

DRAFT SPEECH OF AHUNNA EZIAKONWA

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Welcome, everyone, and thank you for being here today.

Allow me to begin with a sobering statistic. Between 2014 and 2018, some 30,000 people lost their lives in transit. A large percentage of these losses occurred over the Mediterranean Sea.

There is much that we do not know about the people who perished in this way. Some of the names, faces and stories will be lost to us forever.

But what we do know is that prominent among them were many young Africans, men and women in their prime, all of whom had weighed their odds and arrived at the same conclusion: that risking death for an uncertain future in a foreign land held greater promise than the life and opportunities they faced at home.

The migration “crisis” is disrupting African development progress in ways we are just beginning to grasp. At this critical juncture of the migration debate, it is essential that we gain a clearer understanding of its drivers, so that we and other development partners can respond more effectively.

The Global Compact recognized the need “to strengthen our knowledge and analysis of migration, as shared understanding will improve policies that unlock the potential of sustainable development for all.”

The need for shared understanding is today more palpable than ever. **Scaling Fences** appears at a time when migration has emerged unquestionably as a defining political issue for Europe, for Africa, and for the wider world.

This is why it gives me great pleasure to introduce UNDP’s flagship report.

Scaling Fences: Voices of Irregular African Migrants to Europe answers the call of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration to fill the data gap on African migrants who are choosing to travel to Europe via irregular means.

This group has received disproportionate attention in the political and media landscapes, even though we know that migration within Africa is far more common and to countries much less able to cope.

Told from the perspectives of African migrants in their own voices, the report is the first to challenge the development community to really see and hear a group of people who are more often spoken of than listened to.

Recounting the perspectives of young migrants as told in their own voices, the report is unprecedented in terms of the breadth of insights from respondents, the number of respondents, and its spread across both multiple countries of origin and countries of destination.

And what those voices make resoundingly clear is that a reframing of the partnership between Africa, Europe and the development community is in order.

The people featured in this study are not the poorest of the poor – in fact, they are relatively better educated and better off than their peers. They are the ‘springboard generation’ – beneficiaries of two decades of remarkable development progress in Africa.

Yet these bright, ambitious young people share a perception that opportunities to build on this progress and fulfil their aspirations at home are closed. This perception is held so profoundly that it has driven many to reject their known circumstances in favour of a potentially perilous and irregular journey to an unknown future in Europe.

And this brings us to a core message of the study – a paradox of sorts, one that has repeatedly played out over the course of human history, and which we are today confronting in dramatic fashion around the world: that migration is a reverberation of incomplete development, and particularly of a development trajectory that is failing young people.

The report’s title itself bears witness to this paradox. ‘**Scaling Fences**’ refers metaphorically to the barriers young Africans perceive to personal fulfilment, including through the economic and socio-political opportunities in home countries that, the data indicates, drive the will to migrate.

But no one should be forced to conclude that their best chance at life lies at the end of a dangerous journey to an uncertain destination.

Our Challenge today:

If development is failing to keep pace with rising ambition, then perhaps it is time for us as a global community to become more ambitious ourselves. To aim higher, so that the elevator of human development progress does not stall between floors, but instead launches this generation into the fullness of its expanded potential.

With every young African who chases hope across the Mediterranean, Africa sees its development dividend diminish. Think of the progress that could be achieved if the energy, drive and ingenuity of these intrepid travelers could be put to optimal use at home.

And indeed, there is no time to lose. Although irregular migration from Africa to Europe has recently declined, the phenomenon is likely to continue as most African countries develop, because though migration in all its forms is sometimes painted as a crisis, it is actually a longer-term trend – one that started long before us all here today and will continue long into the future.

So, how do we respond? How do we work together to create the conditions that will allow Africa’s most aspirational young people, custodians of the continent’s future, to see possibilities for realizing that future closer to home?

The findings of this report invite us to rethink the current response to migration. They remind us that human mobility is part of our histories, responsible for weaving together cultures, economies, and the countries we all call home. And they remind us of the importance of hope.

Hope is the commodity too many bright, ambitious young Africans are going to dangerous lengths to pursue. We as a global community must support the conditions for that hope to flourish at home.

As a first step, we should start by ensuring that the responses of all stakeholders are more firmly grounded in evidence.

That's why the voices presented in this study should not merely be heard; they must be heeded. They must actively inform our collective efforts to reframe policy and programmatic responses to migration.

By shining a light on their stories, we hope this is the beginning of broadening and advancing the current debate on migration.

Migration is part of life in a globalized, interconnected world. The people you will meet in this report are no different from young people in Finland, Sweden, Denmark or Singapore; they are open and eager to embrace a wider range of possibilities than has been possible for any previous generation. *Scaling Fences* challenges us to create for them the safer, wider pathways that they deserve.

Thank you for your kind attention.