

# Attracting African talent back to the continent

At the New York Forum Africa in Libreville, Gabon, industrialist Ivor Ichikowitz called for increased innovation to attract African talent back to the continent. The founder and chairman of Paramount Group, Africa's largest privately owned defence and aerospace manufacturer, said "Our greatest resource is our people."

The New York Forum Africa is one of the largest gatherings of politicians, investors, entrepreneurs and NGOs in Africa, hosted under the patronage of the President of Gabon, Ali Bongo. Other heads of state and key political figures attending the Forum include the President Alassane Ouattara from Ivory Coast, former President of Colombia Andres Pastrana, former President of Poland, Lech Walesa and former President of the European Union, Jose Barroso.

Ichikowitz appreciated the theme for this year's forum, 'Invest in the energy continent', as it deviates from the usual African narrative of resources. "The title is a really interesting one; it is investing in Africa's energy economy but it specifically it is not about oil and gas. You know everybody defines Africa by its commodities, or the raw materials it can provide to the world, but the truth is that Africa's greatest asset is its people and the energy that comes from its people."



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The continent is facing a new challenge and it is struggling to rely on its most reliable reputation of resources as prices drop dramatically and global influences continue to navigate our growth - but Ichikowitz sees a positive aspect. "It is a very interesting time in the development of the continent because we have to rethink what the continent is about, the commodity crisis, the drop in the oil crisis actually contributed, very positively to innovation because we have to become more creative, we have to find other ways to stimulate our economies."

## Stop emigration

The message he wants to emphasise at this Forum is the need to prioritise African people and minimise the amount of professionals emigrating. "Our greatest resource is our people and interestingly enough one of our biggest exports is our people, referring to the amount of professionals the continent loses to the rest of the world."

"If you look at the statistics - far more professional Africans are working outside of Africa than are working inside Africa."

He worries that certain countries on the continent that have windfalls might be at a disadvantage because these "suppress" innovation, something the continent may need in this changing phase.

## **Uplifting education**

"We have to create industry, we have to create innovation opportunities to bring those people back to Africa, as well as find ways to keep the next generation in Africa. The key element, which takes countries from emerging economies to established economies, is skill levels and in the past we have had very high levels of education in many African countries but this has slipped."

He believes education is becoming a challenge but that South Africa is starting to get it right. "We are doing this very successfully in South Africa and a number of other African countries are investing more and more in education.

"However, that has to continue and the private sector has to invest more for that to happen, to invest in creating industry in Africa to use that labour and to use that intellectual resource. The roles of government and private business are different and we should first establish who can provide what.

"Everybody believes that in the African context, it is the responsibility of governments to provide, which is not the case, it is the responsibility of government and policymakers to create an enabling environment - the private sector has to provide.

"That way the continent can create stability, security, and invest in securing people's assets and thereafter the innovation that is culturally inherent in Africans will come to the fore," concludes Ichikowitz.

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