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## Scholarship and Academic Community Service

At some point in my career, I had to get back to my rural home and provide some services to the community. In Kenya, many city dwellers are either from the rural settings and have simply come to settle in urban areas or some are born here. I moved from rural Kisii and happily settled in Nairobi, got married and set up another home here. I still have a comfortable home and tree plantation in my rural Nyamasega village. The home has trees on it and has a serene environment.

As a family, my rural house serves as a retreat during holidays. The amenities like power, water and access roads were not there. Whenever we visited home, my wife and I had to prepare for lighting equipment and water provision. I decided to apply for power which I paid for and the whole community of over 1,000 residents benefited from this service. It was expensive in 1985 to pay for power and tap it from over four kilometres from the mains. It was my first rural project which I am still proud of.

I also provided the first telephone line connection to my house which the community used freely in cases of emergencies. It was later replaced by the current cell phone system. But I still paid for the landline alone and maintained it by paying the monthly charges.

As a community leader, I initiated and set up one of the best performing SDA Boarding Primary Schools in the area. The school started with a few students who first used my house for classes and the teachers' house, and then we later built up a boarding school on a public communal land. The school now has over 500 students. I organized fundraisers to build it.

Within its vicinity stands a moderate health clinic with basic medicines and equipment for the area. It took me several years to set it up and I also spent our family resources and time to apply and pay for licences. The area leadership was always negative for such development and yet the community deserved it. I am proud to date that I succeeded in constructing the facility.

Next to the health clinic stands a chief's camp office which I put up again for the community for closer administrative services. The initial temporary building

was put up by me as we planned for a more permanent structure. The community has remained grateful for my initiatives since they enjoy using the facilities.

The secondary and primary schools in Nyamagesa Village are government-sponsored but I still provide for essential books. I have managed to put up one classroom alongside the main block, and have provided power to the classrooms. I do supply required books to many schools in the area and beyond as I encourage all students to work hard and pass their examinations commendably.

Other contributions to the Nyamagesa community include fundraising for church buildings, financially assisting needy students who have done well in their examinations. As a family, we always give financial support to young people from the community for their university education. I also give free advisory services whenever I am available.

I have been requested to construct tanks for clean water provision, but have not been able to do so. Plans are underway for the project. This is because of the complex nature of our terrain and the need to involve everybody in the community. Provision of electricity was easy because I first connected my house, lit it up and everybody saw the advantage. Piping for water and setting up common collection tanks calls for all interested parties. Our homes are scattered all over the hills and provision of any infrastructure is very complicated. We are still exploring the possibility.

### **Board of Governors in Schools**

In my earlier chapters, I narrated my early childhood and education at Ibacho Primary School. I had the privilege of serving as a board chair after several years. As a university professor, I had to go back to my roots and give guidance to the young boys and girls on what it takes to become a professor. I wanted to be a mentor and pay back in kind.

When I was appointed the chairman of the school by the Minister of Education, Hon. Stephen Kalonzo, I was surprised by the amount of work that was needed to uplift the academic standards of Ibacho Secondary School, my young alma mater. Many schools in Kisii and Nyamira counties performed badly. Anyone who chaired any school's board of governors was expected to raise the standards of academic performance. Failures at all levels were and are still at an all-time low.

The community was delighted to have one of their alumni head Ibacho Secondary School. My four years as a chairman were educative, revealing and disturbing. The cause of poor performance in examinations was a common denominator in many Gusii schools. I had previously followed annual results and marvelled as to why Starehe Boys or Alliance Girls performed so well that they beat many Gusii secondary schools. My first meeting at Ibacho was to ask the board of governors and teachers to write a paper on how to improve the standards. It was a long explanation why poor results were the norm in Gusii schools.

I learned several things during my first board meeting; the composition of board members was gross. Persons who had never gone to school formed the bulk of members. They could not advise on any academic matters. The teachers were not bothered to teach. Many were untrained, and ran businesses for extra income. Unqualified students were admitted to higher levels without adequate preparation for the next classes. Finally, the head teacher was so weak that he could not control staff with regard to time-keeping and absenteeism.

One of the most disturbing contributions to failure was political interference. The area members of parliament had strong influence on who served as the head of the school and who served as board members. They had to be diehard sycophants of a particular member of parliament regardless of their qualifications and competence in running the high school.

The poor academic performance in Gusii schools necessitated using my family resources to conduct a survey and come up with a publication which I presented and distributed to schools within the region. My strong plea that we should have qualified staff was heeded and there was a slight improvement in performance. My other intervention was the supply of reading materials and the completion of syllabi.

I organized several academic day meetings with the area members of parliament and discussed openly what I had found out in my survey. I was categorical in implicating and condemning the heads of schools that produced poor results. I also highlighted my findings in many leaders' meetings whenever I had an opportunity. I bought books and supplied to some schools which later produced appreciable results. Specific recommendations that I made were implemented and gradual change for better performance was seen. I am proud that my small input in the promotion of education yielded fruits.

I also served as a board member of Kisii High School, my secondary school alma mater, and Nairobi School. The differences in students' performance were so diverse that I made one conclusion: teachers and especially the head teacher made a marked difference. A disciplined group of teachers and pupils, provision of reading materials and timely coverage of the syllabi were a necessity for high academic performance.

My presence and advice to the youth stimulated many and I met them later as my students in the university. The little book I wrote stimulated many and it revealed the rot in our primary and secondary schools. The findings would apply to any schools within the African continent. It is at this level that science and technology should be emphasized to trigger innovativeness in the minds of the youth. I have always stressed the importance of good performance in science-related courses for national development.

My other service to the community involved church construction. I wanted to demonstrate my role to the youth by putting up two campus churches. Kenyatta

University (KU) Senate provided some land for Seventh Day Students to construct a church. KU is where I am the current Council chairman. Until 1995, students used to meet at a family's house.

When I was told about the provision of land, I encouraged the students to plan for the construction of a church. I was then Vice-Chancellor at JKUAT. They invited me for a service in 1995 which I attended happily and spoke to the gathering.

Several years later, in 2013, we had another funds drive to complete a beautiful church which now stands on a one hectare piece of land donated by the university administration. The last funds drive towards the completion of the church was on 13 July 2013. My wife and I pledged to provide some of the funds. It was a privilege to speak to so many pastors and to encourage them on the critical roles that our churches play towards the well-being of the youth.

A Catholic church I was personally interested in was the St Augustine Catholic Church, just outside the JKUAT compound. In 1999, His Grace the Archbishop Mwana wa Nzeki visited my campus to talk to the students. I was invited as the head of the institution to receive His Grace, a request I graciously obliged to. Despite being a Sunday when I would normally take a break, I drove to my office and received His Grace. We had tea together and he requested me to hire a priest for Catholic students who would also teach some courses in the universities. He gave me Father (Dr) Lawrence Njoroge's impressive CV. I advised His Grace that the relevant appointing body would consider Fr Lawrence alongside others who had applied for the post. Fr Lawrence, who was then completing his PhD studies in the US, was in the country and so he attended the interview.

He was found capable of teaching some units in the Institute of Human Resources Development (IHRD) besides his pastoral service. He had to double up as a lecturer and chaplain. I later provided him with a house on the campus.

Later on, His Grace Mwana W' Nzeki introduced a subject which I took up as my own pet: to put up a church on a plot they had acquired many years before. I accepted to assist in its design and provide some basic infrastructure like water and electricity. I had a very active Catholic University Students body. Two of them were fifth-year Architecture students. I challenged them together with their lecturers to come up with a beautiful design of the intended church. In the process, Father Njoroge had reported to work and I assigned him the duty of ensuring that the church was completed.

My students came up with a wonderful drawing of the St Augustine Catholic Church in Juja which is also almost complete. His Grace sat with me several times in his downtown office to organize for fundraising. He liked my efforts and loved to work with me on any important project. What was more exciting was the fact that JKUAT students of architecture took up my challenge to them and were able to provide a free architectural design of the church. The bond between JKUAT and the Catholic Church has continued even after my departure.

Today, under the guidance of Father Lawrence Njoroge, St Augustine stands prominent outside the university boundary next to the AICAD Centre. I regularly visit the Church and the community has remained very grateful to our efforts.

I remained selfless in my service to the community as long as those involved were focused, honest and equally committed.

Perhaps a significant venture was the provision of a modern primary school which I personally undertook in order to assist my staff's children. For a long time, my staff's children were being ferried to several schools in Nairobi. They would leave Juja at about 5 am and return at about 7 pm.

I never fancied this arrangement. It was demanding on young children, cumbersome to the driver and a big concern to my staff who I wanted to dedicate their services to building the young university. I knew the agony of waking up very young kids long before 5 am for them to be transported to nursery and primary schools scattered all over Nairobi, 46 km away. Even driving to Nairobi and returning was in itself a real challenge.

At times I would be called that a van had been involved in an accident or broken down and my transport officer would be forced either to send another vehicle or hire one from town. I thought that this was a ridiculous and costly arrangement. Yet staff argued that Nairobi had better quality schools, hence their preference.

I had a solution: to put up a nursery and a primary school. I called my management staff and told them that I was concerned about the safety and health of the children being ferried to Nairobi and back every weekday. In fact nobody had thought of my idea that we could also start an excellent primary school to rival those in Nairobi.

Management gave me an okay and they left it to me to give guidance. I immediately called all parents whose children were in city schools. I gave them a talk on the negative effects of waking up nursery and primary school kids to go to school at the ungodly hours of 5.00 am. I told them that I could provide a plot for construction of a school which could first and foremost serve my staff's interests and then those of the immediate community.

The parents endorsed the idea, supported me fully and I requested for an interim school planning committee. They chose an excellent committee from amongst themselves which included my finance officer and registrar. I served on the committee as an advisor and patron. I personally attended several meetings during the planning stage. Soon the project was on its feet. Within one year, we put up a block of classrooms through parents' contributions and I terminated further ferrying of young children to Nairobi in search of quality education.

The JKUAT Academy, the name we adopted, became number one in the division. I was again personally involved in the selection of the teachers to the school. I needed to know their past performances. The staffing officer in Kiambu was my friend, and I promised him that parents would indeed top up the teachers' salaries as an encouragement.

I could not believe that after a mere three years, the academy was among the best in Central Province and we were limiting new entrants. There were several schools in the vicinity, but they performed KCPE poorly. Many of the teachers were my lecturers' spouses. And if there is any set-up I am still proud of, it is the JKUAT Academy. It stabilized my teaching and support staff and the community around the university.

I learnt several lessons in the process of building the primary school. I had solved the anxiety of parents and children from early wake-ups and late arrivals, and also saved them from the highway uncertainty. Good quality education could be attained in a short period of time if we earnestly tried. And most importantly, perhaps, I stabilized my staff and made them more committed to serving the university by providing them with the most important facility for their children. They could now not transfer or quit the workplace for lack of quality primary education for their children.

The community was impressed by my visionary approach to education. I was in both the university and primary school set-ups. The end result of this noble venture was that I created a conducive working environment for my staff. They were now able to concentrate on their work and produce quality work for me in turn. The constant worry about their children's safety was no longer there. They could now teach, conduct research and publish – the key indicators of productive work. Value and quality for my time was achieved and my staff had more time to themselves.

When I reflect back on this specific venture, I conclude that one can hit a target of set values within a short period of time. It is not possible to hit a target you never set. You only need an initiator who remains focused on set values. We could have easily taken up an existing primary school and boosted it up in terms of books, staff, water and classrooms. But we would never have become true owners of such a school. Perhaps we would even have been seen as intruders!

Apathy is the biggest destructive and retrogressive element which is hard to change in our society. That is why I enjoy taking risks and trying them. But I always weigh my options. Human beings always need an initiator and an achiever. Then the rest falls in place.

One similar development I would like to share in this book is the establishment of a university staff residential village. This project was one of those meant to induce staff and have Juja town as their permanent residence.

Real estate in Kenya is the only thing that an elite person can afford invest in. Land and houses are an ever-increasing demand which many financially able citizens are nowadays engaged in. I knew for a fact that many members of staff wished to own property near their areas of work.

There was our neighbour, Ms Mary Mburu (now deceased), who had a flower farm next to our campus. She had an excellent rose farm and a school on her

land. I knew her well as an excellent neighbour who always invited me whenever there was a function in her residence. She also allowed students' attachment in the farm. Her brother, Mr. George Muhoho, a former chief executive of Kenya Airports Authority, and a brother to Mama Ngina Keyatta (the mother of Uhuru Kenyatta, Kenya's fourth president) was also a good friend of mine. He was a chairman of Mang'u High School's board of governors when my sons were students there.

One day, in 1994, Mary Mburu offered to sell part of her land to us. My predecessor, Prof. George Eshiwani, initiated the process in 1992 but shortly after he left to become Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University. Mary and I held some discussions on the same and I was convinced that we needed to pursue the offer to a logical conclusion. I had to move fast and set the negotiations in place.

I called my chairman of Council and briefed him as this project would involve substantial financial outlay. He gave me an okay to proceed with further exploratory surveys in the area. I set up a committee comprising the DVC (administration and finance), the finance officer, and a few other members. I was a member of the committee but the DVC took charge. I sounded senior management and called the Senate to inform them about the same.

The land was about 25 acres to be purchased by interested staff members and subdivided it into an eighth, a quarter and a half of an acre. The price was agreed on by the land owner and my committee. There was a lot of resistance from some members of staff.

The final price was eventually decided on and the Council approved the purchase of the land using the salaries of those staff members who showed interest. The purchase price was to be deducted from the salary for those who showed keen interest. Several meetings were held to iron out modes of payments which included legal fees, surveyors' fees and stamp duty. I then drew up a final list of those who were indeed interested in buying the plots. Payment schedules were drawn up and agreed upon.

We got a surveyor who subdivided the parcel of land into eighth, quarter and half-acre plots. Every university member who wanted whatever portion qualified as long as their check-offs could sustain repayments. This was a project which I had been focusing on as realizable several years ahead. We made bye-laws and specified the kind of residential units to put up. We also left adequate space for future university development, some space for a school and playground.

Again the staff residential site stands unique as dream houses have been erected by members of staff. Overall, we all benefited from the initiative. I got my half-acre plot.

Setting up a staff housing scheme was a fulfilled dream to several members of staff who could afford to buy the plots. My initial idea of staff recruitment and retention was now being realized in earnest. Although not all staff could afford to buy, the few who succeeded remember me with deep appreciation.

Many have built their dream houses and have permanently settled there as they continue to perform their noble duty of serving the institution and country. Their children attend JKUAT academy, a few minutes away, while they lecture or carry out other duties on campus. This was our promising environment which, in my view, was perfect for a young nation like ours where competition for property had become the norm. I certainly succeeded in this capital investment venture which remains prominent on the Thika-Nairobi Super Highway. The current market value of the property now is unbelievable.

The Juja business community had confidence in my work. They respected me and we engaged in some capital development advisory services. I told them in the several consultative meetings we held that, one day, JKUAT would turn around the business targets of the area. For example, the staff working here would be many and student numbers would soar. They would therefore need living houses and hostels, so Juja would eventually become a university town. I urged them to consider developing it.

As a service to the community, I offered them free of charge architectural designs of universally recommended students' hostels. I knew that no matter what we did, the university would not invest in putting up more hostels. We could not match the high demand. The number of students would be overwhelming.

I told the business community to put up standard residential houses for students. I even detailed in the design, the number of students per flat, how they would share common facilities like the kitchen, sitting rooms and a small number of shared bathrooms. I drew comparisons from the western countries where students' dormitories are very simple in design but neat and easy to manage.

The idea was taken up by financially able investors and I understand that thousands of students now reside in Juja town, and have reduced the accommodation pressure on the universities. The town was initially isolated, but with the new highway, we now have a fast-growing metropolis connecting the city of Nairobi and Thika.

My reflections on what I did to retain staff can be summarized as follows:

“Human beings must be appreciated in order to serve an institution with dedication. A good working environment is a fundamental prerequisite for quality service.”

The family needs the staff and staff welfare in general were of critical interest to me. But patience pays because the benefits of a well-planned venture are witnessed several years later.

My sincere advice on housing development by the financially able investors is now bearing fruit. The staff housing scheme in the university's proximity is now an area considered the up-market of Juja and the Nairobi environs. Property value keeps on escalating and the investment made by risk-taking colleagues is bearing fruits. My vision and positive selfless actions are slowly unfolding for the general good of the entire Juja community.

## Academic Survey

As part of the community service, I was requested to chair a team of scholars to find out why children in Gusii schools performed poorly in national examinations. As a young man who had grown up and studied in Kisii, I agreed to undertake a survey and come up with the causes of poor performance. I was happy with the task.

The genesis of the survey was a meeting in 1994 of the area academics and members of parliament. They noted that mass failures were the norm for hundreds of children in Gusiland, now Nyamira and Kisii County. In 1994, I assembled my team; we drew up the terms of reference and embarked on the survey. We met once but realized that there were no resources for the project. I offered to conduct the field survey using the family resources. I knew that the team would not complete the exercise if there were no funds to use.

I designed a questionnaire which I was going to administer to 70 public schools at primary and secondary levels. I personally visited the schools and issued the questionnaire which included, among other things, some indication of time management by teachers – especially the head teachers. It was a detailed survey which covered many aspects of poor performance. I was able to compare results of several schools in the community.

I came up with a monograph/booklet which I shared with the community. It was entitled, *Improving Academic Performance in Gusii Schools*. It was widely circulated to the stakeholders. It revealed virtually every factor which was contributory to poor performance.

In Chapter Six of my booklet, I proposed 17 interventions and recommendations which would reverse the trend. To mention but a few: poor school management; rampant staff and student absenteeism; inadequate coverage of the syllabi; poor child foundation; lack of reading and teaching materials. The 36-page booklet makes recommendations which have been revisited by other schools nationwide. The problems are not confined to Gusii schools only, but also afflict other parts of Kenya.

My 1994 study corroborates with the recent survey of World Bank, as relayed in *The Standard* on Saturday, 2 July 2013, almost 20 years after I did my survey. The World Bank Survey of Service Delivery Indicators (SDI) for Kenya states that children in Kenyan primary public schools are taught for 2 hours and 40 minutes a day instead of 5 hours 40 minutes. The study which was very elaborate condemned the teachers, including the head teachers, for absconding classes. It said that seniority and years of training did not correlate with higher levels of knowledge. The survey had a larger sample size than the one I did. It focused on 300 private and public schools while I surveyed 70 public schools only. The very damning report concluded that, “while teachers at public and private schools were likely to show up for work, public school teachers were 50% less likely to be in class.”

My findings had the same conclusions as those of the World Bank almost 20 years later. The comparison between private and public schools was interesting because the former pay well for work done, hence the commitment. I was shocked at the findings and the fact that nothing much had been done to arrest the situation several years later. I have continued to publicize the report and share it with opinion leaders.

My observation on this important subject is that there is no substitute to working hard. Success comes with sacrifice. Parents, teachers and children must know that education brings about innovations. The country needs leaders and educators who make a difference in national development. Also, early foundations to the nursery and primary school-going children can determine their ultimate level success. Time is not static, and cannot be rewound. Hence, teachers have to account for their services. The time allowed to cover syllabi can determine the quality and the pass-rate of the children.