



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The FCO and The Integrated Review, HC 380

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 58 - 72

Witness

[I](#): Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former President of Liberia.

Examination of witness

Witness: President Sirleaf.

Q58 Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's very special session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are extremely honoured to have President Sirleaf, the former President of Liberia, joining us this afternoon. Thank you very much, President Sirleaf. I believe that you want to make a few opening remarks. We would be delighted to hear from you.

President Sirleaf: Thank you. Mr Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee, I thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to share my thoughts with you.

As a friend, I prefer to speak to you honestly and candidly. It is important to begin by acknowledging that from the immense human tragedies brought on by the novel coronavirus pandemic and its effect on the global economy, to the global protests against systemic racism, we are being presented with a new and urgent demand for change in our world. This is a demand to which the United Kingdom, an established world power, and Africa, the continent of the young and home to 16% of the world's population, must respond.

At a multilateral level, we have seen the workings of the United Nations Security Council and other global institutions become increasingly ineffective because of entrenched resistance to change. This condition is further exacerbated by the rising tensions between the United States and



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China played out in our global institutions, including the World Health Organisation. The truth is that the threats we now face to global health, as well as to the maintenance of international peace and security, are new and will require our responses to be global, reformative and innovative. Accordingly, the United Kingdom can play a vital role in amassing the weight of its global influence toward building the needed international consensus required to address the presenting global challenges.

Let there be no doubt that, despite the myriad challenges we face, Africa is willing to engage with the United Kingdom in building partnerships to address our common problems. The African continent understands that we cannot live peacefully, or hope to achieve our developmental goals, in the face of perils to international peace, terrorism, imbalance in trade and an increasing disregard for international law. The real question is: can Africa find a willing partner in the United Kingdom? Can the United Kingdom and Africa's partnership prioritise the interests of both the United Kingdom and Africa?

Unfortunately, while Africa has been and continues to be a reliable global partner, many of its bilateral and multilateral partnerships have left too many African countries poorer, exploited and with weakened educational, security and health systems. Too often, the structural conditions of the partnerships have so weighed against Africa that rather than achieving a sense of development, independence and self-sufficiency, African countries are met with mountains of debt and increasing needs, as well as wallowing in poverty traps and growing dependency. Of course, we do not—we cannot—excuse our own challenges in leadership, but the truth remains that we cannot excuse the tendency of Africa's partners either to ignore Africa's emerging realities, or to impose conditions that do not guarantee meeting Africa's priorities.

The African continent is sensitive to that reality in forging new partnerships. I would therefore offer that perhaps a good place for the United Kingdom to demonstrate its awareness in partnership with Africa is in support for the Ezulwini consensus. It is long overdue that Africa is permanently represented on the Security Council of the United Nations. This overdue quest is not driven by a desire to exercise the power to veto; it is a search for increased leverage and deserved credibility by which Africa is repositioned to end its wars and the threats of terrorism on its shores, to hold itself more accountable for its peace and development, and to bring its collective experiences to bear in added contributions to the maintenance of international peace and security.

The same is true of Africa's interests in building strong, national democratic institutions and accountable systems of governance. Africa will welcome investments in building institutions and infrastructure intended to enhance the national capacities that are required, especially



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for economic transformations through industrialisation. Africa seeks partnerships that will lead to job creation and more opportunities on the continent so as to stem the tide of migration and improve conditions for repatriation. Similarly, it is not enough that Africa is instructed in the art of democratic governance; our institutions must be built more resiliently to guarantee and continuously give realisation to our democratic aspirations.

Africa's interest is in building new, bold, people-centred and far-reaching partnerships that are committed to enabling the achievement of our developmental goals, ending conflicts and lifting our people from poverty. That is why we encourage investment in the African Development Bank, as well as support for the African Union and other regional bodies, so as to spur regional integration and Africa's infrastructural development.

Increasingly, our continent has expanded the space for democracy, the peaceful transition of power and democratic governance. We have continued to move away from military adventurism and dictatorship. However, it must also be said that democratic governance, and democracy itself, is being threatened globally by a growing wave of terrorism, wars, the existence of weak democratic institutions, especially the recent lack of enviable examples from the west, and the opportunistic use of the global coronavirus pandemic to disengage, and accentuate unilateralism and authoritarianism over multilateralism and democratic practices.

As a result, the gains of democracy and the peaceful transition of power on the African continent could be reversed if powerful countries such as the United Kingdom disengage and retreat, either for self-serving economic and political reasons, or the unwillingness to engage in the formation of global partnerships to expand freedom and democracy. As we continue to see, from the health crises to the demand for equality before the law, no place is entirely safe until all have a chance to be safe. Such is the nature of the umbilical cord of the human family that each weak link must concern all of us, as it invariably affects the undeniable bond that is our humanity.

Let me discuss for a few minutes the scale of the challenge that Covid-19 poses on the African continent. While most African nations warded off the initial spread of the virus, there was not enough time to strengthen weak healthcare systems. Last week, the World Health Organisation announced that confirmed cases in Africa had doubled in 18 days to reach 200,000. The first 100,000 took 98 days. This grim news comes at a time when two thirds of Africa's growth is focused on urban slums, where urban congestion exacerbates the risks to local transmission. In that sense, for many of our people social distancing is impossible.

Riding on the growing health crisis is also the significant issue of the limited fiscal space for African Governments to implement the necessary



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health and economic measures to combat the pandemic. The average fiscal stimulus package in Africa in terms of GDP is around 2% or 3% of total GDP. In comparison, the US coronavirus response stimulus package was over \$2 trillion, 10% of US GDP.

It is important therefore to note that, if Africa falls into recession for the first time in 25 years, we risk erasing the gains of the last two decades.

Global economic co-operation through the G20 and strong multilateral responses are required, including the need to depart from the usual and provide financial support at scale to address the looming debt and poverty crisis we face. In this regard, we commend the United Kingdom for being a strong supporter of the works of the International Monetary Fund in Africa, the work of the World Bank and the African Development Bank, and for being the largest donor to IDA, including the recent replenishment.

The reality is that it is difficult to implement a number of policy measures in countries that are heavily reliant on the informal sector, which is populated primarily by small and microbusinesses, and has been one of the most vulnerable sectors during the pandemic. In total, one third of all jobs in Africa will be somewhat affected by the pandemic, an alarming number for a continent that was already grappling with high youth unemployment.

Calling from our experience of the outbreak of Ebola in west Africa, we see many similarities. First, there is a common thread to be found in the successful leadership of women in the fight against serious challenges to global public health. Despite being the worst affected, Liberia was the first to be declared Ebola-free. We now see the remarkable accomplishments of women leaders, not just in flattening the epidemiological curves of the pandemic in multiple countries, but in reasonably opening their countries. The simple conclusion is that we must continue to open the space for women's increased political partnership and leadership.

Secondly, Liberia did not end Ebola on its own. It was a global effort driven by local community ownership of the problem and its solution. This is also the lesson we must bring to the fight against the coronavirus pandemic: a global effort driven by community ownership of the problem and its solution. In this regard, we need a united and supported World Health Organisation, as opposed to a fragmented and politicised one. It is unhelpful to short-change the outcomes of our collective efforts and distract our attention away from a difficult fight.

Thirdly, we need to end the wave of public disinformation about the pandemic. As social media grows more ubiquitous, so too does the tendency to misinform. We have seen that explosion worsen dangerously in the health crisis. The tendency to disinform and misinform presented



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Liberia with a difficult problem in fighting Ebola. Invariably, at the heart of public disinformation is the looming lack of trust in public authorities and Governments. It is therefore important to understand that a fundamental duty of governance is to build trust with the governed by providing truthful information, however difficult it may be. Especially in a crisis, our experience is that, before citizens can trust their Government, the Government need to trust their citizens with the truth so that they can make informed decisions about their lives and livelihoods.

Finally, difficult as they are, perhaps the lasting effects of Covid-19 may not be seen only as tragic death tolls or paralysing effects on the global economy. The effects on humanity and our society may come to be measured ultimately by a new world order, or a reversion to the old, which would emerge in the painful trail of fear, trauma and human suffering wreaked by the pandemic. Accordingly, will we move to explore new ways to strengthen the bonds of our humanity through multilateral approaches to our common challenges, or will we lend ourselves to unilateralism in retreat from our global responsibilities to each other?

Will we seize the opportunity to strengthen the pillars of democratic governance, decentralise political power and expand democratic spaces, or will we slip into authoritarianism and undermine our human need for freedom? Will international law and justice be the burden of a few or the guaranteed entitlement for all? From science and technology to groundbreaking developments in medicine, will we encourage and share the genius of our developments so that we lift each other from conflict and poverty, or will we continue to invest in the prolongation of conflicts from which too many have died, millions more have been displaced and vulnerable women and children continue to be the worst affected?

Will we continue to exploit natural resources only to make the rich richer and keep the poor poorer, or will we make trade fairer, and govern justly and more equitably? Will we enable more women into political leadership, or will we silence women's voices and ambitions? By the quality and legacy of our examples, will we ready our young people to claim a future of peace, tolerance and decency, irrespective of the colour of their skin or how they choose to worship? Will the United Kingdom forge new and enduring partnerships with Africa by demonstrating due regard for Africa's interests and priorities?

The past few months have revealed that a viral outbreak anywhere is a threat to health everywhere, and that injustice in a midwestern city of the United States can not only inspire a global protest to end racial injustice but demand a conscionable reckoning with our difficult past. In the end, ordinary people, black and white, old and young, are demanding that their leaders seek the good, safety and welfare of all peoples. I can only hope that in this moment of history, those who are honoured to lead at



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this time of change will boldly embrace the wind of change for the benefit of all humanity.

In closing I wish, Mr Chairman and distinguished members of the Committee, that I could answer the questions I have presented with a sense of certainty. I cannot, but I am certain that we are at a seminal moment of change not in a country but in the world. I believe, especially as historical partners in trade and democracy, that the United Kingdom and Africa, in shared duty, can build a partnership of trust, in the pursuit of mutual benefits and interests, ensuring that our world is a better place for our children and grandchildren. Thank you.

Q59 Chair: Madam President, I am hugely grateful for your contribution. You have raised so many of the points that we were going to come to. It is enormously helpful to hear your views in your own words as you presented

them. I am deeply honoured that you have taken the time to do so. It is an honour to have a leader of your stature with us today.

This inquiry is about the UK and the role that we can play. You have just spoken very powerfully, and I think the question you really asked is an important one: can Africa find a willing partner in the United Kingdom? The question is: what kind of a partner can we be?

What is the UK's best contribution on the global diplomatic stage? What capabilities do we have that others may lack? I realise that we come with a history—a very negative history in many parts, and in others with a positive association of a living bridge between peoples. I would be very interested in your perspective as to what the UK brings and how we can leverage that power for good.

President Sirleaf: Mr Chairman, the United Kingdom has a long historical and traditional relationship with Africa. The United Kingdom knows Africa. It knows its environment, its endowment, its capacities its strengths, its weaknesses, its culture and its history. The United Kingdom has been our friend in all these years, going back even to those long days of our hardship with colonialism, and in partnership working together for the uplifting and development of Africa.

The United Kingdom has been a world power. It has the ability to work globally and gain the experience and commitment to work in partnership with Africa. We expect that we can depend upon our long-standing knowledge and respect for each other, and that going forward into a new partnership, we will also address some of the shortcomings of the past.

The United Kingdom will bring to Africa not only its long-standing influence in global affairs, but the long-standing impressions and influence that have forged and formulated Africa's own agenda and aspirations over the years. I hope that, as we go forward, the role that



has been played in the past will not suffer a diminution and that we can see it grow even stronger, addressing all the shortcomings of the past.

Q60 Chair: Madam President, you have again covered many issues. I am extremely grateful. May I ask you to comment briefly on some of the projects and elements that the UK has led already, and to discuss the successes and, indeed, the failures? One of the projects that we are particularly proud of was instituted by Lord Hague when he was Foreign Secretary. That was on preventing sexual violence in conflict, which is clearly not simply an African matter, but a global challenge. Perhaps you might like to comment on the ability of the UK to lead in areas like that.

Could you comment on the nature of the Foreign Office's interaction with nation states around your region in particular, and also around the whole continent, and discuss or share with us your views on where the UK can play a positive role? What skills would you like to see UK diplomats and envoys bringing to the theatres?

President Sirleaf: I commend the United Kingdom for all the programmes and projects that it has participated in for Africa's development. There are many strategic partners in west Africa whose primary exports go to the UK. They do not enter the space of too many other countries. Investment in South Africa and east Africa—and private sector investment—has enabled African countries to grow their economies and to create jobs. The shareholding and the major position that the United Kingdom has in the IMF, the World Bank, the African Development Bank and those institutions through their programmes, support Africa's priorities and aspirations.

I should also mention the role that has been played in supporting our countries not only through large development services, but regarding Ebola. I have personal experience of that, as Liberia was at the forefront of the fight against Ebola. I know what happened when the UK commenced the work for research for a vaccine. Today, I am so glad that the United Kingdom is in the forefront in the development of a vaccine for the virus. I know that the United Kingdom played a major role in the sustainable development goals, and those goals today have become the world agenda for all that needs to be done to address the needs of countries so that no one is left behind.

The UK has built a strong civil service. Liberia, too, has gradually built up such functions. Our public institutions and our civil service institutions have benefited from UK support, UK examples and UK experience. You have championed the fight against corruption. In 2016, you held a major anticorruption conference that brought everybody together to share experiences, to find new ways to fight that difficult challenge that we face in all our countries. We know that you have influence. We have strong relationships with DFID and all it does, and in all that they represent in the programmes that they support. That face is out there with us.



What additional skills can United Kingdom diplomats have to improve the relationship and to improve the results of your developmental support and effort? You need to understand our culture a little bit more. You need to understand some of our history. You need to sympathise with the fact that over the years of our natural endowment we have not been able to achieve our goals and realise our aspirations. Despite our partnership, we still have a strong historical relationship with the United Kingdom and we should not leave that behind. We have a few of them. One of them is on the west coast of Africa, and today when we look at the development and we look at how they have advanced— we say that we are asking for a stronger partner.

We are thankful for what they did, and we applaud the effort of the United Kingdom. What the UK Parliament does to be able to meet the obligations that enable us to carry out our programmes is known and appreciated. But we also say that we are in changing times. We are in more complex times. The challenges that we will have to face with the likes of many other world powers who are disengaging tell us that we need the United Kingdom and the skills it has, based on its influence and historical relationship, to do more. We can only hope we will be equally a ready partner to the United Kingdom, ready to share the room and link up to our contribution to an improved world.

Q61 Chair: Madam President, I am enormously grateful. I am going to come back to you with another question. Forgive me for interrupting, but every now and again we miss a few of your words and they are too precious to lose. If one of your team is there, could they adjust the microphone? Somebody from our technical team here believes that he can improve the sound quality very simply. May I ask that he speaks to one of your team?

President Sirleaf: That is fine. Does it mean I should disappear and give them a chance to fix it?

Chair: It is a question of one moment. I think it is quite simple; that is what I am told. I will suspend the session formally. We'll fix it and then we will come back.

Sitting suspended.

On resuming—

Q62 Chair: We resume this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. President Sirleaf, thank you for your patience. I apologise again for the technical issues on our side.

We were talking about the capabilities of the UK, as this inquiry is on how the UK handles issues of global importance. You were talking about a shared duty and the nature of our co-operation. Given the events that we are seeing around the world, may I ask something that is so important to you as former President of Liberia?



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All of us are very focused at the moment on our shared history, some of it shameful, of the legacy of slavery in our world. May I ask for your perspective on the events that we have seen in recent days, and on how the United Kingdom, and indeed many other countries, should be thinking about addressing them?

President Sirleaf: Mr Chairman, the recent events, specifically the protests taking place in the midst of tragedies all over the world, bring us face to face with the need to now be very conscious of the inequalities and lack of equity that has characterised our world.

I believe we will now see a continuation of the call to action on the part of all countries, particularly countries that represent world powers and countries that have long-standing historical and traditional relationships, to see the world today for what it is, and to seize this moment of change. The demand for change will not go away, Mr Chairman. It is going to expand and it is going to widen, because too often too many have been left behind.

It is not a matter of giving fault or blaming; it is a recognition of the circumstances in which the world finds itself today as a result of not acting over time to address inequalities. I am not saying that effort has not been made. There has been, no doubt, and so much has been done by the United Kingdom, but still we need to examine where some of those countries, even those with historical ties to the United Kingdom, stand today.

Could they not have done better themselves, based upon their own endowment? Yes. Could the United States ¹have done better, given those strong relationships and given the capacity and institutional strength of the United Kingdom? Yes. But today the call to examine inequalities within long-standing racism will not go away. It is wrong wherever practised. It is time to examine how we can change not only policies, programmes, constitutions and strategies, but attitudes and mindsets, so that when we deal with each other on a personal basis, on a national basis and on a global basis, we see each other as equal.

Mr Chairman, I am a woman. I know the inequities that women have faced over the years. Some of us have been lucky to break through and to break the glass ceiling. We are thankful for the support we had to get there, but it took too long and we are too few. It is so unfair. Today, women with equal competence, experience, strength and commitment in corporate bodies represent fewer than 3% of the leaders of those bodies. There are women in some of our countries who are the ones that keep our economies going, through the informal sector—our women farmers,

¹ Note by witness: In referring to the United States I misspoke. I should have said "Could the United Kingdom have done better..."



our market women. Still today, they do not have enough education and do not get support.

Mr Chairman, members of the Committee, the UK must lead on this issue. There is no one more ready and no one more responsible or more capable than the UK to take a lead in promoting the change that is called for all over the world.

Chair: Thank you very much. I invite my colleague, Henry Smith, to pose the next question.

Q63 Henry Smith: Thank you very much indeed, President Sirleaf, for your time today and your valuable words. Thank you also for your forbearance with these proceedings and the technical issues.

You rightly talk about the need for the United Kingdom's relationship with Africa to be one that is essential and world-leading, but of course in recent decades you will be aware that the People's Republic of China has been growing significantly in terms of its involvement in developing countries, Africa certainly being no exception to that. In your view, what is the attractiveness of engagement with the People's Republic of China when it comes to international development? Has that changed at all in light of the Covid-19 pandemic?

President Sirleaf: Thank you for that. China, like other bilateral partners, has played a role in supporting Africa's development through some of the same instrumentalities; through contribution to international development finance institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the African

Development Bank; through bilateral programmes; and through investments. Africa has welcomed what we see as an additionality to that provided by our traditional friends.

In the light of current conditions, and in light of the current call, China too must respond to the same inequalities that are being faced and they too must play a part. China too must rise to the call to address that strong call, as they too are now a world power. They must live up to the same standards, to the same call, as others. This call is for all world powers and all resource-rich partners to work with Africa, to be able to improve the situation.

There is no doubt that China is making some extra effort to try to work with Africa. Recently China, in the light of Covid-19, announced \$3 billion to support the fight against the virus. That is obviously appreciated—it has to be—but it does not mean that China will escape the call for change. No, it will not. We expect them to judge their shortcomings and their wrongs, and to respond. They need to support whatever they do in their policies, strategies and programmes to make sure that they address the longstanding difficulties and inequities that countries face.



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If I were to add more, I would only say that China must be able to recognise Africa's priorities, aspirations and realities if they want to continue to have the strong partnership that they seek with Africa.

Henry Smith: Thank you for that comprehensive answer.

Chair: I invite my colleague Stewart McDonald to address the next question.

Q64 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, President Sirleaf, for your time this afternoon and for your opening remarks earlier. They were extremely insightful.

I want to ask about some of your views on the United Kingdom's posture at the minute and where it is going. You will have seen news this week, I am sure, that the Department for International Development is to be merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office into one superdepartment of some kind. The details are still a bit sketchy.

What is your view of that? Do you think it would be a sensible move for the UK? Do you think that, internationally, it would be viewed as international aid having a lesser role as far as the UK's priorities are concerned?

President Sirleaf: Thank you. It is not my role to have a say or an opinion on the structures and functions of institutions in the United Kingdom. What I do know is that we appreciate the manner in which the United Kingdom has forged a partnership with Africa today, despite the shortcomings that I mentioned. We know that they have exercised their influence through the agencies that have worked with us in promoting partnership. Our only concern is that any merger of institutions in the United Kingdom is not indicative of a change or a move that would weaken the strong partnership we have had and which we hope to promote to be even stronger than it has been in the past.

I think one of the things I mentioned—if I did not, let me mention it now—is that China² is one of the few countries to have met the United Nations call for 0.7% GNI of their GDP. That is something that Africa, and countries beyond Africa, applaud. The UK having met that particular requirement—the commitment that was made by all members of the United Nations—is commendable. Will it change with a merger? We hope not.

² Note by witness: In referring to China I misspoke. I should have said that "the United Kingdom is one of the few countries to have met the United Nations call..."



Q65 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I am sure that all members of the Committee would agree with you that we hope it does not change, but some of us may be less optimistic than others. May I ask one additional question, very briefly?

We have talked, and I am sure we are going to talk a bit more, about China in Africa. It feels like our Committee discusses every week the threat that China poses in manipulating different democracies and picking them off against each other. How concerned do you reckon national leaders on the continent of Africa are about economic weaponry from China being a potential threat to stability and security in their respective nations?

President Sirleaf: I like the words “economic weaponry”. Africa has faced weapons of all sort, and economic weaponry can certainly be attempted. It has been tried by others, but we have come a long way from being subjected to, or affected by, someone attempting to use economic weaponry, meaning trying to use our natural resources for their own means. Africa’s capacity to develop its own agenda and its own aspiration is very clear. Africa 2063 is our continental agenda, to which we are all committed and to which we have for many years been preparing our capacity to enable us to execute our programmes and our strategies.

It is very clear that we can now negotiate with confidence. We know what we want. We are going to continue to push for what we ought to have, but at the same time we know that we must also put our own house in order from time to time, and make sure that we have the capacity ourselves to conform to international standards.

African countries seek increased political and economic stability. That is what we have been working for and yearning for. The United Kingdom is our long-standing partner. We hope that you can be out in the forefront, working with Africa to achieve those goals.

Chair: Thank you very much. I call on Royston Smith.

Q66 **Royston Smith:** I add my thanks to those of my colleagues, President Sirleaf, for your joining us today; we are very grateful to you. You have said a lot, and we are very pleased to have heard the things you said. I know that you have touched on some of these things, but I want to expand

slightly.

You were very positive about the opportunity of Covid-19 and how perhaps people can do things differently as a result of this awful disease, but that is not necessarily what will happen. You touched on China with my colleague, Henry Smith. Could you say how you think that the Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis, will affect international relations? It could be that people will become far less global in their outlook. That is a concern that



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people have voiced. What is your opinion on what happens post Covid-19?

President Sirleaf: Already Covid-19 is translating into pressures, demonstrated by the protests and people's call, and this is creating tensions. They are effected through certain misinformation, disinformation or lack of total truth. There are tensions between people, so in the call for change that is coming, as loudly as it is, as expansive as it is, as appropriate as it is and as urgent as it is, I know there is no guarantee that that change will be achieved as the call is being made. We already see a slide into unilateralism, protection and opportunism that started before Covid-19. Covid-19 has presented some opportunities to be used as an excuse to promote that kind of isolationism.

Although there is no guarantee, the call will not go silent. It will be louder. Unless we find an effective response globally, it stands the chance of undermining the security and stability of the world. It may be easy to dismiss a small country, but as we found from the example of coronavirus and its ability to spread and be transmitted across borders, not requiring visas or permits, we know that we have to find a way to deal with it. The United Kingdom cannot retreat at this moment in time. It cannot retreat from the world. It cannot retreat from its historic responsibilities. It cannot retreat from the call for change.

Royston Smith: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Madam President. Alicia Kearns will ask the next question.

Q67 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you so much for being here, President Sirleaf. It is a real delight and pleasure to hear you speak. Thank you for your opening words.

You mentioned in your opening the importance of multilateral organisations. I agree that they are absolutely vital to co-operation and to achieving our shared interests. From your perspective and from your extensive experience, are there particular multilateral organisations that you assess to be in need of reform? If so, how would you achieve that reform?

President Sirleaf: Let me first say that the multilateral institutions have been a vital partner and a major supporter of development efforts around the world. They have had the additional quality of not promoting exclusively national interests, but ensuring that common standards and conditions apply, based upon performance and the achievement of results that are established in national standards and priorities.

That does not mean to say that some things do not require reform. Over time, the changing conditions and the changing requirements of the world have led us to a technological world that we did not see two decades ago. The nature of work has changed, so it is time for reform; there is always



time for improvement in any institution. No institution should remain the way it is without updating itself and initiating change as conditions require. That is part of its function. But the answer is to work to achieve the reform that makes it more efficient, more effective and more capable of getting the results that are anticipated by the change.

I mentioned the Security Council in my statement, and I come back to it. Most of the work of the Security Council in ending conflicts relates to conflicts in Africa, not exclusively, but many, and we do not have a say in the decisions as to how you go about resolving those conflicts. The Security Council was established on a global bias half a century ago. Isn't it time for change? Isn't it time for Africa, having come a long way towards being able to subscribe to international codes of conduct, to use its endowment, even though it was taken away in many ways, fighting those battles of terrorism and extremism? Isn't it time that Africa has a say on the Council—that it has a voice on the Council—so that its own views can be taken into account?

As we change, as we look at financial institutions and go about reforming them, as we must, we must also deal with the world powers and the Government bodies and dominant decision makers, and allow some space for others who have been affected by those decisions, positively and sometimes negatively. All we want is to make sure that, in reforming those bodies and making those necessary changes, they are made to be more responsible, more capable and more effective in achieving the global goals to which we all have committed.

Q68 Alicia Kearns: Thank you, Madam President. I also thank you for all you do to progress the rights of women. You have done so much, and there is still so far to go. Thank you.

President Sirleaf: I wish I could say a word on that before I leave. I cannot let you get away without putting a pitch there.

Alicia Kearns: Please do. Create the question.

President Sirleaf: I live with this every day. I know personally, from my long journey of success and failure, the positives and negatives, as I battled every step on the ladder to success. I know what other women face. I know that there is a barrier. As women progress in their leadership journey, they hit a barrier. That barrier comes from long-standing stereotypes and long-standing views, taking away the opportunity for women's leadership to be a part of the global leadership order, making a contribution.

I do not want to go into all the studies that have shown how women's leadership in different decision-making positions contributes to world GDP, but I know that the examples are there. Women's leadership is more considerate and has more empathy, with the means to be able to



take hard decisions but at the same time making sure that humanity is respected.

The UK has had strong women leaders too—we know. In many cases, some of them have motivated me. You have been a leader in that, so for you it would be a natural course, a natural effort, in which you have already excelled. Once again, as I always say, the United Kingdom is needed to take leadership on all these topical issues. If you do not, who do we look to? You were there in our history and are there now in the time for change, We look to you to be on the frontline.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you.

Q69 Chair: Madam President, thank you very much indeed. In my lifetime, the only two Heads of State born in the United Kingdom that I have known have both been women: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, of course, and President McAleese of Ireland, born in Belfast—two women who have very much shaped these islands. I am not going to go through Prime Ministers, but of course Prime Minister Thatcher and Prime Minister May have both been powerful voices in our history. I am sure there are more to come.

May I come back to a question directly on the UK's role in Africa? I know that you took the presidency a few years after a major UK operation just up the coast from you in Sierra Leone. I hope that demonstrated, under the command of then Brigadier, later Chief of the Defence Staff, General Lord Richards, the UK's commitment to be willing to put troops in danger in order to protect the lives of fellow human beings, in that case in Freetown. Have you seen a change in the UK's action in and commitment to Africa? In your 12 years of presidency, have you noticed the UK having a different attitude, and how would you characterise it?

President Sirleaf: I think the UK has not changed its attitude but has perhaps changed the intensity of its effort, shifting more to multilateral institutions, such as the European Union and others, which have taken the major initiative in promoting Africa's development. In that respect, there was a change—perhaps a noticeable change—that in a way you had passed responsibility to others.

Does that mean that, if conditions change again, you will resume that responsibility, as you have in the past and that Africa can expect that more will be done? I mentioned all that we have benefited from. I know that Liberia has. I remember that there was a programme, Africa Governance Initiative, promoted by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, which tried to build capacities in our country and generally our health systems.

Over the years there has been a shift, and I hope there will be a shift back and that, whatever your new national order, you will continue to carry on the responsibility in the same manner as you have in the past,



and that that will in no way undermine the support you give to multilateral institutions, because they represent organisations and institutions that have the ability and the capacity to go beyond interests, and to ensure the delivery of results from programmes supported by multilateral aid.

If you want to restrict it, if you want to focus on west Africa, where you have a long-standing historical relationship with Liberia and others, given the fact that many of our countries in west Africa are francophone, so, although you support them, you do not have the capacity to support them as you would with Ghana or Sierra Leone.

In Sierra Leone, the United Kingdom has a very historic relationship. In this call for change, we will be looking at what happened to everyone. In a neighbouring state like my own, Liberia, even though the history is not exactly the same, there is a historical relationship. There is a tie, and we all know who broke that tie. What happens in those two countries, as an example, will also be a judge of whether this change brings about the desired results that we all seek.

Chair: Thank you. Alicia Kearns wants to come back in. I know that we are drawing very close to the end of your time, so I am hugely grateful even for these last moments, Madam President.

Q70 **Alicia Kearns:** Yes, thank you. You have been very generous with your time, Madam President.

As a final question, if you were to give one piece of advice to us, as UK parliamentarians, what would you say is west Africa's No. 1 ask of the UK over the next five years?

President Sirleaf: Give us a strong, resilient healthcare system. We believe that the experience of Ebola and the coronavirus tells us that, unless we can control infection in our society, we undermine the ability of our people to perform their duties and carry out their responsibilities. We have so many priorities, but that is No. 1: vaccines, healthcare systems and the training of our medical professionals and healthcare workers. That is the greatest call for which urgency is required.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you.

Chair: Stewart has indicated that he wants to ask a last question as well.

Q71 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** President Sirleaf, thank you again for your time before we finish. You just mentioned a rather obvious point, I suppose, about the UK having different relationships in Africa, and France having different historic relationships in Africa.

How would you compare, today in 2020, the British and the French input across the African continent? Who does what that is good? What can we learn from France, and what could they perhaps learn from the UK?

President Sirleaf: France has been more engaged with its historical relationship. It is more engaged in the sense that it perhaps takes a more



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active role in exchanges and in common global positions. Maybe part of it is that the UK has had strong relationships, because you were a strong power in those beginning days. Your relationships go all over the world, not just in Africa. You have not been as close perhaps as France, but that has changed. Whatever has been the result of those relationships, we are where we are. What is important is where we go from here. In that respect, all those countries with historical relationships have bigger responsibilities today than they did in the past.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Thank you, Madam President. Thank you again for your wisdom this afternoon.

President Sirleaf: Thank you.

Q72 **Chair:** Madam President, before I draw the session to a close, I add my enormous thanks and the deepest respect from all of us on the Committee. I know I speak for the whole Parliament in praising your work not just as a transformational leader of Liberia, but as a leader of the continent and a leader of the world. You have played more than your part. We are extremely grateful that you have given up time to us, particularly when there are so many other subjects that you could be addressing.

May I also say a huge thanks to your team, who have been extremely generous and kind in helping to set this up? Thank you very much. If there are any last points you wish to make, the floor is yours.

President Sirleaf: Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to have had this exchange with you. I look forward to being able to follow, as you carry out your commitment to change. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Chair: President Sirleaf, we accept the challenge. Thank you very much indeed for your time.