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## Back to the Ivory Tower

My thirteen years in academic leadership at JKUAT came to an end when I was posted to NEMA as a Director-General. My three years in NEMA where I tried to cope with myriad environmental problems came to an end too. I had to revert to my original base with the vast knowledge and experience that I had gained from these postings.

This was not unusual. Any presidential appointment is not permanent. One could be relieved of one's duties as soon as one was appointed. My permanent professional domicile was the University of Nairobi. I did not sever my tenure there. I kept on renewing my employment as I was moving about the other jobs. It was not my choice that I became the deputy principal, principal and vice- chancellor of JKUAT. This was the choice of President Moi who thought I was doing a good job in nation-building.

It was not my choice either that I was appointed a director-general, NEMA. It was President Mwai Kibaki's choice. He thought I would do a good job in educating Kenyans about the value of environmental conservation and protection. It was not my choice either to be appointed the chairman of Kenyatta University Council. It was President Mwai Kibaki, and later overseen by President Uhuru Kenyatta. I thanked them for the appointments.

As a responsible citizen, I never stopped conducting my research work and supervising postgraduate students who were registered with my parent University, the university of Nairobi. I kept on remitting my statutory deductions diligently and timely. I therefore kept my position as a professor of the university.

The Vice-Chancellors of the University during my job tour included: Professors Philip Mbithi, Francis Gichaga, Crispus Kiamba and George Magoha. I kept them fully briefed whenever I got a new appointment. They all understood the circumstances under which we worked. They themselves were under such arrangements.

What made my attachment to the University of Nairobi more stable was the fact that I continued teaching and supervising postgraduate students there. A good number of Master's and PhD degree graduates had been my students. We

also published together. My linkage therefore was firm and active. The chairman of department appreciated my services, despite my absence from my station.

I never, at any time, solicited for any appointment to any of the positions referred to earlier. I think my actions and trust qualified me for appointment. All I knew was that I inherited new outfits which needed to be built on. I took risks and enjoyed moulding new outfits. Both JKUAT and NEMA were at their formative stages and they could be moulded in any way the moulder wanted.

I considered myself going through all academic and leadership cycles. The two are not the same, but complementary. I taught and trained students and led scholars. I also managed a department and a university. I led the academic staff, students and administrative cadre. I also headed one of the most demanding and thankless authorities, NEMA.

There, I led an initially young, non-performing organization to become a world-renowned environmental agency. I also guided the workers and provided leadership. This needed some wisdom and skills. It is for this reason that NEMA was referred to as an extended campus of JKUAT. The two were synonymous with my name. But I was not bothered.

Each institute, however, needed a different approach in its management. One was a university and the other, a strait-jacket government authority. It was my duty to adjust to these two different organizations.

In June 2006, I left NEMA for the University of Nairobi. I called my Vice-Chancellor, Prof. George Magoha, and made an appointment with him. I knew him earlier as a straightforward thinker and a no-nonsense administrator. He also knew me well as a former Vice-Chancellor and director-general of NEMA. He knew I was an accomplished scholar.

I told him that I had come to request him to allow me report back to my University of Nairobi. He was very receptive. We exchanged pleasantries before he responded to my request. He praised my exemplary work and told me that I was familiar with the job of a Vice-Chancellor.

Prof. Magoha is a down-to-earth individual. He is a serious worker and demands results immediately. He must get answers on the spot. I concur with these traits. Yet many of us seem have the bad culture of postponement of issues, requests and problems! As we had a cup of tea, the VC gave me a rundown of the work he needed to accomplish within his tenure in office. He told me of the self-sponsored students and the money the university was making. He referred to the many campuses I had started while in JKUAT and thought it was a good idea. He then answered my request.

“Prof. Michieka,” he started, “when a government requests you to assist in building institutions, you respond positively. When they use you well, they may not need you. Your usefulness wears out. You are no longer needed, despite the good work you may have done.”

He commended my exemplary services to JKUAT, AICAD, KENET, IUCEA and NEMA which I assisted in setting up.

He was glad to have me back. He said that the government ceases to recognize you once you have accomplished its assignments. New blood takes over from where the old one leaves. He was categorical in the sense that if one was no longer considered useful by the borrower, one could always revert to the original employer. My records were clean with my original employer.

Prof. Magoha accepted me to return to my department and share my vast experience in teaching, research and outreach programmes. He called the chairman of my department, Prof. Florence Olubayo, and told her that I should follow the normal channels to be re-instated in the University of Nairobi system. I had to fill in staff movement documents to be re-instated as a teaching member of staff.

My brief interaction with the VC reminded me of the first discussion I had with the late Prof. J. M. Mungai in 1980. It was a friendly, collegiate meeting where we shared experiences. I found the two Vice-Chancellors comparable in their reception but different in action.

Prof. Magoha was a critic of a bad system and did not mince his words in condemning mediocrity. He hated non-performing systems. Prof. Mungai was a diplomat who would at times condone mistakes. Prof. Magoha acted on issues immediately. He was a performer and did not waste time. I found a big contrast between the two Vice-Chancellors with whom I worked so closely. The difference was that they worked under different government systems, Presidents Moi and Kibaki.

The University of Nairobi has the highest number of former Vice-Chancellors who have returned to service. They include professors: Raphael Munavu, Japheth Kiptoon, Shellemiah Keya, Francis Gichaga and Crispus Kiamba whom I had worked with previously. The university has a big heart, a big absorption capacity. It is very receptive to its staff who are appointed to various institutions as long as their records are clean. The statutes are liberal and accommodating. The workers understand that retention of manpower is key to a university's stability and visibility.

The former Vice-Chancellors teach, conduct research and supervise postgraduate students, just like any other lecturers. They also hold reputable positions in society as Chancellors of universities. They are always ready to take up any assignments given by their respective heads of department, the dean or college principal.

I find working with the young faculty members the most rewarding experience ever. I always attend meetings and give appropriate advice and guidance whenever needed. I enjoy the interactions with young students who are always ready to learn from senior professors.

Prof. Florence Olubayo was receptive and reminded me that I employed her in the department before I left for JKUAT as a deputy principal. It was a welcome return and I was happy to meet several young people that I had taught. They had become lecturers and were providing excellent services to the nation.

I could not have been to a better place than the University of Nairobi. A good number of workers whom I had assisted in one way or another were excited to see me back to lecture. We shared the past and reminded each other of the youthful days of the 1980s. I recall my excellent relationship with Professors Kimani Waithaka, Ole Mbatia, Margaret Wanyoike, Agnes Mwang'ombe (the College Principal) Willis Kosura-Oluoch, Steven Mbogoh, Samuel Mbugua, Susan Minae, Kareko-Gatere, some of whom were still teaching at greenery Upper Kabete Campus. We related very well.

They could occasionally refer to me as the former Vice-Chancellor, director-general and chairman, and would always ask for my intervention on certain issues when need arose. They would occasionally joke with me and refer to the bad terms of service which we could have changed while I was in the office. I would also respond to them that there was time and season for everything.

The most surprising thing that I found in our Universities was the large number of students admitted. The lecture theatres, laboratories and equipment were always fully occupied. Teaching and the conduct of practicals were never appropriate. The students' congestion did not allow for adequate lecture delivery. This was the case in all public Universities. The unprecedented number of students was certainly impacting negatively on the quality of education.

Over-enrolment of students in our public Universities has stretched the available resources to the limit. The teaching staff are overwhelmed with the crowded work places; residential halls are scarce; dining halls are overcrowded; the ablutions can no longer accommodate the large numbers. The living environment is therefore squalid. Courses that require practicals are no longer serviced. Both the teaching and support staff get overstretched to the furthest limit. The immediate overall effect is the reduced research by the lecturers and little concentration on students.

My transition back to my original career of teaching was smooth. I linked up with my former colleagues and joined a familiar group of academics. I must admit that there were several young and new faces including students that I had taught in the 1980s. Familiar names like Prof. John Kimenju, Dr George Chemining'wa, Dr Jesang Hutchinson, Dr Dorothy Kilalo were among the many lecturers whom I had taught and interacted with earlier. They were ready to receive me and I was glad to join them.

I knew of cases where former Vice-Chancellors would not freely re-join their departments because of past poor interpersonal relationships. This is a common occurrence in many African Universities. The reason is mainly due to poor past interactions where the incumbent would want to revenge on the past injustices. This was not the case when I returned to the University of Nairobi.

I resumed teaching in February 2006. I was assigned to teach courses in weed science and environment. I was competent in the subjects and used many live experiences during my lectures. I reviewed a number of articles to catch up with the latest discoveries especially in weed research.

The internet came in handy and I quickly learnt how to use the latest ICTs. I became a regular user of the library in addition to the internet. I enjoyed teaching the young people who were curious to know about my background. They had seen my pictures in the print media and also during some events. Some would boldly ask me why I opted to return to teaching instead of doing a more prestigious job either in the UNEP or FAO. I told them the importance of teaching them rather than be out there doing a desk job. Imparting knowledge to the youth had a better multiple effect than working for an organization.

I would practically tell them that a lecture to 100 students was more beneficial than lecturing to 10 people. I gave examples of best teaching practices and how that affects a community and eventually a country. I do also recall some colleagues asking me why I opted to return to Kabete Campus rather than go elsewhere for a more lucrative salary. I still insisted that the freedom of teaching and critical thinking was more satisfying than closing myself in an office alone, solving problems. Making huge salaries was not my priority as I was satisfied with my university work and the freedom therein.

I settled at the University of Nairobi quickly, continued educating my children and enjoyed local and international travels. Esther, my wife, was now working with the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) in Kenya. She was happy that I was back to my original workplace which had fewer headaches than the previous ones.

### **A Stint in Politics**

During the 2007 Kenyan general elections, I was persuaded by the local community from my home area to vie for a parliamentary seat. Nyaribari Masaba Constituency is my home area and I have a good development record there. I had been involved in various projects like promotion of education, support of poor children to school, church and school buildings, support of rural funeral arrangements and provision of reading materials in several needy cases.

It was in view of these projects that my community felt that I should vie for the seat. After long persuasion and having naïve understanding of the system of cheating applied then, I gave in. I submitted my papers and declared myself as one of the contestants of the parliamentary seat for Nyaribari Masaba. Twenty-two of us declared interest alongside the incumbent.

To make a long story short; all of us who tried the race were naïve. Many of the running mates were set up as spoilers. They were influenced to scuttle votes in favour of one individual. It was not worth going for. One spoiled ones standing in society.

The people one interacted with had no knowledge of any development agenda. They looked at the immediate gains and had no clue what development plans could bring about. As usual, bribery in Kenyan elections took the centre stage and voters would be bought for as little as Ksh.50 (five US cents) to vote for a non-progressive individual.

Politics in some African countries is a shame and it will take a long time for voters to be educated on their right to good governance and democracy. Tribalism and corruption would always lead the pack of vices in Kenya. Kenyan elections of 2007 resulted into massive rigging and brought about ugly tribal clashes. I was a victim of post-election violence in Molo South Constituency.

We owned a plot on which we had constructed three medium-size houses of three bedrooms each. They were all burnt down; trees felled and stolen; my chain link fence stolen; and the workers chased away. They missed death narrowly. Several personal items were consumed by fire. I never received any compensation as the meagre money that was supposed to be given to victims of post-election violence was distributed through corrupt administrators and never reached the genuine individuals.

I recall that my workers, several displaced people and they spent several nights in Cheptagum Secondary School because they had no place to sleep. Molo South is one of the coldest places in Kenya. Children caught colds, pneumonia and water-borne diseases because of poor hygiene. The truth of the matter is that the consequences of the violence are not fully understood by those who did not experience it.

I reverted to my profession and returned to the University of Nairobi where I resumed my teaching and research duties. I learnt another lesson of not indulging in an activity which was prone to dishonesty and cheating. I also learnt to appreciate that most people go for short-lived benefits. Long-term planning does not seem to be their priority.

“Easy-come-easy-go” philosophy is considered a manifestation of rural poverty. The little money that is dished out during the campaigns makes the people feel rich; they use it as quickly as possible and thereafter they need more. I concluded that for one to succeed in political campaigns, one needed substantial amounts of money. It could drain all the resources and leave one bankrupt and miserable.

Even after one succeeded, one had to keep the contacts alive by constantly “greasing” the electorate. They would abandon you if they were not catered for. This was certainly a backward way of surviving. I learnt the lesson fast and abandoned any future ambitious plans in politics.

Politics itself is not a dirty game as many claim. It is a developmental venture which many people use wrongly to enrich themselves. It becomes dirty only when the politician thinks he is above the constituents. It is a tactful game which can build or destroy individuals and even nations.

Indeed, in many developing nations, politics is seen as a licence for people to eat. It brainwashes many, and hampers development. Clanism, tribalism, nepotism and sycophancy take the centre stage. No country can reduce poverty and dependency if it does not condemn the said vices. Many countries seem to be content with political manoeuvres and can live with them. Few African countries are capable of phasing out election flaws.