyango [01:03:21]

Me too, Mark, me too. And I'm looking forward to the next episode where we focus on educating the next generation me too.

Mark Leon Goldberg [01:03:28]

Me too. Thank you, Adelle and thank you all for listening.

Mark Leon Goldberg [01:03:41]

Thank you for listening to The Future of Africa, a special series on Global Dispatches produced in partnership with the African Union, the Elders, and the United Nations Foundation.

I'm Mark Leon Goldberg, the host and founder of Global Dispatches. This series is hosted by Adelle Onyango. It is edited and mixed by Levi Sharp. You can find all episodes in this series and access episode transcripts at globaldispatches.org.