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The Journey from Koko to Bamako and beyond

Pendant trop longtemps, l'Afrique a été traitée comme un dépotoire d'ordures de toutes sortes. Pourvue de vastes ensembles, peu ou pas contrôlés par des gouvernements en manque de capacité et par des communautés mal informées, l'Afrique fut en passe de devenir un lieu de rendez-vous d'immondices de produits toxiques. Entreprises peu scrupuleuses, originaires de pays industrialisés peu regardants sur leurs exports, voire complices. Les scandales se multiplient. A des milliers de kilomètres des pays d'origine, de nombreuses victimes innocentes, notamment des femmes et des enfants, perdent leur bonne santé, leurs vues, voire leurs vies. D'aucuns parlent alors d'un « colonialisme toxique ».

Il y a 27 ans, jour pour jour, des dirigeants africains avertis et alertes, adoptèrent la Convention de Bamako sur l'interdiction d'importer en Afrique des déchets dangereux et sur le contrôle des mouvements transfrontaliers et la gestion des déchets dangereux produits en Afrique. Ces leaders estimaient que les pays africains se doivent d'adopter des mesures encore plus strictes que celles imposées par les normes internationales en vigueur, pour signifier au reste du monde, aussi hautement que clairement, le message suivant: « ***l'Afrique n'est pas la poubelle du monde»***.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Bamako Convention came to being shortly after multiple dumping incidents occurred in the Continent. Some remained unknown and undocumented. But one shocking case stood up.

In 1988, David Okotie found himself in the unlikely role of global media spokesman for his elderly, blind and deaf father, Kaka Olombu.

Neither sought the limelight nor wanted it.

But Kaka Olombu was Chief of a backwater fishing port called Koko on the Benin River in Nigeria.

When he should have been enjoying his well-earned twilight years, he was witnessing a lifetime's work to take care of his people disappear.

Dealing with 5,000 sick and desperate villagers being forced out of homes that had been in their families for generations.

- Forced out because rich Italian businessmen shipped thousands of containers of toxic waste half way around the world to dump in Koko.
- Forced out because Gianfranco Raffaelli and Desiderio Perazzi exploited villagers with little knowledge of the problem, rather than using companies with the expertise to take care of it safely.

Twenty years later, Raffaelli was still a free man and 94 victims were the recipients of less than $3,000 each in compensation.

And today, 30 years later, Koko is still in the news.

Not to celebrate its recovery and restoration.

- But first, because of a ‘waste to wealth’ scheme that turned out to be hiding a sea of toxic sludge.
- And second, because it is a story being repeated **again** and **again**.

In the face of growing amounts of waste being dumped in African nations, Koko remains a potent example of the human – or rather **inhuman** – consequences of:

- throwaway societies,
- poor legislation and accountability
- and a lack of access to information.

At December’s UN Environment Assembly, 193 countries backed the Ministerial Declaration that:

“*Any threat to our environment is a threat to our health, our society, our economy, our security, our well-being and our very survival.”*

With such global support for change, African nations have an incredible opportunity to turn this threat into a source of sustainable jobs and economic growth.

For example, the World Health Organization estimates around 16 billion injections are administered every year.

The benefits are **unquestionable**: the number of childhood deaths per year has halved since 1990 and every dollar spent on childhood immunizations creates $44 in economic benefits.

But every year, unsafe injections and needle disposal leave hundreds of thousands with HIV and hepatitis, and burning waste to recover the metals generates toxic emissions.
Likewise, the mobile devices driving our increasingly connected world are transforming life in many developing countries. They are bringing access to banking, trade, healthcare, education and off-grid power.

But every year, almost 50 million tonnes of electronic goods are illegally dumped, along with lead compounds, mercury, cadmium, chromium and greenhouse gases.

Whether the mountains that end up in Africa are:

- Second hand goods donated to schools with good intentions
- Or just plain dumped
- Without proper dismantling and disposal, the outcome is the same: polluted soil, water, food and air.

And that's just two examples.

- We could just as easily talk about any number of materials from industrial, farming and household waste.
- Or the growing number of perfectly legal everyday products that use chemicals we don't fully understand or track, but which are suspected of causing irreversible damage to our health.

Yet the legitimate waste market is already worth $400 billion a year.

And that electronic waste I mentioned includes materials worth another $50 billion a year, including around 300 tonnes of gold.

I don't believe that any nation - in Africa or anywhere else - can afford to turn their backs on $50 billion a year.

And I don't believe that any country can solve this alone. A concerted, coordinated multilateral push is required.

As the countries whose people have the most to lose and the most to gain, African countries can be – **must be** – at the forefront of that push.

The Bamako Convention is the perfect legal framework to unite that effort - **IF** we can:

- Secure the financial resources to implement this convention. These resources should come first from national contributions. Complemented by external funding sources.
- Build public-private partnerships to manage chemicals and waste.
- Develop and enforce legislation to ensure that no corners are cut.
- Provide education and training to support that effort.
- Increase awareness of the risks and the opportunities, to ensure that people from all walks of life understand why it matters.
- And maximize the synergies with the other multilateral agreements, like Basel and Minamata to create a global momentum for change.

There is a long way to go to achieve that, but there is an obvious place to start. Right here.

As we celebrate today the 27th Anniversary of the adoption of the Bamako Convention, only 25 out of 54 African countries have ratified it.

- If the countries that are damaged the most don't care enough to add their voice,
- Why on Earth **would** the countries that benefit the most?

Excellences, mesdames et messieurs,

Avant de conclure, permettez-moi de lancer un appel, sous forme de défi:

Pourrions-nous ambitionner de célébrer la prochaine journée de l'Afrique le 25 mai prochain avec 100% de ratification de la Convention de Bamako?

Quel puissant message enverrions-nous au reste du monde? Oui, nous re-affirmerions que jamais l'Afrique n'accepterait de servir de dépotoire d'immondices. Ce message sonnerait comme une véritable déclaration d'indépendance face à un colonialisme toxique. Inhumain. Criminel. Sans scrupule.

L'année 2018 serait ainsi l'année de prise en charge effective de la Convention par les pays africains eux-mêmes. Certes appuyés et soutenus par le Programme des Nations Unies pour l'Environnement et ses partenaires, mais l'Afrique en reprendrait les commandes de pilotage.

La Convention de Bamako mérite d'avoir sa personalité pleine et entière, son propre Siège, abrité par un Etat-Partie au lieu de continuer à être hébergé -tel un réfugié- par les Nations Unies.

Comme vous le savez, mesdames et messieurs, nous soufflons les 70 bougies de la Déclaration Universelle des Droits Humains.

- Pour de nombreux sceptiques, cette Déclaration n'est rien d'autre qu'une promesse sur papier;
- En revanche, pour des victimes comme David Okotie et Kaka Olombu de la communauté de Koko au Nigéria, ou plus proche de nous, les victimes du Probo Koala, les conséquences de la violation des droits humains sont péniblement clairs.

Moment ne saurait donc être propice que **maintenant** pour redoubler d'efforts en faveur de la Convention de Bamako!

Je vous remercie.