Giving Pledge

I am a very lucky African boy as, although born to a modest Nubian family, thanks to my mother’s strong belief in education I graduated as a telecommunications engineer. Again, I was lucky to have the opportunity to further my education in the UK, develop my skills and ride that magical technology elevator to financial success.

It is tempting to claim that my material success was due to my hard work, intelligence or even genius. To be honest I don’t think that I am much smarter or hardworking than my childhood friends and schoolmates. I have been lucky to have the support and sacrifice of my parents, lucky to have the opportunity to get academic and technical training in the UK and lucky to specialise in mobile technology just prior to the cellular revolution. To be repeatedly in the right place at the right time; that is the mother of all luck.

The first business I built was called MSI, a consultancy and software company which designed mobile networks across Europe, the US and Asia. The success and later the sale of MSI ten years later provided me with the financial resources and the credibility in the industry to launch Celtel, to build and operate mobile networks across Sub-Sahara Africa. At the time Africa, and in particular Sub-Saharan Africa, was a no-go area for infrastructure investors. Celtel was a success story, it helped transform Africa and contribute to the social and economic development of the continent. Celtel was also a great success for its shareholders and employees.

In 2005, after we sold Celtel, I had to face the big question — Now what? Where to go from here...? I knew instinctively the broad direction was Africa. I knew that I needed to go back and do something for our people — it is a moral duty and African custom to look after your extended family. I felt my extended family reached from Cairo to Cape Town.

Nelson Mandela described Africa as “a rich continent of poor people” ... but why?

I believe we are poor because of the failures of governance and leadership in many of our countries.

In 2006 I launched the Mo Ibrahim Foundation to focus on the issues of Good Governance and Leadership in Africa. Good Governance is the basket of public goods governments must deliver to its people. It includes — but is not limited to — security, rule of law, economic opportunity, infrastructure, management of public finance, transparency, education, health and citizens rights. We need to move from narrative and rhetoric to facts and figures. Our Index of African Governance measures well over 100 parameters to evaluate government delivery in every African country.
Effectively, we are producing an annual scorecard to measure performance. The objective is not to name or shame anybody but to understand where we are, what works and what doesn’t and to facilitate an objective discussion between all governments, parliaments, academics, business, civil society and beyond.

We also launched our annual prize for excellence in leadership aimed at democratically elected African presidents who served well, took their countries forward, built institutions, respected the constitution and retired on time facilitating the peaceful transfer of power. Over the past 6 years the Prize Committee (of which I am not a member) has offered the prize to three wonderful African presidents but not shied away from withholding it on an equal number of occasions.

We launched an annual forum in Africa to discuss and develop solutions for our most critical issues. The event has evolved quickly into an African Governance week with many institutions and civil society groups coming together.

We also offer a program of fellowships and scholarships for promising young African men and women.

While economic aid and relief efforts for Africa are wonderful and commendable acts of solidarity, we need to change the way our countries are run. I hope that my foundation can help change mindsets and place Governance and Leadership at the heart of the international development debate.

Our work in Africa has credibility because it has been and must remain an African effort funded by clean and transparent African money with no “vested interests” whatsoever. As a result our foundation does not raise funds or accept donations. I have committed to fully funding the organisation as, after all, it is only fitting that money made in Africa should go back to support Africa.

Since 2006 I have allocated well above 50% of all my earnings to the foundation, and I have put in place a legal framework to ring fence funding after my death.

I have also established “Satya Capital” as a vehicle for ethical investment in Africa because I believe that investment is crucial in creating jobs and prosperity. I also happen to know that investment in Africa generates some of the highest returns available anywhere in the world.

When Bill Gates, a man I greatly admire, suggested I join the “Pledge” initiative I had no hesitation in accepting. It is a great honour for me to join those wonderful men and women whose wealth and fame does not obscure or cloud the simple fact that they are part of this wonderful human tribe.