



EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Felix Samakande from Zimbabwe broadens his diplomatic bandwidth



I am the youngest of twelve siblings born at Mary Mount Mission, a Roman Catholic Mission Hospital situated in Zimbabwe at its border with Mozambique. When my father retired from being a school headmaster to become a farmer, he bought land in the same province, Mashonaland Central, in the district of Mt Darwin, not too far from my birthplace. From subsistence farming, my parents raised and educated me and my siblings through a timeline that traversed three eras: colonial rule, liberation war, independence.

This timeline is significant to my life, as it defines my humble beginnings and upbringing. I was a teenager when the liberation war reached fever pitch in the 1970s, and Mt Darwin was one hot war zone. While I was too young to go to combat, I was just the right age for the role of 'war collaborator' for the liberation fighters. I used to go out there on foot

patrols, with no resources, to gather intelligence and report back to base. It was in this liberation war era that I learnt to be creative and work with limited resources. The fact that I survived the war and its aftermath is a story worth a thousand words, but suffice to say, I have had a generous share of moments of grace. My next birthday cake will have 50 candles on it, and looking back I feel humbled, and most of all energised, to have served others and to have been an instrument for their moments of grace.

Moments of grace

Let me contextualise by taking you through one of the many days that helped define who I am today. I was 15, and the liberation war was raging. The colonial regime, overwhelmed by the onslaught from the liberation guerrilla fighters, took desperate measures. They rounded up all the families in Mt Darwin district, forced them



into high security enclosures or 'protected villages' (PVs), and imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew. This was meant to isolate the guerrilla fighters and terminate their support network within the people. One Sunday, a resting day for most, I was one of the few appointed to tend to the farm animals and return before dusk. I enjoyed full monopoly of the family bicycle, took the cattle to drink water, milked some cows, and was on my way back.

The route back traversed six farms, and on farm four I was to team up with two friends. While crossing farm three, I came to a screeching stop on the gravel road when I saw what looked like two puppies crossing the road. Five metres in front of me, I watched these two healthy young animals cross the road as it became clearer to me they were definitely not puppies. My adrenaline started pumping as I sifted through my limited data bank that told me these could be cubs of either hyenas or lions. Instinctively, I started walking backwards with very little cooperation from the bicycle. It was obvious the parents of these cubs were lurking in the bushes, and I kept imagining how vicious animals are when they have little ones of their own – including our own domesticated dog. After backtracking for a while without seeing any activity, I turned and cycled as fast as I could back to the previous farm-gate. I threw the bicycle over the gate, crossed over, and started down the winding road.

I took a longer alternate route to get to farm four and hurried on with my friends, trying to beat the curfew. Unfortunately, we did not; we found the gate shut and the sentries withdrawn. The sunlight was already diminishing into darkness, and we were frightened of being outside and consequently felt courageous enough to do things in the dark. We decided to crawl through the 22-strand outer fence before it was too late. With two of us wrestling with the barbed wires, we got one friend inside; I went in second with my bicycle and milk jar. As I turned back to help the last friend, some guns went off, firing at us in both automatic

and single fire. We abandoned the third friend and ran for our lives. I picked up the milk jar, and my friend took the bicycle and ran towards a rock. A few bullets hit the rock, causing sparks with whizzing sounds, and we both fell to the ground. I got up with the now empty milk jar and continued to run. I emerged at the other end of an abandoned orchard, where women were gathering water from a communal borehole. I joined the queue with my bucket, muscles twitching at each gunshot. When the gunfire died, I walked home to my praying mother. We all survived, but to this day I ask myself

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what happened to the cubs' parents.

Words of wisdom on war

The liberation war was the first of the wars I was actively involved in. I went on to join the Air Force of the newly independent Zimbabwe after high school in January 1981. After full military training, I undertook apprenticeship training in operations room (Ops Room), which included air traffic control and communications. This placed me at the periphery of the Zimbabwean civil war in Matabeleland during the early 1980s. I later left the Air Force after three years because I felt I did not like the 'straight-jacket' military lifestyle. I went on to join the Foreign Ministry, which posted me as a consular officer to our Embassy in Kenya. At the time, Kenya was an island of peace surrounded by wars in Rwanda, Somalia,

Sudan, and Ethiopia. Fast forward to 1998, I was posted to Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DR-Congo) at the peak of its war against Rwanda. Kinshasa was on the verge of being overrun by rebels, and I was there amidst the frenzy. I picked up quite a few values from these exposures to war, to the extent that I feel that war, in its variations, has had a stake in who I am today.

If I am to offer any words of wisdom on war, it is to remind all that war is against both sides. Today at the United Nations (UN), I find myself surrounded by the war agenda, or at least the fallouts thereof. The toughest negotiations we have on our Fifth Committee calendar are the annual Peacekeeping/Peacebuilding budgets. Development, one of the three pillars of the UN, is more often than not centred on states rising from the ravages of war or sanctions – both of which cause underdevelopment. The role of technology in all this has both negative and positive potential. Technologies, such as global positioning systems, make it possible to carpet bomb a precise grid in the Sahara desert, while other technologies, like Internet working, come in to fast-track its development.

The voice of reason

I see Internet governance (IG) as the voice of reason, actively persuading all stakeholders to optimise technology for the common good, while discouraging its negative potential. Internet working

technology has opened the floodgates for collaborative innovation that captures human capacity at its best. This brings me to my final lesson learnt from the many wars: that people command enormous power as long as 'I' is transformed into 'We'. History has never presented people with a more opportune time to wield their power. Let me give an example, which is not entirely hypothetical. People could decide that the biggest distortion to the distribution of wealth on the planet is the economic system, which is resulting in poverty and wars over resources. To dismantle the rogue *corporatocracy* empires, people could network on a global scale to boycott particular products and services until the empires collapse one at a time.

Some neo-liberal theorists have been peddling the notion that humans are selfish, greedy, and thrive on the conquest of others; the reality could not be further from the truth. Progressives conducted more plausible research only to prove that, after all, humans are human, empathetic beings with a care-span that exceeds our lifespan. Complementing our empathy, technology now offers us greater opportunities to root out ills, like money laundering, corruption, and, invariably, poverty. I believe whistle-blowing websites have a greater role to play in the future of the humankind. These are a few of the issues that I became aware of through DiploFoundation, on whose blogosphere these issues continue to be debated.



How Diplo found me

I have been saving the best for last, and I will get to how Diplo found me. Returning home from my first diplomatic stint in Kenya in 1996, my flair for computers earned me a place in the e-government project team. The task was to consult and come up with a feasibility study, but I found myself appointed to the project implementation team. To fit the bill, I ended up taking several diploma and advanced diploma courses. A private computer engineering workshop took me in for six months of industrial training, and this put me strides ahead of my team. A couple of years down the line, I realised I had been training myself to be a worker rather than a manager, so I enrolled for an Applied

ICT degree programme at the University of Zimbabwe.

I dropped out of the Applied ICT degree programme to assume my post at the Permanent Mission of Zimbabwe to the United Nations, New York in 2006. This is where Diplo found me, through its outreach programme. After completing four progressive phases of the Capacity Building Programme, I can safely say I effectively broadened my diplomatic bandwidth. I am now in a position to develop synergies between divergent issues, like technology, development, and international law. I can now draw a bold line in the sand.

Diplo also increased my diplomatic footprint by taking me to the 2010 Internet

Governance Forum in Lithuania. There, I saw Diplo at its functional best and emerged with a profound respect for it. The online learning delivery model of the Capacity Building Programme nurtures within students a culture of give and take: giving through sharing personal experiences and taking from others and the huge knowledge database. Within me, Diplo developed an indefatigable appetite to stay abreast of Internet governance issues and to apply the wisdom gained and to pass it on to those who matter.

Felix Samakande is from Zimbabwe and is currently based in New York, USA on a diplomatic assignment as Second Secretary in the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Zimbabwe to the United Nations. ■

