



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
*Foresight Africa Podcast***

“African policymakers have the tools to make Africa globally competitive”

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Guest:

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Episode Summary:

Policymakers have the tools to make Africa globally competitive as a continent. With an increasingly young and underemployed population, there is a large gap between the continent’s current stasis and its potential for economic growth. Landry Signé is joined by Zouera Youssoufou, CEO of the Aliko Dangote Foundation, to discuss how proper investments in education, health, and infrastructure would give the continent’s vibrant youth the opportunity to succeed.

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SIGNÉ: Hello, I am Landry Signé, senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to Foresight Africa podcast, where I engage with contributors to our annual Foresight Africa report, as well as with policymakers, industry leaders and other key figures. You can learn more about this show and our work at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

Today on the podcast, I'm pleased to welcome Zouera Youssoufou. Zouera Youssoufou is the managing director and CEO of the Aliko Dangote Foundation. She leads the foundation's effort to improve health and education outcomes as well as expand economic opportunity. Prior to joining the foundation, Zouera was at the World Bank for ten years where she had various roles. She also speaks four languages. Bienvenu, Zouera.

YOUSOUFOU: Merci, Landry. Merci beaucoup.

SIGNÉ: The Aliko Dangote Foundation was founded in 1994 and has grown to be one of the largest philanthropic organizations on the continent. What is the Aliko Dangote Foundation for those who may not be familiar?

[1:49]

YOUSOUFOU: Thank you so much, Landry. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. So, it's very interesting. But today actually, May 6th, is the thirtieth anniversary of the Aliko Dangote Foundation. We actually had a little celebration this morning to mark the day. 1994 is when Alhaji set up the foundation formally. So, you you're catching us on a really, really a marker of a day.

So, the Foundation was set up in 1994 with the idea to just do charitable work. So, Alhaji is a devout Muslim, and his faith commands him for ... to whom much is given, much is required. And so, he started doing charity 30 years ago. Well, longer than 30 years ago. Thirty years ago is when he formally incorporated the foundation. And throughout the years, the foundation has been, you know, making grants and supporting feeding programs and doing health initiatives.

And in 1994, he made a remarkable commitment, which was a pledge for \$1.25 billion U.S. dollars. And that was the biggest gifts, biggest single grant that a, that an African person has ever done in philanthropy. And so, that really, if you will, cemented phase two of the, I'm going to call it phase two of the Foundation. And that's when they hired me to come and run the foundation and put some, you know, a different kind of structure around, okay, now that we have an endowment, what do we do? And so, we're still focused on the same areas that Alhaji is interested in, and that is health—specifically nutrition—education, economic empowerment, and of course humanitarian relief. As the need comes up on a regular basis we intervene. So, that's what we do.

And we are primarily focused in Nigeria. Seventy percent of our spending is in Nigeria, and 20 percent in the rest of Africa, and 10 percent in the rest of the world.

And I think everybody will understand these proportions given the size of Nigeria and the myriad problems that we that we face here. So, so that's who we are.

SIGNÉ: Zouera, what are some of your biggest impact stories in Nigeria and Africa?

[4:19]

YOUSSOUFOU: So, in terms of impact, you know, how impact is a is a hard thing to measure because you always have to be careful about attribution. But I would say the biggest impact that we can measure that we've done is the uptake of immunization in Nigeria. Back in 2012, Alhaji signed a a partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to fight polio. And we eventually expanded that to include routine immunization.

And what that did was really make the focus on immunizing under-5s for the first years of their life become something that was commonplace and that we do. We eventually expanded that program to Chad and Tunisia, which are border countries to Nigeria. But in terms of impact, like, people's lives that have been changed because they were immunized and they, you know, we're able to avoid all the childhood diseases and be okay. I would say that would be number one.

Number two in terms of impact is the micro grant program that we run where we give a grant, an unconditional cash grant to poor people. The goal is to pick the poorest women in all of the 774 local government areas in Nigeria and give them a chance to just expand what they do. So, there's no strings attached. There's no direction, there's no training, there's nothing specific that they're supposed to do except do good with the money.

And in terms of our M&E [monitoring and evaluation] what we found is that out of the half a million women that we've already reached, 85 percent have done something positive with the money. And I think that's a powerful story of helping poor people at the at the actual point of their need. Right? Without us saying, you know, making things all conditional and making it all complicated and putting all kinds of strings to helping people. Just give them money and then see what they do with it. And what we see is that 80 to 95 percent of the women do something positive with the money.

And those two stories are the ones that I'm the most proud of in terms of impact of the Foundation on the lives of people.

SIGNÉ: Insightful, Zouera. Prior to your work at the Foundation, you were at the World Bank as the country manager for Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tomé and Príncipe. Can you explain how you became a country manager at the World Bank and the type of work you did at that role?

[6:56]

YOUSSOUFOU: So, that's a really good question, Landry, because I would say that nothing predisposed me to be a country manager at the Bank. I was working at IFC, which is, as you know, the private sector arm of the World Bank. And at IFC, I was, first I was a staff, and then I eventually became a manager, the manager of our

Women in Business Program. And this is a program that was focused on finding opportunities for women entrepreneurs within what IFC was doing.

And so, one of the things that I that I helped us do was focus on financial markets, which is the biggest piece of, at the time, the biggest piece of IFC's business. And I was just thinking, well, why can't we just lend money to women entrepreneurs if we're lending all this money to banks for them to lend to on-lend to SMEs? Why can't we lend it specifically to women owned SMEs and then support the banks in understanding how women are different than men and behave differently than men and you know, just have different issues than men, perceive risk differently. And at the same time upskill the women so that they can be better clients of the bank.

So, that project worked. We did a first project here in Nigeria with Axis Bank, and then with DFC in Uganda, then we dealt with another bank in Tanzania, and then now it's like a real business within IFC.

So, while I was doing all this, enjoying my success at IFC, I got a call asking me if I wanted to be a country manager for the Bank. You know, this is when I was really thinking about moving back to Africa where I'm from, because I wanted my children to be around Africans. My husband and I thought it was important for the, the kids who were at 9 and 12 at the time to just be connected to their African identity. And so, you know, we were both looking for different opportunities in Africa. And so, when I got the call to be a country manager at the Bank, I was like, sure.

And it turns out that the reason why they called me is because Obi, so that would be Obiageli Ezekwesili, who was the VP of Africa at the time, was asking them to expand the pool of candidates that they were sending her for country manager positions. Because one of the things that you have to understand is that country manager roles in the Bank, at the time anyway, were usually occupied by people who had spent a long career at the Bank, typically male, and typically white or European.

[9:27]

And so, Obi just thought, look, you have to find me CVs of different people. And because at that time, we started working closely within the three institutions of the bank. So IFC, MIGA [Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency], and the Bank trying to bring, you know, the institutions closer together. And the first thing they brought together was the H.R. piece. You know that matrix where there's the high performing, high potential? So, I ended up in one of those. And that's how I, that's how I got the call.

So, I can't tell somebody how to do it now, do you understand? I don't have a ... there's no blueprint on how to do it, just that I was doing a really good job at IFC. It just so happened that we had a VP that was really open to different kinds of country managers, and that's how my profile came to their attention.

So, when I came, I mean, this funny story, when I came to Gabon the first time, everybody was so surprised to see me like, wait, what? You're the you're the new country manager? I'm like, yes, *Comment tu peux être représentante de la Banque Mondiale?* [How can you be the World Bank's country manager?] I was 43, I was

Black, I'm African. They just couldn't understand how I got the job. But literally it was, you know, super competitive obviously. But I think when we focus on diversifying the kind of people that we want to hire, I think we're actually able to do it.

[10:46]

You know, people also, I think there's a , maybe I shouldn't say this, but I think there's like an inherent bias that we have that we're comfortable with people who are like us. So, I know that when I was managing our our women and business team at IFC, people used to always tell me, is it only African women on your team? And I was like, no, like, there's eight of us and there's only three African women. So, what do you mean? But just because they were, there's more than one, it felt like a huge proportion of the people were were were African women.

So, I think there's something to be said about people hiring people who look like them, who remind them of themselves. And if we don't make an effort, then we wouldn't necessarily look at candidates that could be hugely helpful, but that, you know, somehow just don't look like how we we expect the candidates to look. So, mine is a story of just opportunity and luck. That that's literally what it was, Landry.

SIGNÉ: Zouera, given your talent, I'm you I'm certain that it is beyond opportunity and luck. It is also a story of an incredibly talented, African leader who happened to be a woman.

[12:00]

YOUSSOUFOU: Thank you. Thank you for saying that. Thank you for saying that. But, you know, I'm saying it like that because the truth is, you know, there are a lot of very talented, very qualified, intelligent, amazing African women who don't necessarily get an opportunity. And so, you know, it's it's it's good to recognize that, look, there was a part of me, yeah, yes it's true I did a good job and that's how I got there. But I also recognize the role that, you know, Obi had in this process, the role of, you know, someone saying, bring me different kinds of CV's because had that conversation that happened, I promise you, Landry, I wouldn't be on their list. I wouldn't be on the shortlist.

SIGNÉ: And Zouera, Africa's fast growing and exceptionally young population seems to be common knowledge at this point. But why do you think policymakers continue to underinvest in this group in terms of education, or building out infrastructure despite their growing importance?

[13:10]

YOUSSOUFOU: So, I think that the issue is that we don't have ... we just don't have a lot of young policymakers. Right? So, if you think about who the policymakers are, they're not the youth. So, I think what ends up happening is that people aren't necessarily thinking about what to do that would support young people, which is why we support the Young Global Leaders program at WEF [World Economic Forum]. Right? Because this is one of our attempts at making sure that younger people who are in the policymaking space get a voice and an opportunity to shine in a way that they wouldn't necessarily be able to do without being part of this program.

So, I really think that what I was saying earlier about biases, if you look at most of our countries in Africa, you look at the age of our leaders, right? This is not even me saying that these are facts. The leadership in Africa, the policymakers, the government, they are older than the average age of the populations, right, in those countries. So, I think that is probably where some of that bias comes in, where they're not necessarily thinking about, you know, what should we do to support young people?

So, that's what we're trying to, you know, use our, our own, you know, ability, our own platform to see how we support young people, so that when young people are in the position to make policy decisions, they make policy decisions that make sense to them, their generation, and people like themselves.

SIGNÉ: Absolutely. And you have a *Foresight Africa* viewpoint titled, "The Future of African Youth and Women Entrepreneurship and their Roles in the Region's Economy," describe how the lack of jobs and opportunities have compelled the young people to create their own. Are there any stories of young or female entrepreneurs that have resonated and stuck with you?

[15:23]

YOUSSOUFOU: Yes. Thank you for that question, Landry. So, yes, what, the two stories, two people, actually, come into mind. One of them is happens to be one of our young global leaders, so here I am talking about the YGLs [Young Global Leaders] again. But one of our YGLs, her name is Uche Pedro, and she runs a site here in Nigeria called Bella Naija. And it's, like, information and, you know, news. And it's a very vibrant platform with millions of of subscribers. And she's able to, to put the finger on things that matter to young people. And she created her company because there was nothing that was speaking to her on social media that was relevant to her. And she's been very successful. And like I said, she's even been chosen as one of the WEF YGLs last year.

Another story that comes to mind that's really interesting is Abasi Ene-Obong, who is a young man who came up with a company called 54gene, and that company was meant to bring together all the different genomics of people of African descent. So, he's he's a scientist, right. He's a scientific guy, was working in the U.S., and realized all of the pharmaceutical companies were developing drugs that didn't have any African genotypes in them. Right? So, the drugs were not meant for us, us Black African people.

And so, what if we created what if he created a repository of the genotypes of all people in Africa so that we could help pharma companies develop drugs that are relevant to us? Very interesting young man, very smart. He was able to pivot his company. He just started it in Nigeria when COVID hit. And I remember he he built us a lab in Kano in like a week, like a COVID PCR lab, that we were able to do it in a container. And within a week the lab was up and running in Kano. He did it in Ogun State. He set up all kinds of testing. He was one of the major testing places in Nigeria in Nigeria during COVID-19.

So, these two examples are just young people who didn't get a job that was interesting to them and were able to literally pivot their lives and come up with

something that was relevant to the continent, that was relevant to young people, and that gave others hope. And I think we have a lot of entrepreneurs like this in Africa that really are able to to move the needle and inspire others.

And, you know, what we need to do is support them and give them access and opportunities and, you know, ways to promote what they're doing and expand the scope and scale of what they can do.

SIGNÉ: This is extremely important, Zouera, especially as between 2015 and 2035, about 450 million Africans will reach their working age, and only about 25 percent of them will find quality job. So, which means that we have about 75 percent for whom entrepreneurship will be one of the key solutions for a brighter future.

Zouera, investing in education, power, and infrastructure are three recommendations you gave in your essay for reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend. Does any of the Foundation's own work target these areas?

[19:13]

YOUSSOUFOU: Yes. So, with education, Landry, we invest directly ourselves, from early childhood education, where we run a program called Mu Shuka Iri, which means planting a seed in Hausa. And it's an early childhood education, which we piloted a couple of years ago and kind of which we're rolling out. And the objective of this program is to get young children familiar with school related things.

You know how in developed countries you have kids go to creche and they go to daycare and they go to preschool before they actually start school. So, the idea is to prepare children for that. Because remember, our children here have to learn English when they go to school. So, most children, you know, speak their, speak Hausa. We we train women, which we call aunties, and these women are now equipped to go into the communities and work with the children in their homes. This is in preparation for them getting ready to school.

Now, for higher education. We also support several universities. We've built business schools in Kano, in Ibadan. We we have rehabilitated dorms and built new dorms in universities across the country. And so, on the education part, we invest directly ourselves. Yes. And I would also argue that maybe some of our investments with the YGLs is also somewhere on that education slash leadership spectrum.

Now in terms of infrastructure and power, Alhaji Aliko does that. Because remember that we are his private charity. So, we're not the Dankote Group Foundation. We are his personal philanthropy. So, he's investing in power. Right? Responsible power. As you know, he just started a refinery a couple of months ago.

In terms of infrastructure, if you ever come to Lagos the road that you'll be driving on from the airport is a road that the Dangote Group built, it's a cement road with a 40-year lifespan with no maintenance required. And this is one of those projects that we do with the government where we get a tax break for making the investment up front. So, we have several roads like that. The Apapa roads, the congested port road we built, a lot of the infrastructure around our own Dangote investments are infrastructure that we built.

So, for instance, every cement factory has a power plant attached to it to power the plant. But then we also sell some of that power onto the grid. We do it in Senegal. We do it here. And so, yes, those investments in infrastructure are not made specifically by the foundation but by Alhaji Aliko Dangote who is our patron, our principal.

SIGNÉ: Zouera, what do you imagine the continent will be like if adequate investments in education and infrastructure are made?

[22:25]

YOUSSOUFOU: Well, what I know is that it would then make us truly globally competitive as a continent. Right? Like, if we made those investments, we would create a level playing field which will give Africa a chance to be all that it can be. Right? We don't want handouts. We don't want charity. We don't want help in Africa. All we want is a level playing field so that we can be all that we can be. We we literally could be like everybody else. Right? We would be in a truly competitive environment if we had the right power, the right energy, the right education. We would be able to do all the things that we think are important.

SIGNÉ: Going forward, we are going to end each episode by asking the guest a couple of questions. AGI looks at Africa from an economic perspective, and we discuss on how to maintain economic growth and structural change while fostering inclusion, especially for youth and women on the continent. Building on your work and experience, what is one piece of advice you have given to African or global policymakers to ensure a better outcome for entrepreneurs on the continent?

[24:00]

YOUSSOUFOU: So, one piece of advice that I would have for policymakers would be focus on the health and education of the youth, and then provide power and infrastructure and let them do it. That's it. You can't dictate how people will live their lives, but if you put the opportunities on the table, they will seize them and run.

And we've seen this across the entire globe. If you put in opportunities, people will find their way into what they need to do, but they need to be healthy and they need to be educated, and they need to have the basic infrastructure of life, which is, you know, power and roads and, you know, basic, basic infrastructure that people can plug into. If governments only did that, I fully believe that we would be seeing a revolution on the continent because young people understand what is there.

And they've been, you know, Now that the world is more global right, now I can talk like an old person because my kids are 22 and 25, almost 25, the idea that, you know, the world is connected, kids have access to devices and the internet and they see what's going on, and they listen to the same music and the same information. They have access to a lot of the same things. It means that they can literally understand what's going on in one part of the world and see how they customize it and bring it back here.

But they need internet connectivity, they need electricity, they need roads, and they need education, and they need to be healthy. And I think if we get those basic policy issues correct the growth will be unstoppable.

SIGNÉ: Fabulous, Zouera. Given your successful career and impact, what advice would you give to African youths and women hoping to follow in your footsteps?

[25:59]

YOUSSOUFOU: So, that's actually a really difficult question, because I find that the only advice that makes sense to me is to be excellent at whatever you're doing. Right? Because people notice, people notice problem solvers on the team, people notice people who put in the most effort. And I honestly believe that if young people and young women, you know, I'm thinking of myself as, like, a young African woman. I started working in Niger when I was 21. So, imagine how difficult that was trying to be taken seriously. You know, people trying to pat me on the head, you know, just thinking that I was a baby. But just really holding on to let me just do the best job that I can do, because that's the only way that I can change their mind.

So, it's really about when you're working as you, as you grow in your career, just be excellent at whatever it is you're doing. If you're an intern, be the best intern they've ever had. Be the one who's there on time, who makes the perfect photocopies, who knows how to take notes the best, who is useful to the team.

And I'll tell you right now, on my own team, the person who rose the most is not the person who I had the biggest hope in. But they just shocked me by their effectiveness and how amazing they were. And she got promoted literally within two years, she had skipped like two levels. Right? So, it's about doing the very best job at anything that you're doing. That's the only advice I think I can give to somebody at work.

And also, don't be scared. Don't be scared. Believe in yourself. Right? I spent years on Wall Street as a Black African woman who nobody could pronounce my name. I dealt with every form of racism that you can ever imagine. But I just kept going. Right? Because I just knew that I needed to get over that. I needed to use this as a platform to further my career.

So, I think not be discouraged, believe in yourself, but also be the very best that you can at whatever job it is that you're doing. And be honest and keep your integrity. Remember everything your parents told you when you were growing up. Because all we have is our name and our reputation at the end of the day, how people see us.

[music]

SIGNÉ: Insightful, Zouera. Your guidance will be a beacon of hope and inspiration for the next generation of African leaders. Thank you so much for joining us today, Zouera.

YOUSSOUFOU: Thank you. Landry. Merci, Landry. Merci beaucoup.

SIGNÉ: I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. To learn more about this show and our report, visit [Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa](http://Brookings.edu/slash/ForesightAfrica) podcast.

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