

Notes for an address to the International Marketing Council (IMC)

Pretoria, 18 May 2001

Chairperson,

I am really very pleased to have the opportunity to meet the International Marketing Council. Everybody I know speaks very highly of the IMC. When we looked at who might come on to the council and in the end at names agreed on, we did indeed all think that the council will be capable of doing miraculous things.

Let me tell you two stories.

A few years ago I was invited by the management of one of the big international television companies. So I met them and they said to me, "As you know, Mr Mbeki, a large part of what we do is communication of news about the world to the world. As part of that, as you surely know because you must watch us, we report about South Africa. It is in the nature of news that you tend to report things that are negative. You report that there has been a plane crash; you do not report that there has not been a plane crash. It is in the nature of news, and so we communicate this about South Africa as we communicate news of that kind about all other countries. And there is nothing anyone of us can do about that. We do not particularly look for bad things, but bad things happen in South Africa and we report them.

But the reason that we wanted to see you, they said, is because there is something that is disturbing us as management. It is that it would be incorrect to have South Africa defined by the news that we communicate about the country. Because in reality what is happening in South Africa is not defined by the news, being bad news.

What defines South Africa in their view, they said, was that when they looked around the world, the one country they could see which communicated a message of hope for all humanity was South Africa. So how do you deal with this matter, that the news we broadcast regularly and by definition almost always consists of bad things, and all that our viewers see of South Africa is that news communication.

How do we deal with this other matter of communicating to the rest of the world the predominant feature of South Africa, that it gives hope to the world? We discussed this and they thought that they might want to do something about it, to try to make sure that they achieve the necessary balance. Indeed all of us were very inspired coming out of that meeting because among all of these people there was not a single South African. They were all foreigners, watching at a distance, none of them daily reporters. They were as I said, management. This was their own assessment of this country. I am quite sure that many of us have come across an instance of this kind.

Last year I spoke to a foreign CEO of an IT company based here. He had come in to start a venture, sent by his headquarters in North America. So he told me that his term had finished and he had to go back. And they had been discussing this matter in the family. His parents who are still alive had been visiting them regularly since they came here as well as other friends from North America. They were considering whether to stay or to leave. And they decided to stay.

He said, "You see I can go back and get a good job. My job is secure and very well paid and I live comfortably. But what I would be doing in North America will not make much difference in terms of changing the lives of people for the better. If I stay here I may not get as good a salary as I would there. But what would satisfy me is that, because I have the necessary skill, what I do in South Africa will make a much bigger difference to creating a better life for people than the contribution I would make in North America." And therefore the wife, the father, the mother and the children said, "Why do you want to leave?" So we have decided not to go back. We will stay in South Africa because it is fulfilling for us that we will be able to bring our expertise to produce something better.

I am telling this story, Chairperson, to say that I think the challenge that faces the International Marketing Council is indeed the challenge to say how we communicate this message about South Africa to the rest of the world, which is the message of hope - a message of hope not only for the people of South Africa but a message of hope for the people of the world.

What the television executives were saying is that what we see, as we assess all these countries around the world, is that the one country that says to all humanity, that all humanity is bound to lead a better life, is South Africa.

How do we communicate that message knowing that there must be reported the ugly reality that actually does happen in our country? The reports that are put out about crime and all sorts of things are not false - they are real, and they are actual. Things that happen will be reported and must be reported. But how do we achieve this objective of making sure that they do not define what is happening in South Africa. Because indeed South Africa is not defined only by those bad things that do happen, but is defined by all that is happening.

I think it is a particular challenge that the Marketing Council faces and I am sure that the Marketing Council can deal with this.

All of us know this, that there is a tremendous international focus continuously on South Africa. I would hazard a guess and say that of the countries of the South, whether it was in Latin America or in Asia or here in Africa, the biggest focus of sustained attention by the rest of the international community would be on South Africa. I think the reason for that is that the rest of the world had been so engaged with the process of change in South Africa, saying, "Let us all work together and act together to make sure that we remove apartheid", that it clearly raised the level of consciousness about this country.

But that stage having passed, those same people are asking the question: "How in the name of the Lord are those South Africans going to deal with these difficult problems that they face?" They are familiar with these problems, and they are very interested to find out how we are going to solve them. In part this is because they can see that in many instances the problems that we face here, some of them anyway, are problems that exist in their own countries, perhaps on a smaller scale.

If South Africa can make progress in solving these problems it will give them some idea about how they deal with those problems in our countries. How are these South Africans going to deal with a matter which was such a huge conflict that it drew the rest of the world into a huge anti-apartheid movement, I think the biggest solidarity movement internationally! How are the South Africans going to deal with the issues of a non-racial society, of race relations and so on? Interesting in itself, but of relevance to us as countries too. Whether you are a Swiss or American or British or German or French or whatever, the matter is relevant in terms of your national context. How are South Africans going to solve this problem because perhaps if they solve it, it would give us clues as to what we need to do in our own country.

I think that is one of the reasons, at least, that has placed the centre of focus on South Africa.

So we need to respond to that. I am saying this is a focus for the rest of the world because many people think, as the TV executives thought, that South Africa is a place of hope. It has the capacity to deal with this question which plagues everybody around the world in different degrees: What are they going to do with the enormous disparities in wealth, this and that and the other, without having a situation of conflict erupt? The problem of those disparities exists in the United States as much as it exists anywhere else, perhaps on a smaller scale. They want us to succeed because success in South Africa is an investment in success in their own countries.

So, one of the things that the International Marketing Council has to do is to address the matter raised by the television executives. None of us want the truth to be suppressed about bad things that are happening in South Africa. Nevertheless, we want to make sure that this thing which those executives are

talking about, that South Africa is a place of hope for all humanity, also gets communicated and helps to define an image of South Africa which is other than the image that you would get merely because you are watching news. I think we should seek to see how we should communicate this and we should do it in part precisely because of the nature of the interest. We should feel the obligation ourselves. Where the world is interested to see how South Africa is solving problems that are of global importance, South Africans should indeed report to the rest of the world, as to what progress and problems we are experiencing in terms of the solution to those problems which are problems globally.

We have to find a way of doing that. Clearly there are seemingly more mundane matters, concerned with attracting tourists, attracting investments and so on which we also have got to address. All of us who travel around the globe would have sensed this level of interest in the country and the positive mood generally across the globe about South Africa.

Maybe we might want to ask ourselves the questions as the IMC: Here is a person who is watching South Africa with interest, and has a positive view but has not visited as a tourist. What is it that we might want to say? Why then don't you come and see for yourself rather than just watch from a distance this thing in which you are interested, where things are happening which are encouraging, in this country which you want to succeed. How would you do that to give it a little spur, taking advantage of the fact that, in reality, the bulk of the people across the world sustain a very positive attitude towards South Africa and great hope that we will succeed? I think the same would be true of seeking to attract the corporate sector to come. And we should say, when we talk about South Africa as the TV executives were saying, that we are giving hope to the rest of humanity.

For instance if you take the pharmaceutical companies, the big ones that we were fighting with in court not very long ago, they are genuinely very excited that they have reached an agreement with the South African government. The South African government itself is genuinely excited that they have reached the agreement that we reached. An important thing about that agreement was not so much that they said, "Okay, we will drop the case and then the law can come in to force". But what was addressed, and agreed, is that government and the pharmaceutical companies would work together to address the matter of ensuring the provision of better health services to the people of South Africa. We will act together to see how we raise the levels of health standards of the people of South Africa.

There is a very interesting conclusion to this. It is that the pharmaceutical companies who say, we have to succeed as commercial ventures and therefore have to make profit also say, we are conscious of the fact that in making profit and being successful commercial ventures, we need also to engage in this very important matter of the health of the people, and we would like to be party to that process. There is no other agreement like it in the world between any government and the pharmaceutical companies. This is the only one.

It is quite clear that in our interaction both government and the pharmaceutical companies as well as civil society with a general interest in these matters, were all challenged to find a way. How do we achieve this accommodation which must respect the need for corporations to succeed as corporations! It means they must make profit but also address this matter, that you have poor people and have to address their health concerns while the health concerns of the poor are not the most attractive in terms of profit making, because the poor do not have money to buy expensive drugs. But we have agreed on this framework and indeed we will be working on this.

I am saying that I think that this in part gives expression to this issue of the hope for humanity.

In that sense it is not entirely accidental that you get an agreement like that. And from the point of view of the corporate sector and these big international corporations, of course it helps to address a matter that has been arising, whether in the Seattle demonstrations or in Davos or in other places. These people in the streets are raising this question: What is the social responsibility of the multinationals. How do they respond? They are too powerful; they are responsible for the employment of too many people; and so

on. They just cannot continue to say, we owe our obligation to shareholders and the bottom line and all that. There is a wider responsibility and this gives them a possibility to respond in a very practical and very responsible way.

But I think it will also be for them part of their being placed in a process in South Africa that represents hope for humanity.

Given the extraordinary volume of goodwill towards South Africa that exists throughout this continent in the first instance and throughout the world, and the hopes and the prayers that South Africa must succeed, I think we have a strong base from which to start.

And the last thing I would like to say, maybe the second last, is that we also have to talk to our own people. It will not make sense that we go around and do all of this work and the rest of the world responds to all these messages that we are sending out, and then I shoot from South Africa into the rest of the world and undo your work by saying that you do not know South Africa. Everyday there are rapes; everyday, crimes; everyday, hijackings; some black person chopping a white person and so forth. We have to look at this, I am quite sure.

And the last thing I was going to say, Chairperson was, that somebody told me a story the other day of a small book written by Pallo Jordan's late father AC Jordan.

He talked about the people in a village, about a young boy in a village. Each morning as he drove the cattle to the veld to graze, he would look across the valley and see the windows of a house shining gold and they really looked beautiful. He kept thinking and dreaming that he would really love to have these golden windows for his own home.

So one day he walks across the valley to this house of the golden windows and there is an old man sitting there on a mud bench.

This old man says, "Can I help you young man?" and the young man says, "No, I came to look at your golden windows because I thought I would find out how you did it so that we might have golden windows at our own house." And the old man says, "Come and sit next to me, my son. Look across the valley. Look at that house. The reason I am sitting here is because I am admiring those golden windows on that house." The young fellow looks, and indeed they are golden, and it is his own home.

So AC Jordan said that it is part of the problem of human beings that they never see the golden windows at their own homes. They see the golden windows elsewhere.

Thank you very much, Chairperson.