



**EMERGING LEADERS**

**FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD**

**EXTRACT**

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## Eliot Nsega from Uganda faces the challenges of an Africa-wide ICT strategy



**I was born** in post-independent Uganda during the reign of President Apollo Milton Obote. I was born when there was a political crisis in the country, resulting from President Obote's abolition of the much-cherished traditional institutions. This led to a chain of events, which culminated in the ousting of the traditional Buganda King in a bloody massacre at the battle of Mengo. These events, which later culminated in the 1966 constitutional crisis, had the undesired effect of unearthing Major General Idi Amin, who would later oust Obote in 1971. Four years old at the time, I still vividly recall the feeling throughout Uganda following these events as one of relief and jubilation.

Sooner rather than later, however, Amin began committing various documented

human rights violations and implementing policies that culminated in the expulsion of the Indian community from the country. This was indeed a period of upheaval, as the Indians were the backbone of Uganda's economy. This period was marked by shortages of supplies, various failed coup attempts, and the continued threat of war from exiled Ugandans in Tanzania. This lasted until 1979 when Amin was ousted by the Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA).

These upheavals characterised most of my formative years, as I witnessed crisis after crisis. The result of this was the emergence of a power vacuum that typified much of the 1970s and 1980s. There were revolutions and counter revolutions, coup after coup,



disputed elections, violence and lawlessness, and guerrilla warfare that lasted from 1980 to 1986.

It was perhaps as a result of our chaotic recent history that the sitting government, under the current reign of President Yoweri Museveni, deemed it necessary to restore the once-abolished traditional institutions.

### The starting point

My home is located in rural eastern Uganda, in the Kaliro district of the Busoga region. I come from a humble rural background, dwelling in grass-thatched houses built from mud and wattle. Ours is one large community, woven together by geography, history, and culture. We are a subsistence family, where we grow both food crops and cash crops, for survival.

I am the fourth born in my family. My father was a civil servant in the Uganda Local Administration as a road overseer, and my mother was a

housewife. Calamity befell our family early on when my uncle, who was the financial backbone of the family, drowned, leaving my parents with the responsibility of taking over the raising of all of his children, along with their own, so that there were 17 children under one roof.

Raising such a big family with meagre resources was never an easy task, especially as my parents had little income. Undeterred, however, my parents sacrificed and took on this huge responsibility and enrolled all of us in school. They struggled to their last breath to see that all of us, without discrimination, received an adequate education. It is comforting to note that, by the time of their death, all of us were successfully on our way to establishing ourselves in the world.

### Pre-university days

I was enrolled in primary school at age six. After passing the primary leaving examinations,

I was admitted to Kiira College Butiki for high school. By the time of my admission, Kiira College was well known but largely for the wrong reasons – for having undisciplined students and as leading in school strikes. In fact, in 1984, during my first year at the school, a very destructive student strike took place, which forced many parents to relocate their children to other schools. However, my parents could not afford to relocate me, as the fees had already been paid. While all this was going on, I felt compassion for myself and my poor parents, and this state of affairs instilled in me an unwavering resolve to stay and succeed. Undeterred by this negative publicity, I embarked on a silent mission to be an example of what high schooling should be. I remained in this school for six years, during which time the school administration noticed my resolve and bestowed upon me the responsibility of serving the school as library prefect. Soon, the school administration noticed my contribution to the



school's academic achievements, which improved steadily during my time, and they decided to honor me with a Certificate of Merit due to diligence of service exhibited.

At times it was difficult to pay school fees on time. Sometimes I had to stay home for weeks during the school year, missing out on studies. My parents used to sell off our farm animals – cows and goats – so that school fees could be met.

Through providence, it was during this time of great uncertainty that my elder sister and her husband moved to Botswana for employment. I was lucky that as soon as they settled, they began sending money back home for our school fees. I am greatly indebted to them for their selfless love and the care that they extended to us, which enabled me to complete high school.

While waiting for the release of the advanced level examinations, I decided to find something to do to augment

my parents' income. I decided to move to the capital city to stay with my relative who was a newspaper vendor. I decided to join his trade of selling newspapers on the streets, as I believed that there was pride in legitimate hard work.

### Graduating with honours

I began attending Makerere University in 1992 on a three-year undergraduate degree programme. Fortunately, I was admitted on a full government scholarship. However, it was during that time that the idea of cost-sharing was being fronted by the World Bank through its Structural Adjustment Programme, and it was worrisome that the government was buying in to the idea.

I was unsure of my future, should this grand plan become a reality. Being from a humble background, my survival instincts immediately urged me to join the Needy Students' Scheme, an initially despised scheme that was started after

general student allowances were abolished as part of the government's economic restructuring in response to the World Bank. Undeterred by scorn from fellow students and society, I boldly joined this scheme, which enabled me to receive a stipend that assisted me in my studies.

At about the same period, after successfully completing my first year of university in July 1993, it happened that the university was searching for the most resilient students to uphold the name and dignity of the university and intern at organisations and companies in the country. I was honoured and greatly humbled to be chosen by the university, and I was sent as a student volunteer to the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF). Thanks to this attachment, I was catapulted into an international setting, an experience that has continued to shape my world to this day. The understanding was that I would be attached to UNICEF for the three-month-long summer vacation and that I would resume normal studies upon the reopening of the university in October. After my initial three-month service, however, UNICEF would not let me leave. Instead, they chose to retain my services, the reason being, in their own words: 'the dedication, commitment to service, and attention to detail exhibited'.

These events thus obliged me to fulfill a dual-mandate: achieve university academic excellence, at the same time as satisfy my

### General Information about my Country Uganda

Uganda is a land-locked country located in Sub Saharan Africa and lies astride the equator, more than 2000 km west of the Indian Ocean. It borders Kenya to the east, the United Republic of Tanzania and Rwanda to the south, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to the west, and Sudan to the north. The total area of the country is about 241 000 square kilometres, 16% of which is covered by fresh water bodies. Most of the land forms a high plateau at an altitude of between 900 and 1500 metres above sea level. The country's western and eastern borders form the shoulders of the rift valley which contains Lake Victoria, Lake Kyoga and the Rwenzori mountain range.

Uganda's economy is predominantly agricultural, the sector employing over 80% of the work force. Agriculture contributes more than 90% of Uganda's export earnings and over 40% of government revenue with coffee contributing the largest percentage. Uganda's main exports are currently the coffee, fish and fish products, tea, tobacco, cotton, corn, beans, sesame.

employer's expectations. I look back at those years with satisfaction and pride as I was able to satisfy both obligations to my best ability. I successfully completed my university education, and in 1996 I was awarded a Bachelor's degree in Library and Information Science with honours.

I am indebted to such an early induction to working life; my UNICEF experience would help me later in life to accept challenges and struggle for necessities. It was also my volunteering experience that shaped my attitude towards volunteerism as being universal and inclusive, the values of which always need to be upheld: those of free will, commitment, engagement, and solidarity. I later pursued a Master's degree in Information Science.

### Embarking on a professional career

After the expiry of my initial attachment, UNICEF decided to retain my services on short-term consultancies to backstop

the organisation's information management procedures. UNICEF later seconded me to UNHCR, where I successfully completed my two-year assignment in information management and documentation. I later joined Kyambogo University, where for eight years I served a dual role as assistant librarian and lecturer.

I am currently on an international appointment with the African Union (AU), based in Banjul, Gambia. I was posted to serve at the AU Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, an organ of the AU mandated to promote the rights and freedoms set out in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, as well as ensure their protection across the continent, monitor and advise on the implementation of the Charter, and interpret its provisions.

I am responsible for developing, planning, and conducting activities designed to provide information about the AU, as well as promoting increased awareness about its aims

and activities through various information tools and mechanisms. I carry out this function by identifying human rights violations on the continent and documenting best practices using national, regional, and international instruments.

### The part the IGCBP has played

The call for applications for the 2010 Internet Governance Capacity Building Programme popped up on one of the professional list serves that I belong to. Since I believe in life-long learning, I thought I could join and participate in the e-learning experience. I was very fortunate to have been admitted to the course.

This was my first e-learning experience, and I loved it. What intrigued me most was the fact that whereas e-learning exists in a virtual classroom, with the IGCBP, I had the feeling that I was attending a face-to-face class, given the expert tutoring that is involved. I particularly



liked the experience of a student-centred approach to learning, as opposed to a teacher-centred approach, which exists in many formal educational institutions.

The first online session was especially critical, considering that it was my first exposure to communicating through hypertext entries. Our course tutor knew how to conduct a discussion and motivate trainees. She was also knowledgeable in the broad range of subjects that we discussed, so that I read both ahead and widely in an effort to cope with her immense store of knowledge.

The course continues to shape my destiny up to today. Whereas I was toying with the idea of pursuing a PhD in Information Science, I have since changed course, thanks to Diplo. After successfully completing all three postgraduate diplomas in Internet Governance, Intellectual Property Rights, and Policy Research Methods, I was fortunate enough to have been admitted for a Master's degree in Contemporary Diplomacy at the University of Malta. The idea of diplomacy has captured my imagination to such an extent that I am considering pursuing it to greater heights.

Thanks to the course, I now pride myself in disseminating information in a diplomatic and professional manner. In the social sense, the course has helped me to gain a strategic advantage, especially as I am working for

a regional organisation. In my office, diplomatic skills are abundantly required for one to be able to balance the intricate questions surrounding the operationalisation and day-to-day functioning of routines. My job specifications revolve around documenting best practices and sharing them with colleagues in a diplomatic, professional manner. I am also responsible for issuing public statements both within the organisation and to the wider public, globally. Thanks to Diplo, I am now conversant in providing mutually acceptable solutions to a common challenge, and I have gained the necessary tools that I need in the phrasing of statements in a non-confrontational, polite manner.

### **My vision for the future**

The main challenge for Africa today is infrastructure development, so much that

communication within Africa is a big nightmare. In this digital age, and with the AU in place, it should be possible for all of Africa to be connected to the Internet.

Unfortunately, attempts in this regard have been met with a certain number of setbacks, ranging from laying the wrong sea cables to cable breakdowns in some parts of Africa. The continent continues to face challenges, including the slow pace of ratification, domestication, and implementation of Internet communication technology (ICT) instruments and decisions. In addition, there is inadequate coordination and coherence among the AU organs and institutions with the RECs in terms of policy initiation, development, and implementation. The capacity and resources for implementation have not matched the progress achieved



in adopting ICT instruments and establishing institutions.

There is a need, therefore, to address these challenges in order to enhance the capacity of the AU organs and institutions and member states to better respond to instances of ICT policy in Africa.

As part of the evolving African governance architecture, there is a need to formulate an ICT strategy within the context of accelerating continental integration through shared values.

A 'multistakeholder approach' to ICT policy is also necessary, as this opens the door for bottom-up policy development processes. This approach challenges the traditional 'secret diplomacy', and it

introduces new principles of openness, transparency, and rough consensus in global negotiations. Indeed, this is one of the distinctive features of Internet governance.

The AU was established in 1999 by member states belonging to the African Union. It was mandated with the mission of accelerating the process of integration on the African continent so as to enable Africa to play its rightful role in the global economy, while addressing multifaceted social, economic, and political problems, compounded as they are by certain negative aspects of globalisation.

To achieve this, there will need to be in place an African-wide ICT strategy, based on principles, standards, and norms

that permeate the various legal and policy instruments of the AU and Regional Economic Communities within the realm of ICT, democracy, and governance. Such a strategy should strengthen the ongoing AU and RECs initiatives to develop synergy and avoid duplication of efforts and resources in order to ensure effective functioning of the African development agenda.

The recent Africa Internet Governance Forums held in Addis Ababa and South Africa are good starting points that should catch Africa's attention.

Uganda-born Eliot Nsega is currently on an international appointment with the African Union (AU), based in Banjul, Gambia. ■

