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Transcript

Ghana's Democratic Gains, Economic Change and Regional Influence

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Alex Vines:

Good evening, everybody. My name is Alex Vines. I'm one of the directors at Chatham House, and your host tonight. Very welcome to you all. I'm delighted this evening that we can host here the president, His Excellency John Mahama, president of Ghana. He will be speaking on 'Ghana's Democratic Gains, Economic Change and Regional Influence'. This is really welcoming back the president, because he visited Chatham House as vice-president on trade and energy policy in July 2010.

Ghana is, of course, a country that Chatham House does considerable amounts of work on. The former president, President John Kufuor, has spoken here – indeed, he won the Chatham House Prize. We've also had various other ministers of the Ghana government speaking here, but also opposition: Nana Akufo-Addo, the presidential candidate of the New Patriotic Party, visited Chatham House in February 2012, in the run-up to last year's elections, to talk about his vision for Ghana.

But today it's about the president of Ghana, President Mahama, talking about the democratic gains that Ghana has achieved, its economic change and regional influence.

Excellency, welcome back to Chatham House.

John Mahama:

Thank you very much. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased and happy to be back here after several years. I remember I was invited to give a talk here in 2010, as the moderator said. At that time the topic was on Ghana's emerging oil and gas industry. Today I'm asked to talk on 'Ghana's Democratic Gains, Economic Change and Regional Influence'. But I guess that Ghana should be taken in a context and as a context of Africa, so I'm going to be talking both about Africa and Ghana, almost interchangeably. I think that all the things you see happening in Ghana are happening elsewhere in Africa.

In 2004, when FIFA announced that South Africa had been chosen to host the 2010 World Cup, the entire continent was overjoyed. Never before had the World Cup been held on African soil. Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's president at the time, said, 'Africa's time has come. We want to ensure that one day historians will reflect upon the 2010 World Cup as the moment when Africa stood tall and resolutely turned the tide on centuries of poverty and conflict.'

The teams of six African nations qualified to play in the World Cup: South Africa, Nigeria, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Algeria, and of course, my own country, Ghana. The crowd that assembled in the Johannesburg stadium in June 2010 for the opening ceremony of the games was a microcosm of the entire continent. The energy was electrifying, from the thunderous beating of drums to the deafening blares of – I'm sure you remember that instrument – the vuvuzelas. Not since the days of independence from colonial rule had Africans seemed so united in their sense of determination, in their expectation of victory. Never mind that apartheid had only officially ended in South Africa in 1992, and that was the first year that country's team, Bafana Bafana, played their first match.

It was the same year that Ghana, my country, returned to multi-party democracy, in 1992. Never mind that Cote d'Ivoire was only seven years out of a debilitating civil war, or that in Nigeria acts of religious violence were on the rise, or that Cameroon was in the midst of serious economic turmoil, or that Algeria was already witnessing small waves of social unrest that would ultimately erupt in large-scale protests. Never mind any of that. It would be extremely poetic to say that when the squads of those six nations marched onto the field, nothing else mattered, except the game. But that's not altogether true. Everything mattered: the world's eyes were focused on Africa. It was our moment, and there was a point to be proven; there was history to be made.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I don't need to tell you what happened next. Unfortunately, one by one, our teams were eliminated. But as a testament to our solidarity and the continent's desire to achieve success on that international stage, every time an African team was eliminated, its fans shifted their support and allegiance to one of the other remaining African nations. Soon enough, Ghana's Black Stars, the only African team to advance to the round of 16 and then the quarterfinals, found itself carrying the hope of the entire continent on its shoulders.

Sports and politics have always had a special, almost symbolic relationship. The Greek philosopher Plato once said, 'You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in one year of conversation.' I believe that's also true of a nation: whether and how a nation performs on the playing field says as much about the nation as whether and how it performs on the battlefield or in the ballot box.

The Black Stars' performance in the 2010 World Cup, not unlike their performance in the 2006 World Cup, is as good an indicator as any of

Ghana's role regionally and throughout the continent, as well as on the international stage. Ghana first gained a reputation of being a trailblazer when in 1957 it became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence. But that's old news. The real story is that since then, despite whatever difficulties the country has faced, we've never been satisfied to merely rest on those laurels. Ghana continues to make news and maintain its relevance. Over the years, Ghana has solidified its reputation with the various advances that it has made: advances in the demonstration of democracy and the rule of law; advances in healthcare delivery; advances in technology and communications; and indeed, advances in our economic growth.

I use Ghana's performance in the World Cup as a metaphor to open this talk because, as is often the case in conversations about Africa, the emphasis tends to not be on the gains that have been made, the small but significant victories, but rather on the isolated wins or losses. This sort of binary system is far too simplistic a method of judgment for the complex nature of Africa and its countries, and Ghana stands as a prime example. Despite winning the Africa Cup of Nations four times, 2006 was still the first time that Ghana had qualified for the senior FIFA World Cup. Still we took the lead for Africa, going as far as the round of 16. In 2010 we once again took the lead, and that time we went even further, to the quarterfinals. With this type of progress, one can only imagine where the future will find us, both on the football field and in reality.

What I'm here to talk about today is neither success nor failure. I'm here to talk about progress. Ghana's first president, Dr Kwame Nkrumah, famously said, 'We face neither east nor west. We face forward.' I'm here to talk about the strides that Ghana has made and is continuing to make, and the importance of us maintaining that pace of not looking left or right at what other nations are doing or where they are going, but as Dr Nkrumah said, facing forward and paving our own road into the future. Why? Because being a trailblazer can be both a blessing and a burden: a blessing in that it is always wonderful for one's achievements to be recognized; a burden in that along with this recognition is a built-in expectation of sustained success. It is an expectation that does not allow enough room for the patience that is necessary to account for progress, which often seems low, especially for a developing nation like Ghana. You see, depending on the vantage point you stand, progress and success are not always one and the same thing.

I'd like to share with you a portrait of two different countries: Ghana of 2000 and Ghana of today. In 2000, there was a 4.7 per cent prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS; in 2012, the prevalence rate was 1.3 per cent. In 2000, the rate of

maternal death was 600 deaths per 100,000; by 2012, that rate had been halved to 300 deaths per 100,000. In 2000, average life expectancy in Ghana was about 54 years; in 2012, it's 62 years. In 2000, the per capita income was around \$420; today it's at about \$1,500.

When these portraits are placed side by side, when you look at where we are today as compared to where we were in 2000, there is a tendency to use the word 'success'. In fact we have been successful in our efforts to manifest change. Yet success is such a finite word, one that suggests an immediacy of action, one that implies arrival at a destination. Progress can be deceptive because although it is easy to recognize over long stretches of time, it can be difficult to see on a day-to-day basis because it also encompasses the minor setbacks that, when viewed in the short term, can be labelled as failure. I suspect that during the 12-year span of time that existed between these two portraits of Ghana, there were a number of setbacks and impediments that temporarily kept our nation standing still. I suspect that if questioned on any given day during the 12-year span of time, the average citizen might have readily complained about the lack of progress that was being made. This seeming lack of progress is a common complaint in many developing nations and Ghana, despite usually being at the forefront of change and achievement on the continent, is no exception.

That is why it is crucial for us to change the way in which we frame our conversations about Africa. It is crucial that we consider not just the attainment of an end goal but the small and steady advances that are being made to reach that goal. By changing the way in which we frame our discussions about Africa, we also change the unrealistic expectations of overnight success and the discouraging notion of failure when those expectations are not immediately met. The lens through which we view Africa must show a realistic depiction of what is actually happening on the continent and how these events are affecting the lives of ordinary people.

Throughout the centuries, Africa has existed in the world's imagination in myriad ways. We have been depicted as a 'dark continent', a den of exotic diseases, an annex of adventure and safari. We have been cast in a fairy tale of freedom, one in which the attainment of independence was thought to proffer a happy ending. We have been painted as the perpetually impoverished land, the place of political upheaval, the place where everything bad can and usually does happen. We have been patronized by the media, by donors and by aid organizations.

All this notwithstanding, Africa has persevered, so much so that half of the countries in the top 10 list of the fastest-growing economies in the world today are in Africa. However, the fact of that achievement does not negate the existence of other areas in those countries that need to be improved. Ghana, with a GDP of \$34 billion in 2012 as compared to \$18.7 billion in 2006, finds itself atop that list of fast-growing economies. Yet we also find ourselves struggling to meet the challenges posed by a fast-growing population, challenges such as the creation of more jobs to curb the rate of youth unemployment and the rapid expansion of an infrastructure that no longer adequately serves our nation's needs.

If we were able to look into the future, we would very well be able to paint a picture of the Ghana we would find then and compare it to a picture of Ghana we find today, and we would be able to clearly see the progress that is being made right now to move us towards that future. Sustainable change is rarely immediate. It is measured, a process of step after painstaking step being taken in the direction of an intended target or goal. The role that patience plays in this process cannot be understated. The absence of patience ultimately leads to the absence of direction. It is that patience and the keen sense of focus it engenders which has enabled Ghana throughout the years to time and time again be a trailblazer on the African continent – in politics, in sports and in the improvement of the lives of our citizens.

Tomorrow, along with 17 other nations, Ghana is set to receive an award from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization for its progress in reaching the Millennium Development Goal of decreasing hunger and undernourishment. The award is being given to countries that have met the target of cutting the percentage of people in their population suffering from hunger and undernourishment between 1992 and 2012 – that is, cutting the number of people suffering from hunger and undernourishment by half. In 1990, the prevalence of undernourishment in Ghana's population was 34 per cent; in 2000, that figure was 11.1 per cent. By 2012, that figure was reduced even further, to 5 per cent.

I'm almost certain that tomorrow, when Ghana and the other nations are honoured for their achievement, the eyes of the entire world will not be trained on that stage. There will not be a stadium full of people beating on drums and blowing into vuvuzelas. Nevertheless, history will have been made. This is the nature of progress, and the reward for the patience that it demands. It happens in minor but consistent increments. It more often than not goes unnoticed and then finally one day when enough ground has been gained, it is announced – bam! – and labelled a success.

Until then, and even after then, we continue to face forward. We continue to take step after painstaking step. We continue to make progress in all areas of our citizens' lives so that Ghana can live up to the full promise of its vast potential. Thank you for your time.