

Speech: Opening remarks by the UK High Commissioner to Kenya during the 5th annual devolution conference

It's a great honour to be here this morning and to offer opening remarks on behalf of the International Community.

I would like to recognise the inter-agency steering committee co-chairs – Kirinyaga County Governor H.E. Anne Waiguru and Muranga County Senator Irungu Kangata – as well as the representatives of,

- The Presidency
- The Ministry of Finance
- The Ministry of Devolution and ASALs,
- The Council of Governors
- The Judiciary
- The Inter-Governmental Relations Technical Committee
- The Commission for Revenue Allocation
- County Governments
- And many other ministries, departments, independent agencies and commissions.

Your Excellencies,

My own country is full of local histories, local cultures, and local rivalries. Every British person has many identities – English, Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish; Northerner or Southerner; Yorkshire or Lancashire, Manchester City or Manchester United. Many reflect ancient and sometimes bloody rivalries. Each gives us a sense of belonging and of history.

These differences are to be celebrated; they make us what we are. Our unity is found not in ignoring or subjugating them, or pretending they don't exist. Instead we find strength in our diversity; we find ways of reflecting and embracing it in our politics and our government; and we seek to make sure everyone feels they have a say in the decisions which affect their lives, at the right time and the right level. It is continually a work in progress, but a vital one.

The same is true here in Kenya. This country took in its 2010 Constitution the ambitious and highly significant choice of embracing devolution. It offers a way of building peace and prosperity, and expanding inclusive service delivery. Expectations everywhere are high. The International Community on whose behalf I speak today is your partner in making devolution work for all Kenyans.

Already in a few short years so much has been achieved. As I travel around the country, particularly to the most remote and historically-marginalised areas, people often tell me that devolution has made a bigger difference to their lives than any other single event or process, and an overwhelmingly

positive one. Devolution has a vital part to play in delivering Vision 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Big Four.

Last year saw the next important phase, as elections brought a mix of continuity and change to county administrations and positions. In just the past months newly-elected governors, senators, speakers and members of county assemblies have been inducted, and begun or resumed their vital duties, from planning their work and how they fund it to engaging their populations.

No five year-old institution or indeed person has worked everything out yet, and we should not be surprised that devolution in Kenya still needs to address some significant challenges to realise its full potential.

Funds need to flow efficiently and accountably from centre to county and on into service delivery that most benefits Kenyan citizens. That requires the flow of resources to be predictable and transparent, and their management to be open and accountable at all stages. We need to see progress on public financial management at the county level, with strong county audits and efficient expenditure. Fighting corruption is critical to the attainment of all goals – from the Big Four to the smallest act of service delivery to an individual citizen.

Devolution brings government closer to the people it serves, and public participation is vital to success. Such participation can go much deeper. Youth, women and persons with disabilities, and citizens in historically marginalised areas within counties, should not be left behind. Letting citizens and civil society get engaged in drafting plans and budgets, and in overseeing implementation, ensures ownership and accountability.

County assemblies and the senate have a key role to play to ensure their legislative and oversight functions strengthen devolution.

Meanwhile counties have come together to form regional blocs, which are at various stages of development. These have huge potential – to strengthen trade, reduce conflict, and create efficiencies in improving service delivery. We in the international community are keen to support them.

We should seize every opportunity for lesson-learning and exchange of ideas and good practice between counties. It is in the counties that we find most of the innovation needed to realise the potential of devolution: all counties need to be aware and inspired by each other's efforts. Sometimes healthy competition is important too: striving for example to be among the best counties for investors and for doing business will drive improvements that benefit all.

The presence of Kenya's Development partners here today reflects our commitment to support devolution in Kenya. Over KES 10 billion has been spent on programmes supporting devolution over the last 7 years, with much more invested in key service delivery sectors such as health, agriculture, water and sanitation, climate change and urban development. Development partners have also supported initiatives to raise awareness and support civil society participation in the devolution process.

We strongly support this conference's focus on the Big 4 agenda. County governments have a key role in realizing the targets set out by the Big 4.

And we are here not just to embrace the technical aspects, but also the spirit of devolution as envisioned in the Constitution. Kenyans from all corners of the country want to experience the real impact of devolution in their daily lives. This conference is a crucial forum to reflect on how we deliver that.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I conclude, let me say a word about the wider picture around today's conference.

As friends of Kenya and supporters of its democracy, we in the international community welcome again the moves to political reconciliation that Kenya's leaders have made since early March. It is great to see this gathering embrace and further those moves.

As we look ahead, let us focus on the common good. The Constitution, institutions and the rule of law represent the foundations of that common good, and they are precious. They provide the framework in which every Kenyan shares rights and obligations, and can seek fairness and justice. They need to be strengthened, not weakened, and Kenya's leaders bear a special responsibility to lead in that.

Discussions between political leaders are important, and the new atmosphere since March is greatly welcome. But political discussions are not sufficient on their own. Kenyans should engage in a sustained, open, transparent and inclusive national conversation, involving people from all walks of life and leaders from every section of Kenyan society – to move the country forward, strengthen its institutions, ensure accountability and justice, and give every Kenyan a stake in the important developments now under way for the future of this country. We stand ready to support this as friends and partners of this great nation.

On behalf of the international partners, I wish this conference every success.

May God bless us all, and may He bless this wonderful country of Kenya.

Asanteni sana.