

## SPOTLIGHT

**Mo Ibrahim**

Mo Ibrahim was chairman of the fastest growing mobile phone company in sub-Saharan Africa, Celtel, which he sold to Kuwait's Mobile Telecommunications Company for \$3.4 billion dollars in 2005. Few businesses can demonstrate such a dramatic impact on society as the provision of mobile phones in Africa. The technology he developed allows Africans to communicate in spite of limited landline infrastructure. This technology also provides a platform for future technology that may greatly assist Africa in the 21st century.

Ibrahim, who has British nationality, was born a Sudanese Nubian. He has never forgotten his African roots. He was inspired by mobile technology as early as 1969, and spent years learning about the technology that he believed could make a real difference for the people of Africa. He was a man of vision. He completed his doctorate on mobile communication in 1974. He played a part in establishing Britain's first mobile network, before setting up a consultancy business. In 1998 he started Celtel to work exclusively in Africa, with the intention of building a European-quality company with the best equipment, stating from the outset: 'We will not pay a single dollar in bribes.'

When he sold the company, Celtel had more than seven million customers, and employed 3 500 people. It is the only mobile network that saw the poorest of the poor as its major customers. Africa has become the first continent where mobile phones outnumber fixed lines. When Celtel started in 1998 there were two million mobile phones on the African continent. Now there are over 100 million – and there is still a long way to go.

Ibrahim aimed to raise market penetration to 20% by 2015. He saw opportunities where others saw problems. Most organisations focus on cities, bypassing villages and hamlets where most Africans live. Celtel focused on rural areas that would continue to be cut off from the rest of the world without this technology. To do this, Ibrahim is exploring the possibilities of using solar energy.

Ibrahim never underplayed the frustrations of operating in Africa. However, he has demonstrated that, despite the frustrations, success is possible. This success is built on the needs of the poor, of improving their lot in life while growing a successful business.

Ibrahim has shown not only great vision about the progress of technology but also that technology can be used to help those people with whom he identifies. Despite the fact that he resides in England, his business focus is on Africa and ways in which technology and processes successful elsewhere in the world can be used to the benefit of people in Africa.



## Leadership in the African Context

This is further evidenced by the fact that he has used his own money to establish a \$10 million foundation to fund development projects in Africa. He is using his personal success to the benefit of the continent with which he identifies. The foundation aims to:

- stimulate debate on good governance across sub-Saharan Africa and the world;
- provide objective criteria by which citizens can hold their governments to account; and
- recognise achievement in African leadership and provide a practical way in which African leaders can build positive legacies on the continent when they have left office.

The foundation, which is run by his daughter, Hadel, has awarded the prize four times since 2005 to:

- Mozambique's Joaquim Chissano;
- Botswana's Festus Mogae;
- Cape Verde's Pedro Verona Pires; and
- Namibian Hifikepunye Pohamba.

It also produces the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) that provides an annual assessment of the quality of governance in African countries looking at four specific aspects:

- safety and rule of law;
- participation and human rights;
- sustainable economic opportunity; and
- human development.

(Source: Wikimedia (n.d.); Easterley 2008).

## INTRODUCTION

The story of Mo Ibrahim dispels the idea that African leaders are neither competent nor concerned about their people. It demonstrates how leadership skills can be used in the most difficult of circumstances by understanding local conditions and using these to bring about change. The profile also identifies some of the critical issues for leaders that can benefit others; the importance of local knowledge and understanding; and a passion and determination to succeed without compromising values.

Mo Ibrahim offers an example of an African business leader who uses his considerable business acumen to bring benefit to others.