EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Angelic Caroline Alihusain-del Castilho
from Suriname breaks through the barriers of development

I was born the eldest of seven in April 1967 in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname. From my earliest years I was curious and active, exploring everything I was allowed to. As I grew older and had sisters and brothers, it came naturally to me to take the lead and protect, as well as support, my siblings. I learned from my mother very early on that it was important for a woman to be independent and educated. I always enjoyed attending school and drove some of my teachers to their wit's end; from the time I knew how to talk, I never had a problem expressing my opinions and ideas.

As I grew up, I found myself always organising something, whether a school vacation for my friends or a programme with the aim of learning and sharing knowledge. By the time I turned 23, I decided to become involved with politics in my country. We had gone through a difficult time in Suriname, and I felt that I could no longer stand on the side-lines and just watch. I became the Chair of the Youth Forum of the party I joined. Meanwhile, I was studying agriculture at university. While studying, I travelled around my region and developed a taste for experiencing different cultures and speaking many languages. I became more and more capable of seeing the bigger picture. I found that my heritage made it very easy for me to blend in anywhere in the world. I experienced goodness in people all around me and realised that people of all ages are usually very eager to learn, if only provided an opportunity. Due to all my activities and broad interests, I built networks across oceans with people and organisations. I think what defines me is my healthy curiosity, my willingness to learn, and the need to share my knowledge.

Creating opportunities

Since my graduation as an agricultural engineer, I have worked in the private sector, with NGOs and multinationals, as well as with the government. In these different positions, varying from HR manager to consultant/trainer, programme director, and ambassador, I have strived to turn my employees into a team and to create opportunities to train and exchange knowledge with

those who worked with me and for me. Because of my broad interests, I have also participated in many events and organisations nationally and internationally, especially those aimed at promoting the political participation of women. Some of these were the Vital Voices of the Americas and the Women's Parliament Forum in Suriname. I believe that as a woman, you have to build a strong belief in yourself without becoming arrogant; you have to realise that no matter how much education you have, there is always something left to learn and you need to remember the importance of building yourself a strong and broad network.

My continuous drive for education, as well as high performance in my jobs and my political activity, led me to the nomination for ambassador. In 2007, I became Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Indonesia. A few months ago I finished my posting and returned to my country to work at our Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A little about Suriname

Suriname is a small republic in South America, and our official language is Dutch. We are a multi-ethnic, multicultural country, and my ancestry is European (the Netherlands, Britain, Spain, and Portugal), mixed with indigenous Surinamese. Suriname has a very rich cultural history, starting with the indigenous Surinamese who were the first here. After them came Europeans, Africans, Asians, as well as Jews, Lebanese, and Syrians. Nowadays, Suriname represents all the cultures and religions in the world even though we are the smallest republic in South America. Every Surinamese family, my own included, represents this very valuable characteristic of Suriname.

Surinamese, in general, are well educated people and naturally

embrace new communication technologies. However, for many it is still expensive to have Internet connections at home, especially ADSL. It has to be said that there are a number of Internet cafés and that many Surinamese use their phones to access the Internet. However, the coverage area is limited, and those living outside the coastal areas face more challenges accessing the Internet. Our laws have not yet embraced the IT era, meaning that very few issues that arise because of the Internet can effectively be dealt with through the judicial system. Also, many Internet users' skills and understanding of the Internet are limited to sending e-mails only. The deeper and more significant meaning of the Internet as a capacity-building tool is not implemented. For many years now, the government has expressed the wish to use the

Internet to break through the isolation of communities in the hinterland and offer them equal access to education. This, however, has not yet been realised. Nowadays, some schools have a computer room where students can use computers, but the use of the Internet as part of all classes is not yet taking place. Recently, there have been some new initiatives launched by the government and NGOs to promote the use of computers, but they are still on a very small scale.

Personally, I am not involved with negotiations in the IT sector. However, I argue for universal Internet access to anybody who will listen, and I teach and share knowledge with as many as possible on how to use the Internet for educational or economic benefits.

My relationship with the Internet

Prior to taking part in Diplo's Internet Governance Capacity Building Programme (IGCBP), I was already making use of the Internet for my own development, networking, and communication, and I was promoting its use to all who cared to listen. My experience in Internet governance (IG) issues came from using the Internet to improve my work on and understanding of different issues relating to my life and interests. One of my first projects in my first job was motivating the company I worked for to start a promotion for Christmas bread through the Internet. It was not customary then to use the Internet for promotions, but it was a success!

I needed the Internet to assist me in being in more than one

place at the same time, which it did by allowing me to take care of different responsibilities online. As an ambassador, I wanted to run a Facebook page but was concerned about the security and access to my information. I once purchased tickets online and never received them. But I also continued my education online and so was able to guide my career to higher levels while working. The Internet allowed me to be on top of things while travelling and to be very efficient and effective.

I look at Internet governance mostly through a capacity-building lens and one of increased access and benefits, especially for the developing world. Currently, I work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Suriname. Even though there are many computers in the office, Internet access is restricted or unavailable. The use of computers and the Internet for more than just sending an e-mail is not really promoted and does not really exist. It has to be said that people are eager to learn, but the Internet is not something that is recognised

as of yet as a priority area for in-office use, let alone for the execution of diplomacy.

When I was doing my post-graduate course in contemporary diplomacy, a course in e-diplomacy was also offered. For various reasons I chose not to take the course then. Over the years, however, I realised more and more the importance of the Internet for development and communication, not only personally but also professionally. Therefore, I retained my interest in finding out how it all works and where all decisions concerning the Internet are made. For one who does not know much about it, the Internet can sometimes seem to be close to magic, guided by some unknown force and which is, for no apparent reason, very expensive. I experienced a knowledge gap when it came to an explanation of how the Internet works.

Exploring the Internet in more detail

While I enjoy the many benefits of Internet access, I am keenly aware that many in my country do not enjoy this facility. There

are still many in the districts that miss out on chances for continued education, because courses are only run in the capital. They cannot afford the time and money to travel up and down to participate in these courses. At this moment, there is no Surinamese institute or agency offering courses online.

My main focus when I started the Diplo course was to learn more about something that I had been using for years now and could not do without. I looked mostly towards understanding what more I could do with it for my own benefit, for the benefit of those around me, as well as for my country. Capacity building is necessary to allow for equal participation for all Surinamese. It will require all of us who have leadership positions to gain more knowledge in order to be able to provide, promote, and support Internet access for all. There are still many, also in leadership positions, across sectors in Suriname who do not understand the important role the Internet can and should play in the development of individuals, institutions, and the country.

I truly enjoyed all aspects of the Diplo course and learned a lot from my peers, as well as from the official lectures and our tutors. The highlight was the online party we celebrated in a virtual Brazilian indigenous village, my first online party ever. The programme provided me with a lot of new information, both technical and related to where and how decisions are made on a global level. I developed a better understanding of and a deeper insight into the challenges and opportunities provided by the Internet. The interaction with people from my own region allowed me to recognise similar challenges and share ideas on applicable solutions. It also allowed me to broaden my network of friends in the region. Now I can even advise the staff of our ICT division in the Ministry on whom to contact to broaden their network and share information with them on initiatives in the region. It was funny for me to realise that I actually had an opinion and ideas that mattered in this area, an area that always seemed very technical and difficult for me. I have taken many classes online on different topics. In this course, you could apply the knowledge and skills at the same time that you were learning them. Also, issues that I had never considered in relation to the Internet were brought forward, forcing me to consider more angles and viewpoints than before. Some good examples are the language used, the use of the Internet to promote culture, and the issue of copyright.

Moving forward

Now that I have finished this programme, and along with what I have gained from others like it, I feel confident that I can play a role in promoting and discussing the importance of participating on a global level in making decisions regarding Internet governance. I can also be of assistance by advising and/or sharing knowledge with those in the Ministry and with others. Personally, I have increased my knowledge and formed a concrete vision of the importance of the Internet for capacity building. Currently, there are, to some extent, discussions on the Internet, whether on security or on education in the country. With my newly acquired knowledge, I am planning to publish some articles on these issues and to assist in increasing awareness. My goals for the Ministry are to use the Internet effectively and efficiently in promoting our country and strengthening our diplomacy, while country-wide they are to break through the isolation and provide equal

opportunity to all. These goals have not yet been achieved, but the first steps have been taken.

Programmes like these have been beneficial to me and would be beneficial to others, since they allow for a deeper understanding of the history and current issues regarding the Internet at the same time as providing insights on what is to come in the future. The latter is especially important for our countries to focus not only on what the Internet means for today, but also to know what to prepare for. Knowing who is making the decisions on a global level and where allows for a better analysis of current challenges and how to solve them. I will share all my information with the staff of our ICT department, allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of the IG/ICT sector and leading them to become stronger and better at what they do. I share my lessons on a daily basis with anyone who is interested in the department. Because of my increased knowledge of Internet governance, combined with

my diplomatic background, I am now the contact for university students who want to research the use of Internet communications technologies (ICT) by the government and specifically by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Such programmes allow us to strengthen our knowledge and thus provide us with an opportunity to support, assist, and argue more strongly with our governments and other stakeholders about the crucial influence the Internet and its global governance has on the development of our people and countries. A lot of my growth is related not only to my access, but also to my knowledge of Internet use. Small countries like mine are not attractive to prestigious universities, but we can cross that bridge with the use of the Internet. We may not have the money to have our 'diplomats of culture' travel the world, but through the Internet we can bridge that gap. We may not have the money to travel and meet others, but through the Internet we can break through that isolation and make friends and allies worldwide. There is a lot more to say, but, in short, a thorough understanding of all aspects influenced by the Internet can allow a small republic like Suriname to allow all Surinamese an improved chance of developing their potential to the fullest, an improved chance of sharing with and learning from the world.

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