



Ambassador Lewis Lukens

Remarks at the International Youth Foundation reception

January 23, 2013, 7pm

(As prepared)

Good Evening. It is a great pleasure to be here tonight to welcome all of you to the *Ideas4Work* conference. I, and other people, have said it many times, but it bears mentioning again: There is no more important issue in Africa than improving the lives and prospects of the continent's youth. That is why I am here with you this evening, and why I am so pleased that all of you – who are leaders in many different sectors in your own countries and regions -- have taken the time to be here, too.

Young people represent nearly half the population of Senegal. The statistics are the same in most countries on the continent. In fact, Sub-Saharan Africa has the youngest population in the world – offering incredible opportunities for positive change -- but also creating a huge challenge for the continent. If we wish to reach our goals in Senegal and other African nations for long term economic growth, we must involve and engage young people in our efforts.

President Obama and the U.S. government's foreign policy team want to make sure the enormous potential of young people across Africa can be fully realized. Empowering and supporting young African leaders is in fact a central component in the U.S. Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, released last June. In announcing the strategy President Obama declared: "Young men and women have shown time and again the willingness and ability to change their communities and their countries for the better, and the United States will continue to be their steadfast ally and partner."

Many of you have heard of the President's Young African Leaders Initiative: The initiative is focusing on three core goals: one, to support leadership development; two, to promote entrepreneurship; and three, to connect young leaders with one another and

with Americans. Some of you in this room attended the President's Forum in 2010, the First Lady's conference in 2011, and the Innovation Summit in 2012, where we worked on carrying out those goals with youth leaders from around the continent. Indeed, we have seen youth leaders blossom with just a little bit of help – like Cherif Diallo, an exchange program alumni, leading civic education courses in the suburbs of Dakar, and Assane Seck, who developed a mobile phone platform “app” that won 2nd prize in the Apps4Africa contest and then spent two weeks in Seattle, Washington learning and exchange with a tech firm there. Both of them are members of our Embassy Youth Council, a group of young Senegalese who gather together, and with me personally, to discuss and exchange ideas. Two weeks ago, I gave certificates to two of our youth council members who just completed our English language scholarship program called Access –both of these young women have bright futures before them also, I am sure.

The U.S. government and the organizations, members of government, and other senior figures in this room cannot give every African youth a job or even necessarily give them all the skills to obtain jobs in their countries. We know that African youth don't expect this from us – and aren't necessarily asking us such. Rather we want to use our convening power to raise awareness of the issue of youth unemployment to host country governments. We want to encourage more effective partnerships among the public and private sectors to turn the youth bulge into the youth dividend. We want to join together the potential of Africa's youth entrepreneurs with business mentors in, for example, the United States. This is the direction of our policy and programs.

This afternoon, our USAID Mission Director launched two Senegalese projects that encompass these goals and this direction: training under the program *Jeunes Agriculteurs* and the youth leadership effort under the *YouthActionNet* program. These both come under a large youth program that the Department of State is supporting called the Youth Livelihoods Alliance led by the International Youth Foundation, who also organized this week's meeting.

Thank you again for being here, and I look forward to hearing more from you and about the conclusions of this meeting. Jëre Jëf!