



**Workshop on "Intellectual Leadership
and the African Information Society
Initiative:
What Role for Africa's Academic
Community?"**



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ICT Visioning Statement

by

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The gods must be crazy (draft)

I was 20 when I went to the United States of America in search of a better life, information, independence, and new circles to fulfill my journey. This was a period of major personal and political transformation. As a student, I involved myself in the black people's movement at an effervescent period. I learnt about racism and sexism. I learned to work with men and women committed to educating the community about their civil and human rights. I also learnt to write articles for newspapers and to develop educational programmes for radios and other community centres. I participated in the creation of information networks with other people of color. I led a rich life; it was difficult for me to imagine myself in my remote village back home in Zimbabwe.

I was afraid of many things. I was afraid of the apathy that I left behind, the poverty and above all the isolating nature of villages. I thought about how difficult it used to be to travel from home to the nearest clinic. I remembered smoke in our kitchen, unemployment in the village and wondered if I could ever survive in an African village. But home is home, it was beckoning and at the end of 2030, I returned to Zimbabwe, my country of origin. You can imagine the surprise and excitement when my mother saw me.

I reach home and find that mother has aged gracefully and I am happy with that. We embrace and she cries. I cry with her. The room is charged with emotions. There is music, prayers, songs and dances. I don't know how to react, the prodigal daughter.

Our home and the entire village have changed. Trees are everywhere. Recreation facilities for the young and the old are also available. New development indeed and I am amazed.

Mother suggests that I have a bath as I traveled by what are known as chicken buses, in Zimbabwe. I am pleasantly surprised, the water is warm and yet there is no fire-wood around, there is no smoke. I ask how the water was heated. Proudly, she announces that she uses pig dung from a piggery to produce biogas, which she uses for lighting and cooking, in place of firewood. She explains, 'This makes cooking bearable and healthier. Medical reports have shown that respiratory and eye ailments mostly originate from firewood smoke. We are utilizing biogas, which is a renewable energy resource that causes minimal damage to the environment, compared to fossil fuels. In this way we are addressing both deforestation and environment damage problems. The spent slurry from the biogas plant is used as manure for vegetable gardening. This is an organic fertilizer, which preserves soil nutrients, as compared to artificially manufactured fertilizer.' I cannot believe this is my semi-illiterate mother almost lecturing to me and sounding very sophisticated. She looks at my confused face, shrugs and explains that the community is working with some university students who are attached to the village for a year and then go back to the university. Even when they return to the university, they keep checking on the progress of the projects. While working with the communities, they are taken care of by whichever community they are working with.

I am confused. When I was young, going to university meant being divorced from the village with its primitive ways. Have universities changed?

Today is market day. My mother goes to the nearest shopping centre to buy sugar and when she returns, she announces, authoritatively, that because of bad weather, the opening of the village market will start late. I ask her if she is a meteorologist but she looks at me with an amused expression and asks if we don't have *combuters* in the USA. "We have *combuters* (there is no shona word for computer) at the growth centre that gives us information. We go there every morning to get information on the weather, the market days and the prices, sources of cheap

commodities and new treatments for common ailments.' My mouth is open in amazement and remains open for a long time. The *combutors*' are programmed in shona, the local language. How can this be? I am really shocked. Am I in my village, am I dreaming? I pinch myself hard and feel the pain. It's me alright and not my ghost.

My auntie comes to see me. I have not seen her for years. We hug and are overcome by emotions. Once again I shed a tear. She appraises me and I am uncomfortable. I look older than her and yet she is twenty years older than me. We talk. She tells me that she has not been feeling well, but going to the gymnasium has helped her. I ask what the problem is. She gives a lengthy explanation about some gynecological problems. She is talking like a Doctor. Something is wrong in this village. And the gymnasium thing for such an old woman, even in America women of that age don't go to the gymnasium (she pronounces it as jimbu). I am embarrassed, I have not been to a gymnasium for years.

My young sister arrives carrying a baby and a feeding bottle. She is about to bottle feed and is stopped by my auntie. 'don't, use your own breast milk, it provides all the nutrients the baby needs. It is there on tap, does not need sterilised bottles and it's free'. I look at this illiterate woman and think, the *gods must be crazy*. She looks at me and realizes that I am confused. She offers an explanation; they learnt all this from students of food and nutrition at the university. 'We have always known the truth but then we needed educated people to confirm it. Are they not the ones who stopped us from breast-feeding? Now they have come back to us and de-educated us. They realize that we were right, breast milk is great.' I nod foolishly.

We chat, my mother, sister and auntie. They want to know about the USA. But then the discussion turns to reproduction and sexuality. They talk about menstruation, sexual intercourse, abortion, pregnancy, childbirth, and vaginal discharge and go on and on. I want to sink, to fly away, to diminish, and to go back to the USA. These were taboo subjects when I was growing up. We never discussed sexual issues in public let alone with parents. Parents were supposed to be asexual. My auntie senses my discomfort, and touches me lightly on the arm. 'Don't be embarrassed, before Christianity came, we used to talk about our bodies and were proud of them. The students attached to the health centre are quite open and have encouraged us to be open too. They are polite. They listen to us. Some are medical students. They share what they know but also learn from us. The health centre is controlled by women. The women have been taught to carry out their own cervical examination. It is amazing. Abortion services are available, and there are support groups, trained by students of psychology to counsel women dealing with issues of premenstrual problems, infertility, and menopause.' Good God, even in the USA I don't know of any place where women have such clinics. Should I share my surprise? No, I decide to keep quiet lest I disturb the flow of our discussion.

My mother explains that women have been provided with special cameras to see their reproductive organs. This has imbued them with a sense of confidence. My sister says that one woman, on seeing her cervix, burst into a song, the African way. She could not believe that her cervix was so beautiful, elegant and artistically put together. She always imagined that it was a mass of dark ugly blood, but there it was in all its glory defining her womanhood.

During the next two days, I discover that university students are sharing information with communities through informal gatherings, at our house, community centres, churches and schools. Communities are listened to and respected. Their experiences echo each other within these meetings. Popular education techniques are applied (participative and interactive methodology based on Paolo Freire's methods, the Brazilian educator, but much more gender sensitive). Even engineering students seem to be versed in these methods. Resource centres are

everywhere. Why did I stay away for so long? A sense of shame overwhelms me and I burst in tears. My auntie looks at me and whispers to my mother that I need a brain scan. I am tempted to believe her.

Some teachers in the neighbourhood have become facilitators. Communities are raising money through baking, (using indigenous stoves) selling plants, individual contributions from sale of crops, friends, men and women who see the importance of having an information rich society are all contributing. It is amazing.

As I stay in the village, I witness many other changes that have taken place while I was away. Farmers are well equipped with information about the dangers of using pesticides. They know international prices and have become hard bargainers. They are using computers to order seeds and other agricultural inputs. They have mobile phones so getting in touch with agriculture extension officers is easy.

It is not just students who go to work in the communities but people from the rural areas are also going to universities to share their experiences and to learn. I almost faint when our neighbour, a toothless man in the afternoon of his life, a cattle keeper, comes to our home to borrow a suitcase from my mother. He announces that he is going to the *univerthity* (university), in Harare, for two weeks. Apparently, this programme has been going on for the past three years. Peasants and students are learning together. The university has been demystified.

Students of political science are translating government policies to the peasants. One funny man, having learnt the meaning of policy, demands to know if dreams can be turned into policies! He claims he has a gift for foretelling the future in his dreams and given a chance, he could guide the country especially the finance ministry. I can see that one of the students is amused and is trying hard to suppress his laughter. I have to look away, if I look at him, we shall laugh.

There are attempts to create 'democratic space' for communities through provision of information. There are mechanisms for communities to channel their concerns to parliamentarians so that needs and priorities can be incorporated into national policies and plans. The state and its machineries respect these mechanisms. I am humbled.

I also have an opportunity to talk to some students. They are simply amazing. They say they are able to see the application of their knowledge, they are involved with the outcome and are not mere bystanders. They have learnt that they do not have all the answers and are more down to earth than when they first arrived in the village. They also admit that there are ideas, people and situations that cannot be experienced in the classroom.

The few professors I meet, the ones that have come to see what the students are doing, indicate that working with communities, giving them information, has revitalized the learning process. Knowledge gained in the field is being applied in the classroom. The degree of retention of knowledge has also increased. Students are more critical, more interesting to engage with and have stopped sleeping in the classrooms. Some lecturers have also stopped sleeping while teaching!

Feedback information about the students performance is shared with the communities at a one-day student/professors/community discussion. In the audience I see my mother's face beaming. Later, when I ask her why she was beaming, she says, 'I feel proud to realize that I have contributed to the students motivation to learn'. I smile. The experience is sobering.

Another interesting observation is that people do not seem to be in a hurry. They strike a casual conversation with even strangers and this seems to enrich the information they already have. They do not seem to make a distinction between work and none work. People have become so creative that those who have no jobs often band together and undertake studies (assisted by students) that lead them into an enterprise of their choice. Most of the community members have learnt to fix things...bicycles grinding mills, saucepans, flat tyres, axes, name it.

As I write my experience, I am sitting in my mother's smokeless kitchen. There is a sense of inner peace, self-acceptance and happiness. Why did I stay away for so long?

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