

Report on South London UPF Conference on Africa Day

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"Africa has so much to offer the rest of the world beyond its abundant mineral wealth: namely its rich culture and extended family tradition, and the exceptional beauty of its natural landscapes and wildlife" – this was the main message that was conveyed during a celebration of Africa Day held on 1 June 2013 at the Peace Embassy, Thornton Heath. A 30-strong audience comprising Ambassadors for Peace, UPF affiliates and new guests of UPF convened to observe the 50th anniversary of Africa Day, which had been inaugurated on 25 May 1963 with the founding of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). The theme of the conference – "A New Dawn for Africa" had been chosen to shine the spotlight on the positive changes taking place in recent years in Africa. In particular, as explained by the event MC, Jennifer Nkumu, significant progress towards realisation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets had done much to improve the lives of millions of people across the African continent.



The opening speaker presentation was given by Susan Crosthwaite, on behalf of her husband Dr. Ashley Crosthwaite, who is the Director of UK-IRFF (International Friendship Relief Foundation). She explained how several projects being conducted by UK-IRFF in Africa provide help in bringing substantial change in the lives of young people in various nations including Uganda, Kenya, Cameroun and Zambia. In particular IRFF has supported WAIT, a youth action group which promotes purity and abstinence through the medium of dance and music as a means to tackle the problem of AIDS. WAIT has had a powerful impact in schools and police academies in Uganda. Other IRFF projects include support for junior schools in Uganda and Zambia, a much-needed medical initiative to treat parasitic fleas in children's feet, and also agricultural and small business projects. The example of IRFF demonstrates a model of how positive engagement of UK youth can make a real difference in Africa.



Dr. Lance Gardiner, coordinator of the South London branch of UPF, continued the proceedings with two moving audiovisual presentations. The first was a short video feature on business activity in Ethiopia, a country which has been associated in the mind of the UK public with drought, famine and starvation, but which is now one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The second was a slide presentation accompanied by rhythmic music showing amazing African scenes which took the audience on a grand tour of 20 countries from Egypt in North Africa down to the tip of the continent in South Africa. In the final main speaker presentation, Christa Kamga, a joint co-ordinator of Youth UPF, explained what it was like to grow up in Cameroun, highlighting the quality of close family relationships and respect for older people that are an integral part of African culture. She felt that this kind of upbringing helped her to become a person without any barriers in relating to people, and that there is a lot we in the West can learn from the African way of life.



There followed an opportunity for participants to offer short contributions, and we heard from six people from various nations, including Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Guyana (South America). They each spoke passionately of their experiences and perceptions of Africa as they reflected on the topics raised in the conference. Prominent themes were the struggle to preserve traditional values in the face of modernisation, and how the African diaspora can contribute effectively towards the ongoing resurgence of the continent. The afternoon's proceedings were made complete by two vibrant musical performances and tasty refreshments as the programme drew to its close.