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The unfinished Journey, Memories of the road travelled, Professor Adipala Ekwamu

Mr. President, Ministers, Cabinet Secretaries, Vice Chancellors and Rectors, Development partners, students, ladies and gentlemen - good afternoon

It is my privilege now to introduce a very special book, the Unfinished Journey, that chronicles the life of a man who has given himself so fully to leading and building up the RUFORUM network that he hardly needs introduction - Prof. Adipala Ekwamu, it has been a great privilege, and a great adventure, to work closely with you over the past year, retracing the journey of your life, in order to produce this book.

Prof. was born into the Adipala clan, in a small village in Eastern Uganda named Olyanai - the smelly place - because of its being located next to a swamp that used to be teeming with fish!

When Prof. was just a few days old, a very beautiful ceremony was performed that has deep significance in the Kumam culture. He and his mother and his immediate grandmothers in the clan each had a thread fastened around their neck. Some days later, when all these threads fell off naturally, they were collected up, and all of the women gathered at the swamp to release these threads into the water.

The release of the threads symbolized the shared and continuous journey of life -- the passage one has to travel through life -- the road that many others have travelled before -- and the continuous journey of life over generations. As the strings drifted where they may in the swamp that was also symbolic - some strings got stuck on the reeds, while others travelled far - to places unknown and unexpected.

Well, as we all know, Prof. has travelled far in life. But this is certainly not just by chance. Three women - his mother, Polina Atim, his dear auntie Ada Adongo, who is now more than 100 years old, and a local witchdoctor in the clan by the name of Imata Amayo -- all had the foresight and determination to work incredibly hard - digging, brewing and selling Waragi, the local gin - in order to send Prof. to school. Even though they had hardly any education

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themselves, they believed in the value of education, and invested everything they had in doing whatever they could to give the next generation better prospects and opportunities than they had themselves.

In other words, Prof had the values of human capacity building modelled for him very early in life, and clearly he was taking notes!

Back in 2004, when Prof. was applying for the new job of coordinating the brand new RUFORUM network, he came across an ancient Chinese proverb that captured his vision of what the network could become - If you are thinking a year ahead, sow a seed. If you are thinking 10 years ahead, plant a tree. If you are thinking 100 years ahead - educate the people.

The vice-chancellors who interviewed him for this job must have been courageous souls indeed, for he came into his interview - with his head shaved freshly bald, due to a miscommunication with the barber - and proceeded to show them pictures of the grass thatch hut in which he had grown up! The intent of this was to link his own personal story to the larger idea that ultimately education is the thing that will bring development and enable the African continent to feed itself, develop itself and work together in collaboration to build the future.

Back then, nobody could have predicted that this new little organisation, RUFORUM, would even survive the next few years - let alone evolve and grow to become what it is today: a pan-African body of 120 different universities -- engaging with heads of state; bringing diverse people with diverse knowledge from across the continent and the world together to collaborate; making heavyweight contributions in capacity building and research in agriculture and food security; shaping the future of African higher education; collaborating with communities in the co-production of knowledge; pioneering and scaling out new ways of thinking about student learning; and developing young researchers as leaders, change makers and builders of society.

In the process of doing this book, we traced some of the thought processes and particular experiences through which RUFORUM's approaches to learning and engagement emerged. Learning to unlearn with the farmers of P'KWI, in the aftermath of a decade-long civil insurgency. Visiting Earth University in Costa Rica with vice-chancellors in 2013.

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Having revisited all these memories of Prof's with him, I can now say that I recognise his own very human personal qualities of leadership, empathy, humour, doggedness, yet also humility and the willingness to learn from others and be changed by their thinking - I think these personal qualities have had a huge impact in bringing people together and shaping the RUFORUM network.

As Prof often says, he wants those who come up after him to do better than him. As the title of Unfinished Journey acknowledges, human capacity building is slow work. It is generational work. Success lies in the people who come after you, and may only become visible years or even decades after its seeds have been planted.

Yet now we're on the cusp of 2020, and time is running out. The gathering crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and ecological breakdown, inequality and the lack of opportunity for massive numbers of young people - these are existential crises that demand more bold, creative and courageous responses from us all. Now more than ever before. They demand that we all find ways to be good ancestors to the generations that come after us, just as Prof's three clan mothers were good ancestors, making it possible for him to travel far and become a leader. And just as Prof and his late wife Theopista Nagujja have, I think, been good ancestors, investing in schools around Olyanai, thinking of the future.

Visiting Olyanai with Prof, this sense of urgency, and anguish, about the future was palpable. The fish in the swamp that once sustained the community and gave it the name of the 'smelly place' are now gone. The forests are gone. Even the mango and Shea nut trees are being chopped down for charcoal production as people pursue daily survival. The primary schools are bursting at the seams, and teachers are struggling to cope with 200 or more students in a classroom. So many young people are not being prepared for the future.

All of this, of course, is not an invitation to despair, but rather a call to action. As Prof has reflected, it is nearing time for him to pass the baton to others. Now is the time to celebrate his legacy, also acknowledging all of his students, colleagues, collaborators, partners, family members, children and grandchildren - many of whom are in the room. Thanks to Prof, and many others, within the relatively short space of 15 years, RUFORUM has grown into a vibrant network that has produced thousands of strong, capable and proud scholars, leaders and change-makers whose influence is spread across the continent. Now they are the ones - to paraphrase Gandhi - being the change they want to see in the world. As the story inside of this

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book will reveal, Prof will leave a legacy to be celebrated. I hope you will enjoy reading and sharing this story.

Thank you.

This is our thirteenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM AGM 2019 Digests. You can get more details about the meeting at <http://www.ruforum.org/AGM2019/> and more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You many also join us online using Social Media for real time updates. Our Official hashtag is #AGMGhana2019.

About the Author

Megan is a writer, consultant and storyteller who travels widely across Africa, creatively documenting complex stories and processes of learning, innovation and change in higher education, food systems, agriculture and sustainable development. She holds an MA in journalism from Stanford University, and also recently completed an MPhil at the Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch University exploring the creative methods used by food innovators to build capacities for resilience.

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