

Representing Africa

INTERVIEW WITH SAM KUTESA

MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AND PRESIDENT OF THE SIXTY-NINTH SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY



SAM KUTESA is the current Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Ugandan Cabinet, a position he has held since January 2005. He was previously State Minister for Investment. He is also the elected Member of Parliament for Mawogola County, Sembabule District. He holds a Bachelor of Law (LLB) degree and served as Attorney General between 1985 and 1986. Between 1994 and 1995, he served as a delegate to the Constituent Assembly that drafted the 1995 Ugandan Constitution. He will be the president of the sixty-ninth session of the United Nations General Assembly.

What are the main tenets of Uganda's Foreign Policy?

The first thing to say is that our foreign policy should be seen in the context of a Uganda that is growing very quickly. Our economy is taking off, particularly now that we have discovered oil. This is our opportunity to begin industrialisation, and we are now embarking on an economic transformation programme. Our main focus for the coming years will be on infrastructure, roads, rail, and hydropower. These are the fundamentals for growth. The key thing to understand is that we are committed to spending our oil and gas revenue wisely, to using it wisely; because we know it is a finite resource. That said, we can use it to bankroll our infrastructure programme, and at the same time save some money for future generations.

At the foreign policy level, our guiding principle is regional integration. Why? Because this will make us economically stronger. It has been shown around the world that integration reduces conflict, and this is also the case in Africa. Our government is committed to ensuring the growth of our democracy, and that governments, including those of our neighbours, are accountable to their people, and that they protect our people's human rights.

Another key policy goal is boosting rural growth. Over the last decade, the guiding objective in this endeavour has been the Millennium Development Goals, or MDGs. These programs come to an end in 2015, when we will have to make an assessment of what has been achieved, and what has not. Why have we not been able to achieve some of our goals? My view is that in many cases, the MDGs didn't involve the private sector. If you look at the examples of success, such as treating AIDS and HIV, the private sector was involved and was able to supply cheaper medicine. We have a high percentage of people under treatment with good life expecting, and the infection rate has come down. So we feel that in setting the post-2015 development agenda, public private partnerships will be a key component.

What does the UNGA Presidency mean to you personally, as a Ugandan and as an African?

Obviously, I am extremely proud, from all three perspectives. It means a lot to me. And aside from

the honour, I feel that this is now Africa's moment. So between now and 2015, aside from looking for common global agendas, I will be working extremely hard to push forward Africa's agenda. The time has come for change in the United Nations. We must remember that in 1946, when the UN was set up, almost all of Africa was still under colonisation. So I myself, and all the other leaders of Africa, feel that the time has come for the UN to reflect the new global reality, and to reflect the reality of Africa.

We are coming to the end of the Millennium Development Goals originally set in 2000 to be achieved by 2015. So, the time has come to negotiate a new agenda, a sustainable development agenda for Africa and for the world. It is extremely important to set out an ambitious, transformative, universal agenda for the post-2015 period. There are already working groups at the UN setting new goals and targets. They are also working on ways to finance our development agenda and how this will be implemented differently to the Millennium Goals.

A lot of my time is now spent on agreeing goals and financing mechanisms. My main goal is to eradicate poverty and hunger. How do we do that? By investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and by empowerment of women and girls. We are setting an example by including more women in the cabinet. Many senior positions in the Ugandan government are occupied by women, but we also need to empower women in the villages. This is the way to improve women's lives. It is essential that girls get a proper education; this is how to empower women economically.

Then there are issues related to strengthening democracy: that means, among other things, fighting corruption and ensuring peace and stability.

The other issue that I will be pursuing is climate change, which is a global issue, and of course one that is affecting Africa. I believe that the key to combating climate change is to find mechanisms to help developing countries to use clean technology for development. This is expensive, so mechanisms are required. Each year billions of cubic metres of forest are cut down around the world to use for fuel. So, rural electrification is essential in fighting the destruction of the environment.

Another priority is strengthening the relationship

between the United Nations and the different regional blocs in East Africa. Experience shows that when the UN works with regional groupings it can achieve a lot.

Uganda's relationship with its aid partners is changing, and you are using more of your own budget for development issues...

The developed countries have largely made good on their promise of contributing 0.75 per cent of GDP to overseas development, particularly the United Kingdom. But the reality is that overall, we are falling short, and it is not enough to finance a transformative agenda. So, now we must begin to bring in the private sector to help finance this agenda. We are also looking at expanding domestic revenue collection. At the same time, we need to make sure that we negotiate a fairer international trade regime that will give developing countries better access to export markets, and thus greater revenue. By fighting corruption we can stop the illicit transfer of resources, allowing them to contribute towards development.

You are a long-standing advocate of pan-Africanism. How would you assess recent progress in achieving the goal of pan African representation, particularly on issues like trade and investment, through bodies such as the East African Community (EAC) and the African Union?

Regional economic integration is essential to spur growth, particularly for small and fragmented economies, which can boost their competitiveness through better connectivity and access to larger markets. Over the course of the last decade, the EAC,

comprising Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, has become one of the most integrated regional markets in Africa, consisting of a Customs Union and a Common Market. Now, just like the Schengen visa regime for some countries in the European Union, the single EAC tourist visa will allow visitors freedom of movement in the bloc.

The EAC provides a regional market that protects its members from global economic shocks and allows them to enjoy the fruits of globalisation. The EAC also provides an opportunity for the countries to deal with common problems, like security. The region deals with shared threats: Burundi and Uganda have contributed to the Amisom Peace Keeping force in Somalia. The EAC has been involved in strengthening the governments of neighbouring fragile countries and institutions in an effort to improve the security situations in these countries and generally prevent insecurity from spilling over into the region.

How do you see the EAC's role as an investment area?

The EAC as a region has also shown other remarkable achievements: It is the fastest growing area in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an average GDP growth of 5.8 per cent during the last decade. It is also one of the largest regional economic blocs in the African continent, with a total population of 145 million and a combined GDP of US\$ 98 billion. The total FDI inflow into the EAC region has tripled from US\$ 1.3 billion in 2005 to US\$ 3.8 billion in 2012.

The East African Community provides a unique opportunity for the countries within the region to

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Sam Kutesa,
Minister of Foreign
Affairs of Uganda
with Ban Ki Moon,
UN Secretary General

approach the future with sure footing. The countries within the region can enjoy the benefits of globalisation under the auspices of the EAC, which hedges them from unfavourable global market environments. It is also my sincere hope that overtures will be made to rope-in new members such as the new nation of South Sudan into the community, for the reason of enlargement and diversification of the market. Integration provides that desirable supra-national statelessness that could be important in unlocking Africa's potential.

India and China now have a significant investment presence in Uganda. What are the implications of this for your diplomatic strategy?

Uganda is a landlocked country that depends on foreign imports for most of its consumer goods and energy requirements. On the global stage, the country has maintained a posture of non-alignment. The end of the Cold War and the emergence of powers like India and China has seen Uganda adapt to changing times, and the need to have good diplomatic relations with countries around the world.

The lesson from the global financial meltdown for the developing world, and particularly for Africa, is that we cannot continue relying on the West as target markets for Africa, so we are open to trade from the East. In this sense, the EAC is timely in that it provides a large regional market, giving producers in the region multiple choices.

What about conflict resolution?


Uganda is playing its part in conflict resolution in the region, and is seen internationally as having a key role to play in this regard. We have led peacekeeping forces in

Somalia, in South Sudan, the DRC, and were the only country to intervene to prevent genocide in Rwanda. We are always working toward stability in the region.

Uganda has come in for criticism in Europe particularly over what we might call a clash of values in regard to same-sex relationships...

I think that you have to understand that we are not talking here about universally applied rights. There is controversy and debate in the United States, and in Britain, where the Archbishop of Canterbury recently said that he did not feel comfortable about same-sex marriage. These are complex cultural questions, and it is important that Europeans do not impose their values on other countries with different traditions. The important thing here is that we do not discriminate against anybody. What people do in their private lives is not the government's business.

And finally, what are your aims and objectives for trade and investment?

The message is simple: Uganda is open for business. Since 1991, over 2000 enterprises of various sizes have committed in excess of US\$2.5 billion in actual investment into the country for projects that range from agriculture to manufacturing and transportation. Uganda is an attractive investment location in Africa for the following reasons: its strategic location at the heart of Africa guarantees ready access to regional markets; we have a predictable and stable economic environment; a fully liberalised economy; abundant natural resources; a government clearly committed to the private sector; a well-trained, English-speaking workforce; and well-developed basic infrastructure. 

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US Secretary of State John Kerry speaks alongside Ugandan Foreign Affairs Minister Sam Kutesa, Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs Tedros Adhanom (left) and Kenyan Foreign Minister Amina Mohamed.

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