**Youth culture as driver for democracy and good governance**

*Adebola Williams, CEO, RED Group addressing the European Parliament at the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Africa Summit on Wednesday January 9, 2019*Last September, Davido, one of Africa’s foremost music exports arrested the imagination of voters in Osun State, South West Nigeria as he drummed unprecedented support for his uncle who ran for the position of governor in the state. His uncle lost the election by a considerably small margin - 482 votes out of a total of over 700,000 votes cast – but the deep connections that Davido managed to create between the electorate and the campaign was no small feat. The Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), on whose platform the uncle ran was not expected to go far at all in the South western state.

The outcome of that election proved one thing - that the marriage of culture and development is a veritable tool to take Africa forward. In fact, it might be the most effective tool considering the zeitgeist.
In other countries like Senegal, South Africa, and Uganda, we continue to see young Africans leverage the power of culture using digital and other technological tools as media to bring about change and speak to power in ways that have never before been experienced. From ya ner mar to Arab springs

In Uganda, Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, an actor, musician, and youth influencer otherwise known as Bobi Wine rode on his fame as a creative to win a seat in the country’s Parliament. He later got massive national influence by championing by-election victories of candidates who beat that of the political party in power, the National Resistance Movement (NRM).

Bobi Wine was later arrested and allegedly tortured, but his emergence as a youth champion positions him as the most formidable opponent faced by President Yoweri Museveni in all his 32 years in power.

In Nigeria, Desmond Elliot converted his popularity as a beloved Nollywood actor to social and political capital, canvassing for votes with the masses using issues peculiar to his trade and understandable to the average Nigerian Joe. He’s currently seeking re-election to the same parliamentary office. Popular actor, singer and record-label boss, Bankole ‘Banky W’ Wellington is about to recreate Mr. Elliot’s template in an elite Federal Constituency in Nigeria’s economic capital, Lagos. He goes head–to-head against the political establishment in next month’s general elections.

Examples such as these leave us with questions on the quality, effectiveness and impact of government to government or government to CSO model of engagement adopted by entities such as the European Union to enhance Africa’s experience of positive trends with specific regard to nation-building.

For decades, the European Union and others like it have engaged with diverse governments across the continent without any record of commensurate impact on the governments of Africa or its people. On the contrary, what we have on the continent is a visionless and wasteful leadership hell bent on oppressing its people. Sometimes, these governments have been reported to even enjoy the support of more developed nations in the oppression of their peoples.

As a result of this, the millions of Euros allocated to Africa as development aid only ends up getting rerouted into personal bank accounts domiciled in Europe and other financial safe havens across the world. One at some point begin to wonder how much of a culprit Europe could be

Another one of the unfortunate consequences of this model is the underdevelopment witnessed across the continent leading to illegal immigration of many young talented Africans looking for greener pastures across the Mediterranean. Many of these migrants end up becoming a drain on the resources of Western countries, consequently stunting the rate of their economic growth and even engendering crime.

Surely, there must be a smarter way to promote democracy and democratic ideals in Africa. And there is!

We are paying close attention to how the nature of advocacy is changing across the globe, and especially in Africa. Minorities, the silent majorities and disadvantaged groups world over are eschewing the (white) saviour mentality and its associated failings; and rightly so. However well-intentioned, others’ efforts will never save us. With the right tools and the required encouragement from allies, Africans are proving daily that locally developed solutions and advocacy inspired by and targeted to those directly affected is a more effective way of ensuring sustainable changes. Africans understand the nuances of navigating African issues.

As an entrepreneur with extensive engagements across the continent, it is obvious to me that young Africans are more better positioned to change the political dynamics they are faced with. Empowering them with the necessary infrastructural tools to maximise their existing potentials can influence the power dynamics of the continent towards sustainable democracy.

This is what our company StateCraft Inc., which is the nation-building company Of our group RED clearly understands - that Africa needs a citizen-driven, culture-based approach to governance, and not the top-bottom, imported one that has been propagated for years without desired results. With this understanding and using media as a tool, StateCraft Inc. has captured the imagination of young people and government across Africa and beyond by mobilising young people to vote for credible candidates, designing effective policies, driving qualitative governance, and promoting citizen action and engagement.

The key, as we have enunciated in our 2018 flagship book, How to Win Elections in Africa, is messaging. A well-thought out approach to designing messaging and channels for any campaign – so that it creates deep connections between the people and the intended movement – is extremely important. Its role has been understated in previous approaches led by our foreign allies and now, we at StateCraft, more than anyone else, know this.

The result of our insight is the 2015 victory of the then opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari against the incumbent candidate, Goodluck Jonathan after four attempts. The following year, we midwifed the victory of Ghana President, Nana Akufo-Addo over an incumbent after three failed attempts. Our impact have been felt across diverse levels in other African countries including Kenya, Liberia, and Senegal.

More than ensuring the democratic handover of governments from political establishments in these African countries, StateCraft Inc. has shown that creating awareness among young people is the key to making desired changes happen. Recent research has shown clear connection between increase in the use of substance like tramadol and continuous internet fraud and the consistent Ré enforcement by pop culture predominantly music and this is simple- repetition leads to retention, retention provokes action.

For too long Africans have been resigned to fate and submit to the whims of incompetent leaders. Now, through our work and those of others like YIAGA, Enough is Enough Nigeria, BudgIT and others, Africa’s youth are taking their socio-political destinies into their hands through culture, development, and active citizenship.

Last year’s win with the #NotTooYoungToRun movement in Nigeria is an example of the kind of result that can be achieved using collaborative youth efforts.
Clearly, foreign actors, and sadly, African leaders even, have underestimated the importance of citizen education and engagements in bringing about desired improvements to nation-building. Most educational or awareness programmes are designed and implemented around election calendars in various countries but our experiences show this at best creates short term excitement for issues that require persistent dedication. If citizens do not examine the impact of government activities – this includes world governments – on their daily life, overwhelming movements started and concluded within the 12 months preceding election years in any country will hardly move the needle.

In 2012, our development arm, in partnership with EiE and with immense help from several renowned musical sensations whose desire for nation-building remains indubitable – created a movement tagged #OccupyNigeria. We effectively caused a shutdown that ensured petroleum subsidies were reinstated to the advantage of Nigerian masses. This remains one of the incredible example of how pop culture, youth demographic power and active citizens’ engagement can serve as a formidable tool of checks and balances for any young democratic government. At no other point in Nigeria’s seeming gerontocracy has the voice of young people ever been so respected. We changed the game. 2015 elections in Nigeria saw youth actors as never before inspired by the several wins we were beginning to gain using the media and pop culture. Ask President Emmanuel Macron whose 2018 visit to Nigerian was made most successful by his headlining visit to Fela’s Kalakuta shrine. He delivered his message to the youth on their own turf; not his.

With Africa experiencing a youth bulge that is unprecedented globally, the European Union, more than ever in its history, needs to collaborate actively with these foot soldiers of democratic growth in Africa to promote good governance and demographic dividend. It must focus on developing a new crop of young, talented Africans with the wherewithal to create value and change the fortunes of the continent. There is a willing, already active community of doers whose track records guarantee a return on such investments.

We train our engineers but continue to import foreigners to fix our roads, not just because of the bad deals the leaders are striking that might lead us into second colonization as we are watching unfold in Zambia but the schools are broken and the system isn’t confident the engineer they have trained  is capable.
For democracy to flourish there needs to be accountability but In Nigeria for example the education allocation is barely 7% of the budget when it should be minimum 25. How do you demand for account if you are not enlightened. If you are hopeless, if you feel helpless. 13 years ago myself and my friends set up a platform The Future Awards Africa to directly combat this by showing hope and possibilities through the eyes of those who were defying the odds using the media and pop culture as channels and today a critical mass of enlightened youths have been born

If the EU truly wants to help build democracy on the continent, it must review its approach, channels and messaging. It must be bolder and more courageous to reach an even larger number of Africans with its message of mutual cooperation, good governance, and sustainable democracy through tools of the times.

With a population explosion by 2050, it’s no longer time to play lip service because the impact will reach the world and Europe always one of the recipients.

In my conversation with Aleksandra Gadzala, of the Africa Center, Atlantic Council, Professor Nicholas Cheeseman, of the University of Birmingham’s Democracy and International Development, and Mark Demesmaeker from the European Parliament this afternoon, we will uncover practical ways through which Europe and the rest of the world can collaborate with Africa to achieve mutually desired results.

Thank you, and I look forward to a lively engagement!