



Branding Africa

Think of Africa and you're likely to conjure up images of warfare, drought and corruption. But Ruurd Brouwer, Africa Director of entrepreneurial development bank FMO in the Netherlands says that, in order to attract investment to the continent, we need to get rid of the sorts of images as depicted by aid agencies and instead replace them with pictures of successful African bankers driving Mercedes cars.

Brouwer was speaking at the EMRC Africa Finance & Business Forum held in Paris in early December.

In his presentation, Brouwer showed participants a number of typical images of Africa that are used by charities such as war, dead bodies, kids toting guns and shanty towns. It was, he conceded, not difficult to find these photographs, given what was happening in many parts of the continent such as Zimbabwe.

“The consequence of the pictures is simply this – that people simply grab their wallets and make money available for aid and not for investments,” Brouwer says.

Screening an image of a small African boy apparently needing help from a Western hippy, he called for investors to promote a healthier picture of Africa, such as “Let’s go and do business together. We need each other for success. We need each other to become profitable.”

Brouwer’s instead prefers an image of a firm and confident handshake between an African and a Western businessman – both wearing smart suits.

Stimulating debate



Brouwer’s views, however, stimulated controversy both during the Forum and afterwards. During question time, one of the participants challenged his call for new branding for Africa. He said Brouwer had portrayed the images of aid to the continent as “negative” and he asked whether opposing aid organisations was the best way for business to respond to the needs of Africa and form partnerships.

In response, Brouwer said his objective is not to oppose the aid industry, which he points out is a very big industry, but to highlight that there are two conflicting interests here.

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The message he wants to convey simply is this: “There is money to be made, there are healthy businesses to be financed and I think in the long term that is the only way out. And the existing image, which is more dominated by the aid industry in the long term, I believe, does not offer the solution that we need.”

His overall goal, he told INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of the Forum, is to stimulate debate.

Investing in Africa

In conclusion, despite several years of strong economic growth, “brand Africa” is still not the brand it should be, maintains Brouwer. Yet there are plenty of investment opportunities in the continent and, according to Brouwer, it’s wise to invest there. He adds that while countries such as Turkey and Russia have experienced economic crises in the past, crises in Africa are seldom economic in nature. They are nearly always political.

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