



Drivers of Change

Personal and inspiring
testimonials from the
African Diaspora

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Preface

This booklet contains a series of stories like my very own: stories from the diaspora. My story is that of a young man who finds his way to this chilly country where he had to master the language, chat endlessly about the weather and deal with a very strong individualistic culture. What made it bearable was my strong faith and belief that I would one day be successful here. This was no blind optimism. Like others, I knew it would not be easy. But I knew where I came from: a war zone, Liberia, escaping from the claws of poverty, from a place where I could not be the man I wanted to be. Yet, a remarkable aspect of living in the diaspora is how differences between us

seem to vanish. Our world-view becomes broader. But there is still a reason why we look for our fellow country men, to remind us of our roots because our past keeps haunting us. We try to find ways to deal with our past: by supporting projects in our country of origin, building schools, organising conferences about issues such as development and peace processes. This enables us to share our perceptions on the future of these countries. We try to keep our life balanced, to come to terms with both a gruesome past and a sunny future. This is both a blessing and a curse. Yet, it makes us unique.

Vamba Sherif | Novelist

About us

Alberta Opoku (text) is originally from Ghana. She studied journalism in Utrecht and New York and has been writing for almost ten years. She is also a producer and co-presenter of Bridges with Africa, a Radio Netherlands Worldwide production. Alberta's commitment to Africa doesn't end with her job. She's, amongst others, an executive board member of the African Diaspora Policy Centre and the Evert Vermeer Foundation.

Rebke Klokke (photography) has been working as a photographer specialised in portraits and reportages for many years, in the Netherlands as well as in Africa. She is no stranger to its people, both on the continent and in the diaspora. She has lived in Africa for 13 years and most recently spent three years in Uganda, where she published the Kampala photo book in 2007, which captures the daily life of people in the streets of this vibrant city. She has been living in Utrecht since 2007, keeping her love for Africa alive through projects for Warchild, ICCO and Pharos.

Happy reading!

After a situation of conflict, comes a period of assessing the damage and rebuilding. So far, it's been governments and international organisations that did most of the rebuilding. But from the diaspora, Africans who fled the conflict in their country of origin are gradually demanding a role in the reconstruction process.

This booklet portrays ten such Africans in the diaspora. Their efforts vary from building a school to empowering women, and from stimulating entrepreneurship to teaching personal hygiene. Some of them are involved in their homeland because they feel things could be better, to others it's a way of coming to terms with the guilt of fleeing.

What sets these ten Africans apart from others isn't only a steadfast commitment to peace and development, but also the fact that they are experts by experience. This is probably one of the secrets of their success. And despite the seriousness of the issue, there is always room for laughter about living in two worlds. Indeed, their stories show us that seemingly small contributions from the diaspora can have a great impact on the lives of people here and in Africa. We hope these stories will inspire you, too.

Alberta Opoku | Journalist and Rebke Klokke | Photographer

‘Africans don’t want handouts’

“I was about four years old when the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) recruited me as a child soldier. I was trained with other children, right across the border with Ethiopia. But I never fought. SPLA-leader John Garang said we were too young to fight. One day he told us that our compatriots who return to camp wounded, need caring for and you can only do that through education, not by an AK-47.

I wanted to fight, not play nurse. I deserted, moved to Khartoum, and took petty jobs to put myself through school. Via human traffickers I came to Holland in 2000 as an asylum seeker. In the asylum centre, I was

haunted by guilt. Here I was: eating and drinking well, sleeping in a decent bed. So I decided, one day I’d build a school in Sudan.

In 2006, when I was reunited with my family and villagers, I told them about the school. They advised me to build a village school, because when girls reach a certain age, their parents are reluctant to let them go to school in town with boys. I agreed on one condition: the villagers would become owners of the school. They would help to build, maintain and partly staff it. The local government would deliver some teachers; I’ll recruit the rest among retired Dutch teachers. The parents are poor and can’t afford

tuition, so they and their children will do chores in and around the school - a dignified way to earn their schooling.

Education only has value when one literally deserves it. I’m the living proof. Anything you get for free is taken for granted. That’s why, sometimes, I get mad at development organisations that give Africa the wrong help for the wrong reasons. Africans don’t want handouts or so-called help. They want partners who demand responsibility, and take them seriously. My project is a protest against these development organisations. It’s also a way of coming to terms with my conscience.”

Kon

NAME **Kon Kelei**

ORGANISATION **Cuey Machar
Secondary School Foundation**

EXPERTISE **Education**

RESIDENCE **Nijmegen**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Sudan**



‘I’m a different Stéphanie altogether’

“Taking matters into your own hands, that’s probably the most important lesson I learned from the war. Yes, I’m now a different Stéphanie altogether: stronger and more unconventional. The war in 1993 turned my world upside down. Separated from the rest of my family, I fled to Kenya with my two-months old baby. Even when I got to the Netherlands in 1998, I wasn’t at ease, as it took a few more years to be reunited with my family. What kept me going were my faith and the fact that I wasn’t going to stand by and watch what others had planned for me. Hence my commitment to the women in Burundi! I know where they’re coming from. Generations of Burundian girls were raised to look

for a good man who will take care of them and as a result, the majority of Burundian women were housewives. But all that changed during the war. Tens of thousands lost their fathers and brothers and many more were widowed instantly. The women were now forced to be self-sufficient and independent. I figured I could help empower them more effectively, because I know their culture, suffering and emotions. In 2004, I went to Burundi with a group of multicultural women to talk about peace. I used the opportunity to discuss the fact that women in Holland aren’t bystanders but participants in society. On another trip we discussed ways of dealing

with conflicts. The lesson: with mutual understanding and respect, conflict needn’t end up in killing or war. This may sound common to most people, but to them it was groundbreaking. Now that there is peace in Burundi, I’m looking at the country’s long-term development. Being a former French teacher, I’m most interested in education. So this autumn I’m going back again, with a group of English teachers to exchange ideas and methods with their Burundian counterparts. Because English is becoming an increasingly important language in the region and Burundians have some catching up to do.”

NAME **Stéphanie Mbanzondere**
ORGANISATION **Burundian Women
for Peace and Development
(BWPD)**
EXPERTISE **Gender and
Empowerment**
RESIDENCE **Rotterdam**
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Burundi**

Stéphanie



“In the past years I’ve seen a number of African women come out of their isolation and stand up for themselves. When I first arrived in Holland, I noticed the mind-blowing lack of self-consciousness and identity of most women from the Horn of Africa region who were living here. They had lost themselves in the process of seeking asylum. Despite their residence permit and material luxuries, they were stressed and isolated. What was worse, they had no ambitions. I knew things could and should be better. But at that time, twelve years ago, there wasn’t much I could do. My ailing sister was the reason why I came here from Italy. Her health situation wouldn’t improve. When she passed away, I stayed to become her

children’s guardian. No matter how difficult the situation was, I remained strong for myself and for my sister’s children. That’s why I found it so hard to accept that the women from the Horn of Africa region had more or less resigned from life in Holland. Being Somali myself, I know these women and know why they act a certain way, and I know how to influence their mentality and change their thinking. Having adapted to my new life in Holland, I was now very motivated to dedicate more time to these women. Fortunately at that time SAS was shifting from being an African organisation - for men and women from all over the continent - to focusing on women from the Horn of

Africa region. So I hopped on board and we geared our ambitions towards empowerment and education about domestic violence and other forms of violence. About three years ago we set up the Somali Women Agenda to encourage peace, development and political awareness in Somalia and beyond. It is a national movement of almost all women’s organisations in Somalia and the diasporas. These efforts - the Somali Women Agenda, Stichting African Sky - are small steps, but the impact is momentous.”

Stella

“Small steps, momentous impacts”

NAME **Stella Ismail**
ORGANISATION **Stichting African Sky**
EXPERTISE **Gender/Horn of Africa**
RESIDENCE **Utrecht**
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Somalia**



“Nothing is more elevating than earning your own living. I’m convinced aid takes away people’s survival instinct, their ingenuity to beat the odds and make it. I believe in trade, not aid. The entrepreneurs I deal with prove me right every day.

After years of working in commercial organisations, I have a solid network within the business communities here, and being half Ethiopian, half Eritrean, I can pave the way and match entrepreneurs in Holland and East Africa. That’s Teampro’s core business: stimulating trade relationships between the Netherlands and East Africa.

It all began some ten years ago. A friend of mine had started a charity organisation and needed someone to check up on a project in Ethiopia.

At the hotel in Addis Ababa, I was flooded with Ethiopian businessmen who wanted to know everything about Holland. They needed someone to arrange things for them – from buying industrial machines, to setting up a meeting.

I was amazed! They wanted to do business, but Europe seemed so far away that they didn’t consider simply calling their prospective Dutch business partners. I smelled an opportunity here. I quit my job as a product safety specialist with a prestigious multinational chemical company, and developed a business plan to promote Ethiopian business. I started with a trade mission to Holland. The Ethiopians paid for their tickets and accommodation, but I needed funding for the mission.

When I asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for assistance, they weren’t forthcoming. ‘Ethiopians? Business? Are you sure?’ A while later I returned to the ministry, with sponsorship money from eleven big companies in my pocket. The civil servants were impressed, and decided to fund the trade mission.

I see opportunities where others may be blinded by threats. That’s my formula for success. Next to trade missions, Teampro also monitors market developments and provides advise on business opportunities. We carry out market surveys and feasibility studies and provide mediation in EU and Dutch subsidies to support economic development in East Africa.”

NAME **Rachel Tocklu**

ORGANISATION **Teampro**

EXPERTISE **Entrepreneurship**

RESIDENCE **Rotterdam**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Ethiopia/Eritrea**



‘I believe in trade, not aid’

Rachel

“As a father, the war and its aftermath confronted me with the future of my own children and the children of Sierra Leone at large. I wanted to contribute to the rebuilding of my country.

Fortunately, I met like-minded people when I fled to Holland nine years ago. We decided to set up an organisation that would give back to Sierra Leone what it had lost long before, and during the war and we agreed to do things differently than other development organisations.

Instead of just giving random aid, we opened an office in Sierra Leone where the people could pitch for our

help. In essence, we assist them in rebuilding their lives. The people are the architects, we are the masons. They tell us what they want to do, how far they are in the process and what further support they need; and then we link up.

This is our prize-winning approach in all fields, from education to agriculture. Last year we won the World Bank’s D-MADE award for our fisheries project. A group of women who sell fresh fish in Freetown’s biggest market approached us with a storage problem. They needed assistance in building a cooling room for the unsold fish. I immediately

realised this could be a win-win situation for everybody. Instead of going to the wholesale every day, the women can now buy in mass quantities. In this way, they’ll have extra time for themselves and their children.

Of course, some people were sceptical about building a cooling system in an area without reliable electricity supply. They’ll be surprised! Not only do we have a solution for the electricity problem, it is top-notch and environmentally friendly too. Being an environmentalist, this mattered more than anything to me.”

Sulaiman

‘The people are the architects, we are the masons’

NAME **Sulaiman Bangura**
ORGANISATION **We Care
Development Foundation**
EXPERTISE **Environment**
RESIDENCE **Wageningen**
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Sierra Leone**



‘I hope to deliver the right ‘weapons’”

“I’m black, woman, visibly Muslim, and considered old. That’s my package. And inside the package you’ll find many things such as a mother, wife, an entrepreneur, academic and a concerned Darfuri. My husband and I got our degrees in Holland in the mid eighties, but I couldn’t find a suitable job, in the academic world or in a commercial organisation. So we relocated to Sudan, and moved back to Holland a number of times. I was in Khartoum when the conflict in Darfur erupted in 2003, forcing me back to Holland again. Before leaving, I promised the Darfuri women I would help them to overcome the crisis and emerge from it stronger, but it was easier said than done.

My family businesses cost a lot of time - my husband and I run a company in embassy services: dealing with legalisation of documents such as invoices and certificates. With my son, we have a second company in entrepreneurship training for migrants in particular. Meanwhile I continued working for the foundation and unfortunately most of our projects for Darfur were rejected for funding, but I persevered, thanks to my package. Because I’m a Darfuri, a woman and a teacher, I understand and value the women’s perspective. And they know, trust and understand me; because I live in Holland they see me as neutral. This has allowed me to empower women from the conflicting

tribes to stand up for themselves, work together and demand a role in the peace process. At first, everybody thought they would fight. You bet they’re fighting: for peace! We succeeded in creating a platform for women: “Darfur Women Uniting for Peace”, where women team up and exercise their role in the peace process. They are fighting tirelessly for a conflict-free future for themselves and their children. And with enough partners and sufficient funding, I hope to deliver the right ‘weapons’: more peace trainings, capacity building and further trainings in basic computer skills.”

Mekka

NAME **Mekka Abdelgabar**

ORGANISATION **Stichting**

**Vrouwen Organisatie
Nederland - Darfur (VOND)**

EXPERTISE **Education and Business**

RESIDENCE **The Hague**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Sudan**



"Learning by doing is what attracted me to JAN in the first place. I came to Holland ten years ago and five years later I was lucky enough to get a permanent residence permit. We, who came here as so-called under-age asylum seekers, run JAN entirely by ourselves.

Our most important task is to offer information. This ranges from the basic need to know stuff about housing, education and integration in Dutch society, to current affairs in Angola. To our members who are still in the process of legalisation, we offer specific information about new laws and bylaws regarding their stay here. Every member of JAN is either going through the legalisation process, or

has gone through it. We are expert by experience; you can't get any better. A great deal of Angolans who are minors in Holland are sent back home. So we deal with youngsters both here and there. Our newsletter with current affairs from home is particularly important to those who eventually don't get a residence permit. They remain informed about Angola, which makes it easier to re-adapt if they are sent back.

But our work doesn't end here. In Angola we keep the returnees informed about their chances of making it. We have a strong network within the business communities in the major cities. Through them we arrange internships for the returnees,

so that they can succeed in life irrespective of where they live. This approach works. They learn from their counterparts there, and share their knowledge and experience from here. I'm going to Angola myself, for a traineeship, as part of my study in socio-cultural education. 'Be ambitious!' That's what we tell our members. I'm putting my money where my mouth is. Maybe one day, I'll be president of Angola. Politics has always fascinated me, but I don't want to execute someone else's policies. I want to create my own. In Angola the president is the only person powerful enough to bring about actual change."

Juliano

'I want to be president of Angola'

NAME **Juliano Da Silva Rodrigues**

ORGANISATION **Jonge Angolezen**

Nederland (JAN)

EXPERTISE **Youth empowerment**

RESIDENCE **Rotterdam**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Angola**



"My mother was a handicraft teacher and I began selling her students' work at a young age. I've always had an ardent love for arts and crafts. When I left for Europe with my French husband, my passion for art evolved into promoting Ethiopia in Europe through art and culture. When we moved to Holland, 22 years ago, I started importing Ethiopian handicrafts to markets and museums through my own company. I supplied handicrafts, decorations, tea and spices to Ethiopian restaurants all over Holland, and I also became the supplier for the Rasta communities in Britain and the US. About twelve years ago I started setting up coffee ceremonies at festivals. Customers would sit in a big

circle and socialise with one another while we were serving them Ethiopian coffee, bread and popcorn. The coffee ceremonies became a huge success, so I decided to take the country promotion one step further. We approached marketing students from Amsterdam and Addis Ababa to pitch ideas for a modern, responsible and sustainable brand. In 2006, a combined team from the New Business School in Amsterdam and St. Mary's University College in Addis won the pitch for Meleya - which is Amharic for 'identity'. Meleya stands for organic and fair products that are manufactured according to traditional methods. The brand will cover a broad range of products: wine, coffee, honey and

tea. So far we've used the label to promote a number of exclusive coffee lines - all single origin. Late 2009, we'll introduce a less exclusive blend to attract a bigger market audience. Organic and sustainable aren't the only things that make our blends special. We combine exclusive design with art. Every packet of Meleya coffee has an abstract of a painting from a contemporary artist incorporated into the label. We in return build a digital exhibition for the artists whose works appear on our label. Through my network in the art world, I'll exhibit some of the paintings in Dutch galleries, creating a win-win situation for all."

NAME **Debritu Lusteau**

ORGANISATION **Meleya**

EXPERTISE **Branding**

RESIDENCE **The Hague**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Ethiopia**

'Promoting Ethiopia through art and culture' Debritu



Bioli

‘I was humbled and ecstatic’

“I grew up on the river banks of Zaire. My father was captain of a river ferry, so I saw a great deal of the country from his boat. I fled over 25 years ago, when my mates were being arrested after a student demonstration. In 1996 I went back for the first time. The DR Congo, as it was re-named, had deteriorated beyond recognition. This wasn't the country I saw from crossing the rivers. Back in Holland, I set up Stichting Bambale to work in three areas: health care and environment, education and agriculture. The latter became an instant priority as I saw teenagers who looked like they were eight years old. They didn't get

fed until their parents had traded something to buy food. People asked me how they could grow enough food for their own consumption. I convinced them to grow more. They could sell the surplus and use the money for their children's schooling or pay for their medical care. We now have cooperatives of about 50 women in four villages who grow cassava and other foodstuff. Being a medical analyst, I know the importance of basic health care. But in Congo, common hygiene was non-existent. I saw operating theatres and thought: 'anybody who gets operated here will surely die.' African hospitals are far from perfect, but these

were extremely bad. Teaching the Congolese to do things the Dutch way would be farfetched. Besides, that's not even what they wanted. We started with basic hygiene awareness trainings. The real basics, like how to wash your hands after you've been to the toilet; put a lid on your toilet - even if it's only a hole in the ground; when a child wets its bed, don't wait till it's soaked with urine, wash the mattress immediately. When I was there in July, I noticed the people were using the hygiene skills. They said: 'at least you didn't tell us we needed a washing machine.' I was humbled and ecstatic.”

NAME **Bioli Ikele**

ORGANISATION **Stichting Bambale**

EXPERTISE **Health education**

RESIDENCE **Eindhoven**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Democratic**

Republic of Congo



"I wanted to get in touch with other Ugandans in Holland when I fled Uganda, but I couldn't find them. Eventually I met a few, and we founded a typical diaspora organisation to celebrate our culture and look after our collective interests. We have built a vibrant 500 member online community, keeping each other informed about all things practical: from funerals to birthday celebrations. But we wanted to do more. Two years ago we organised a conference about diaspora involvement in peace. One of the speakers was a young woman, who was abducted at the age of 13 to become a sex slave during the war. She was systematically abused, raped

and tossed from one commander to another. When she returned to her hometown, society accepted her back, but her children were identified with the rebels. Meanwhile, the young girl had organised a group of 117 former sex slaves and their 300 children, and they needed a centre where they and their children could stay and work on their future. Moved by this young lady's experience, strength and courage, we organised the Amsterdam Gulu-walk, joining 100 other cities, to raise funds and build them the centre. With the help of other organisations, we will finish the first part of the centre by the end of this year.

By late 2010 we'll complete the second part, a vocational school, and by 2014 the girls will be skilled enough to run small-scale businesses or get employed if they so desire. This project has taught me that even the smallest contribution really makes a difference. I'm thinking of ways to expand this view through remittances. We all regularly send €100 home through various channels. But if 1000 Ugandans would send €100 through one bank, the money could be used as an investment tool to generate income in Africa. Call me crazy, but I think this idea is worth examining. I'm looking forward to it as soon as we finish the vocational school."

NAME **Ali Balunywa**

ORGANISATION **Pearl of Africa
Foundation**

EXPERTISE **Social activist/
Gulu-walker**

RESIDENCE **Almere**

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN **Uganda**

‘Even the smallest contribution really makes a difference’

Ali



More information

African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC)
www.diaspora-centre.org

African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)
www.accord.org.za

Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)
www.bicc.de

Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)
www.cfr.org

DIASPEACE
www.diaspeace.org

European Centre for Conflict Prevention (ECCP)
www.conflict-prevention.net

The International Crisis Group
www.crisisgroup.org

Nairobi Peace Initiative
www.npi-africa.org



Colophon

This book is an initiative of the African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC), the Multicultural Women Peacemakers Network Netherlands (MWPN), HIRDA and NCDO.

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