

Africa: Open for Business started as a very small project. I was going to Africa to film another project and decided to do some extra shooting on private enterprise in Africa. It was through the incredible spirit of the people interviewed that this project grew.

As I sat in a small café in Kampala, Uganda for that first interview and listened to Michael Kijjambu so eloquently explain his business concept and what the private sector needed to succeed in Africa, I knew this was something special. After a few more interviews it became apparent – these were the African voices that needed to be heard.

The cameraman was Mark Thalman of Ventana Productions. Mark has filmed all over the world and won numerous awards. My instructions to Mark were simple: I want to shoot this the same way one would shoot a business show on Asia. I wanted nothing where you felt sorry for Africa. Africa's businesses would be judged on merit, not on how heart-wrenching of a story we could pull out.

I thought Mark did a fantastic job, but it was only later that I realized what made it so special. One of the African ambassadors in Washington commented that the tight close-ups of the subjects were unusual. As the ambassador noted, Africans are rarely shown in close-up. There are exceptions, but the statement is pretty much true. Africa is filmed as the masses, not as individuals.

When I first started this project, people assumed I was going to Africa to film a documentary on AIDS or some other disaster. "Business in Africa, isn't that a contradiction in terms?" laughed one well-traveled cameraman. Another asked if we were going to be covering women's co-ops and craft organizations.

This is not the Africa we are used to seeing.

Africa Open for Business is my vision of an Africa not shown in the media – an Africa with stock markets, high rises, cell phones, internet cafes, and people who have dreams and aspirations and are driven to build a better future for their children. In short, an Africa that is not so foreign from Europe or the United States.

Africa's wars, famines, natural and man-made disasters must be covered, as these problems desperately need international attention, but not covering the functioning part of Africa has been extremely detrimental.

Developing economies need foreign investment. That's how the Asian Tigers grew, but the media gave a more complete picture of those foreign lands. With the media coverage of Africa today, it would be fair for an investor to incredulously ask where he is to send his money – to a refugee camp? A game park? What else is there? When there is rare coverage of Africa, it shows an Africa devoid of economic life. The reality is Africa offers the highest return on investment in the world. It's just that the media has missed the story.

This is not to paint too rosy a picture. Starting a business anywhere is hard enough, and in an extremely challenging investment climate like Africa, it is infinitely more difficult. This is why these stories are all the more compelling, because despite tremendous odds, they still forged ahead.

The companies and countries shown in the film were picked at random. They are just a sampling of

what is on the continent. I could have landed in any country and found the same thing.

I chose mostly African business people, but a few of the stories are foreigners living, working, and investing their futures in Africa. I picked Botswana because it is one of Africa's most successful countries, both in terms of the economy and governance. I picked Somalia because it is a disaster. (Somalia has been without a central government for more than a decade, yet surprisingly, private enterprise is flourishing!) Nigeria has enormous companies, but I chose a small factory because I liked the idea of a small entrepreneur trying to navigate the chaos of Lagos. When I picked Vodacom Congo I didn't know it was one of Africa's top ten cell phone companies. I just liked that the owner lived in Africa and used his profits to invest in further ventures in Africa.

One thing that surprised me was how the concept of the extended family and a sense of community played out in "corporate Africa." Almost all of the companies interviewed offered maternity leave, not because they had to, but because they thought it was the right thing to do. Many offered housing loans, lunch at midday, private clinics with nurses, and more. When I mentioned this to one of the entrepreneurs she said, "Oh yes, I only wish we made more money so we could do more for our workers." I doubt that would be a top priority for many business owners in Europe or the U.S.

Africa Open for Business shows ten companies in ten countries, but it is about all of Africa – about Africa's spirit, about the drive of the people, and about the desire to make a better life for the next generation. Each time I look at the film there is one thing I know: these are the people that are going to build Africa. Africa's entrepreneurs are Africa's future.

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