

SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY, PAUL KAGAME, PRESIDENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF RWANDA, AT THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

London, Commonwealth Club, March 9th 2010

- ✚ Mr. Peter Kellner, Chairman of the Royal Commonwealth Society;
- ✚ Mr. Danny Sriskandarajah [Shris-can-da-ra-ja], Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society;
- ✚ The Commonwealth Community in London;
- ✚ Distinguished invitees:

I would like to begin by thanking the Royal Commonwealth Society for inviting me to speak on the importance of young people in the development of Rwanda, Africa and, indeed, of all 54 nations of the Commonwealth.

In that context, it is fitting that I speak to you today representing the newest member of the Commonwealth and, as such, the youngest member of this family.

The Commonwealth not only has a rich and diverse history – it is also forward looking and embraces youth.

The strategic importance of young people in the development of my own country, the African continent, and the entire Commonwealth is a theme that I know the Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) seeks to promote.

I am delighted that the RCS will be hosting the Africa Commonwealth Youth Leadership Programme in Rwanda later this year, and hopefully our discussions today will feed into preparations towards that event.

In any country, the youth should be pillars for the future. Rwanda's vision for our youth builds on the one we have set for the country as a whole: prosperity, self-sufficiency, and dignity through innovation, creativity, technology, and values – including traditional ones.

We also want youth that are able to determine their own destiny – through choices and opportunities that their predecessors are working hard to provide.

Young people are an important demographic in Rwanda – 75 percent of the population are under 30 years of age, and 40 percent were born after the genocide.

Although youth were mobilized in large numbers to murder their fellow citizens during the genocide, it was also a predominantly youthful movement that liberated the country and ended the slaughter. And today, young men and women are playing a useful role in Rwanda's reconstruction and ongoing development.

Through-out our re-building process, our youth continue to show immense resilience. Many have had to shoulder heavy responsibilities since the genocide, including providing for their siblings at an age when they needed care themselves. Against incredible odds, they are

contributing meaningfully to reconciliation in their villages and across the country.

In a sense, a lot is being asked of Rwandan youth – they have inherited a difficult past, and must also work hard to consolidate and drive forward the gains that have been made over the last 16 years.

Their role in this regard is critical - which is why, for example, there are two youth representatives in Parliament who participate in debates aimed at seeking home-grown solutions to Rwanda's particular challenges. Young people have also formed cooperatives from the grassroots level to empower themselves economically and create better livelihoods.

Rwanda's experience with engaging youth has reinforced the lesson that bad governance can corrupt the minds and actions of young people, and that the inverse is also true: if given the support and confidence needed, youth can be a formidable force.

 Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Investing in youth at the national and international level is not only the right thing to do, it is also imperative. Fifty percent of the world's population is under 25 years of age, and half a billion of these young people live in Commonwealth countries. In Africa, the situation is even more marked – two out of three Africans are in this age-group.

Unfortunately, however, young people often bear the brunt of underdevelopment. In sub-Saharan Africa, 4 out of 10 young people do not have jobs, and 3 out of 10 are illiterate.

Furthermore, youth are becoming increasingly caught up in conflict situations globally – we need to strengthen the resolve of young people from being drawn towards extremism or drugs.

To this end, we will need to provide an environment in which our youth have a positive view of their future and feel valued by society. This assurance should be translated beyond words into our policies and programs. Allow me to offer a few proposals in this regard.

First of all, quality education is paramount. In Rwanda, we recognise that the political freedom we fought for can be undermined if young people find themselves trapped in the ignorance caused by illiteracy. In response, we offer the first nine years of education free; as a result, Rwanda should be ahead of the Millennium Development Goal target on universal primary education.

Beyond schooling, we recognise the urgent need for high quality skills development programmes – tertiary education, including basic literacy and numeracy but also covering the communication, analytical, scientific and technical skills demanded in the 21st century economy.

Our youth can only be productive for themselves and their communities as long as they are healthy. Diseases like HIV/AIDS, Malaria and others continue to disproportionately threaten the youth – education, prevention and treatment programs should be designed with the youth in mind.

Secondly, we must tackle youth unemployment. We need coherent employment programmes for young people and access to finance for talented entrepreneurs. It is also important to promote microfinance and cooperatives that support the youth to become job makers rather than seekers.

Third, we should lead by example in setting a culture of innovation and independence. Young people must be encouraged to seize the opportunities of a globalised economy and become truly entrepreneurial, not just in business, but in science, the arts and politics. They should understand that it is not right or sustainable to depend on hand-outs from anyone – they need to drive their own development.

And lastly, young people should challenge their leaders, and take up such responsibilities as well. These kinds of challenges to the status quo are good for any healthy democracy and I personally welcome them – which is why events like the annual National Dialogue in Rwanda provides a forum for ordinary citizens, especially the youth, to express their views directly to high level members of the government.

The 21st century calls for a new generation of leaders – for this reason we should empower our youth to tackle issues such as climate change and sustainable development; regional and internal conflicts; unequal trade relationships; globalised corruption and bad governance.

Certainly, the Commonwealth is well placed and has the right values to contribute meaningfully to this generation of young people I am talking about. This includes supporting the movement of skilled people from countries with higher skills to those where they are critically needed. From such efforts, the productive capacities of the youth in individual member countries and collectively will increase, driving the development that we all seek.

It is also important to promote wider cultural and social sharing between our young people, aided by the Information and Communication Technologies that they use so well, to support increased collaboration and friendship.

This is a demanding but noble agenda – Rwanda looks forward to working with our new Commonwealth family members, and most especially our youth, to turn this vision into a reality.

Thank you very much for your kind attention – let me now turn it over to you for questions.