

# Saraki: Regional Cooperation, Partnership, Panacea to Africa's Challenges

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*Bukola-Saraki*

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Senate President, Dr. Abubakar Bukola Saraki has identified regional cooperation and partnership as the only solutions to the myriad of challenges facing the African continent.

Saraki, in a statement by his Special Assistant on Public Affairs, Mohammed Isa, made this known in a keynote address at the opening session of the ongoing Crans Montana Forum of Africa and South South Cooperation for Africa's Development holding at Dakhla, Morocco.

He noted that, "the contagious nature of poverty-driven social unrest would in effect suggest that the challenges that we face must be viewed from a regional perspective and the solutions located in greater regional cooperation and partnership.

"The challenges of cross-border crimes, the smuggling of small arms and light weapons across our borders, or even the wave of terrorist activities, provide another compelling reason why effective cooperation and partnership is almost a matter of life and death.

"The experience we have had with Al-Qaida in the Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali and the Boko Haram in Nigeria shows that security and stability of our countries can only be guaranteed through a regional governance system which would make it impossible for terrorists and criminals to find a safe haven within any of our borders", he added.

Many countries in Africa, Saraki noted, have witnessed remarkable economic development in recent years, adding that, "however, in the context of overall global economy, this progress amounts to very little or nothing."

"Africa's share of the global trade is only two per cent and of this, only 11 per cent is Africans trading with themselves. We have to reverse this trend. Unless we do, African success stories would continue to be undermined by other serious challenges like poverty, youth unemployment, high infrastructure deficit, and conflicts", he stated.

He identified trust and genuine partnership as key factors in opening up the African continent to African businesses and people, adding "this is why I must commend the King of Morocco for the recent bilateral agreements with Nigeria in different areas, including the Bilateral Air Services Agreement; Marine Fisheries Cooperation; Diplomatic and Official Services Visa Exemption and many more.

"We need to build on this and make it easier for people and goods to move across our continent. We must strengthen relationships among our parliamentarians, among our governments and among our businessmen to share experiences and build mutually beneficial partnerships. There are very exciting models to build on. The Lagos to Tangiers highway project; the Trans Sahara gas pipeline project, as well as the Chinese-backed railway projects that would connect East African countries are only a few of these", the Senate President stated.

He challenged African leaders to put the need for regional socio-economic co-operation as a key component of their development agenda because "without the demonstrable commitment by African countries to think beyond their immediate borders, Africa will

continue to remain junior partners, even in its relationship with other parts of the developing world.

"The exploitation of our continent does not become more acceptable simply because it is done by another developing region rather than Europe or America. The strength of Africa's cooperation with the rest of the world, lies in the ability of Africa to cooperate with itself", he stated.

Saraki noted that for Africa to benefit from the demographic dividends that a massive youth population offers, the leadership must make the right investments in quality higher education and create the right conditions and opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment as no single country on the continent could do this alone.

He added that a large market is only useful when the people have the necessary purchasing power; and that a huge population could only be an asset when it is productive.

Speaking on his goal as President of the Nigerian Senate, Saraki said it was to improve parliamentary collaboration across Africa and to improve economic partnerships on the continent by enacting laws that would promote trade in Africa and make doing business in Nigeria safer and easier.

"I believe that the kind of political leaders that can help our continent in the 21st century are those who are able to think in regional terms and operate in a global context, those who have the self-confidence to play in a team of leaders to find a common solution to the common problems that confront our countries, our continent and all of humanity", he said.

The Crans Montana Forum which was well attended by top individuals from the political, business and civil society leadership across Europe, Africa, Middle East and North America addressed issues bordering on economy, agriculture, the environment, social and political developments.

Other speakers at the opening session are Founder and President of Rainbow Push Coalition in the United States, Rev. Jess Jackson, and an Assistant Secretary General at the United Nations, Mr. Phillips Douste Blazy, both of whom are Special Guests.

The guest speakers include Mr. Baldwin Lonsdale, President of Republic of Vanuatu, Mr. Rupiah Banda, former president of Zambia, Mr. Dioncounda Traore, former President of Mali, Mrs. Freda Tuki Soriacomua, Minister for Women, Children and Family Affairs, Island