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*NOTE:* This transcript has been edited by Pauline Koelbl-Mujawamariya and Linda Chapel Jackson.

CH: Good morning Pauline. Thank you for joining us. We hope that you’ve had a delightful time here so far. This morning we want to talk a little bit more about what you said at the Global Engagement Speaker Series presentation on Tuesday [February 19, 2019]. One of the things I was deeply fascinated by was the fact that you said you were a product of education and it has really formed the way that you have been able to carry your professional life forward. Can you describe a little bit about your background and talk about how education came to play such an important role in your development?

PKM: Thank you very much. I was born and raised in Rwanda and I left during the war in 1994. From that time I lived in different countries in Africa. At some point I immigrated to Tucson, Arizona. One of my motives to want to come here was to go back to school, because I valued education. When the war broke out I was in law school, first year, so I had a taste of what education can do for you and I wanted to find a way to go back to school.

So luckily enough, when I arrived at Tucson, Arizona, I connected with really good mentors, professors who guided me beyond teaching me the normal subjects, and helped me rekindle my passion and reconnect with what I was good at. They got to know me, know my story beyond the public story, and they knew I wanted to find my way back into international development, and they also knew—at least they told me—I was smart and could be competitive like anyone.

And of course being new in this country, I doubted sometimes whether I was good enough. Again, with the mentors I had, this doubt disappeared and they convinced me to apply for a Fulbright scholarship, which—first of all, when I heard about it, I googled it, and I learnt about people who had gotten Fulbrights, and I was like no, this is not for me. And they convinced me, no, it is for you. And beyond that they guided me into how to put in a winning application.

I was selected to go do my master’s in the UK, which was also surprising because the Fulbright to the UK is the most competitive one, because you’re supposed to speak the language and of course every American speaks English and wants to go to the UK because they don’t need another language.

When I finished the master’s degree, I got another Fulbright Fellowship to go to work for UNESCO, a UN agency that focuses on education and scientific research. And that was really a good surprise and great career path for me. I guess you call it luck, and what I learned in life was also to grab my luck. If you give me something to do I will work hard and make sure you are proud that you gave me the chance.

At UNESCO, I made good contacts. One of them facilitated a connection in Geneva at WHO. When I finished my fellowship I actually had a job, to move to Geneva in Switzerland to work for WHO. I am just highlighting my journey, saying it was through mentorship, fellowship, but also being lucky enough to have professors who could take extra time to mentor students. Because some people are smart, but being smart is not enough. Sometimes you need someone who encourages and pushes you.

CH: How did you set aside your law studies, then? Was it an opportunity for you to reevaluate the direction that you wanted to go? So when you had different mentors who talked to you, they discerned that maybe your talents were leading you in a different direction? Or had you sort of evolved into that yourself?

PKM: First of all, I know when you grow up here in the US, you’re supposed to know what you want to become and as a kid, you are supposed to choose what you want to do and your parents support you. When I was growing up in Rwanda, parents told you what to do. And it was OK. It wasn’t a problem because that’s how things were done. So when I was a kid it seems I used to ask a lot of questions. I still do by the way [laughs] and my parents decided I should either become a journalist or a lawyer. Somehow they settled for the law school. For me it was about education and it wasn’t necessary about the law school because this wasn’t me choosing to go to law school.

Throughout my journey, the first time I left Rwanda, I lived in the DRC Congo, and I decided to volunteer and then was later hired to work for UNICEF. That was my first involvement in international development. That experience was unique in many ways because I think what I learned there, I could not learn it working in headquarters. It was just a unique experience.

So when I arrived in the US and I was looking at the options to go to school, I wanted to find my way back into international development. Law was one option. Luckily the head of the organization that brought me to the US as a refugee was a former lawyer. So I started talking to him—You are a lawyer and you are running a nonprofit organization, what happened? I got to understand how if you decide to go to law school you have to keep in mind you’re going to have to pay a lot of money as the law school is expensive. This means you have to take loans which you have to pay back. To pay back the loan you have to work for a firm where probably it does not matter what you believe, but rather how much money you can make.

So I understood then that the law school I was pursuing in Rwanda was probably different in terms of the career choices and what one can do with the law degree to help others and also be able to make a living and take care of your family—because that’s what we do.

CH: You know it’s fascinating when you say that you like to ask a lot of questions because it seems to me that you have—it’s not the right word to say, drifted—you have strategically placed yourself into professional endeavors that cause you to ask a lot of questions, especially when you were working on different projects for African economic development. Describe the job that you had where you had been talking about all of the different sorts of—the universities and the innovation ideas that were coming out and you were talking about when Africa—you said that Africans can solve African challenges and the world’s challenges. So you talked about identifying problems that maybe started in Africa but actually can extend into global solutions. So describe that job.

PKM: Perhaps to clarify a bit, it’s not just about the problems that start in Africa and can expand in the rest of the world. It’s actually about the world problems. For instance, we talk about global warming. This is not a problem starting in Africa. It’s actually starting in other places and Africans are paying the price. It’s looking at how existing challenges, whether unique to the African continent or global challenges, can be solved by anyone anywhere.

Part of my frustration—and I think that’s why I was so happy when I moved from the UN or traditional development practices to innovation entrepreneurship, as a way of structurally providing solutions that tackle existing challenges—was that in the past Africa has been seen as a passive continent, where you come to help. And sometimes perhaps you don’t even ask what kind of help people need, you just bring what you have, you assume this is what they need, because you make assumptions when you meet poor people.

If you remember, in my talk I started initially by what I called facts. I knew I was talking to smart people, I knew they know those facts, but I wanted this for the record: Africa is not poor. Africa is very, very rich. However, I have met smart people who probably without paying attention—I don’t think they do it on purpose—they start saying Africa is poor. Because this is what you hear every time. And I know they know Africa is endowed by all kind of minerals, petrol, anything you can imagine, you find it in Africa.

CH: I think you had a statement here, you said Africa is rich but has poor people. The other thing you said is that one of the words you wanted to rewrite in some of these descriptions is the word help. Why was that?

PKM: Because the whole connotation around the word help is again, based on an assumption that people are helpless. You come in to save them. And because this mindset or connotation around the word help allows you to think you are coming to save people, you don’t have any incentives to ask questions first—sometimes think about the fact that actually these people were living before I got there. These people probably know how to solve the problem themselves because they know the culture, they know the environment. What if I could actually ask them about what they need and then just empower them with tools?

So I would like to replace the word help by empowering or providing tools, because at the end of the day even here in the US we need help. Right? Everyone needs help. But we never use those words when we are describing a developed country.

The whole narrative has an implication, because if people continue to say OK I am going to go and help Africa, they miss out on an opportunity to do the right thing, which also could be beneficial for them because it’s going to be lasting, sustainable. Moreover, they miss out the opportunity to do business.

So what I like to talk about today is how Africa is rich, Africa is open for business, Africa is looking for investment just like anyone else, and Africa is looking for true partners. Thus, if true partners come into your house, they’re not just gonna focus on the fact you might be hungry, they could admire anything cultural or positive you have and ask about how did you make it, how can we make more. And that’s engagement. Now of course there is the other extreme where us Africans try to blame everyone else, not ourselves.

There’s a lot of things to be done on the African continent. When I started working in the space of innovation and entrepreneurship, I used to go around talking about how, yes Africa can innovate, yes Africa is innovating. I was then giving old examples to remind people that Africa used to be innovative. I talk about who built the Pyramids—everyone knows about the Pyramids. Even if they might not know where they are they want to go and see them one day. People talk about the city of Timbuktu in Mali and Lalibela in Ethiopia. I wanted Africans to remember that those wonders of the world were built by our ancestors. So the discussion I like to push among ourselves is: How did we go from building these innovative infrastructures to being labeled poor and people needing help?

Today things are moving very quickly. Young people are not waiting for anyone. They use what they have to create a solution that works for their communities. And what I am trying to do with anyone who can listen is to say let’s just unleash those potentials. Let’s equip them with the tools so they can create jobs, support each other. But again, the examples I showed about innovations that came out of Innovation Prize for Africa demonstrate how these are global solutions. They’re world class innovations. But if in our mindset we think of Africa as a continent needing help, we’re never going to think that actually Africa can also help the rest of the world.

Those are the things I try to highlight. And I think people know those things. But I believe we need to repeat them many times so that people can switch from talking about helping to innovating, investing and over time the help word will disappear because we’re using a different narrative.

CH: I know that you have been meeting with various people on campus during your visit. One of the things that you may have heard is that MSU has made a real effort to work side by side when there is an academic partnership or a community-academic partnership. Researchers want to learn from the community and then work on these solutions with what we have to offer and what you know, meaning what the community knows. Is that something you see other universities doing when they work with African partners? How are you cultivating relationships with universities to come in and know how best to work in these communities?

PKM: This is why, when I was invited to come and speak here, I was excited, because I feel like this is a good way to begin. In my past work I engaged mostly with African institutions, not necessarily Europeans or Americans. I think there’s room to facilitate more collaborations and knowledge sharing and I intend to do more of this. I know MSU is already doing it and some other USA universities, but we need more. For example my mentor from University of Arizona, Wayne Decker, is doing work with Mzuzu University in Malawi. He created a nonprofit initiative called Flame Tree when he was still a professor at the University of Arizona. It fosters collaboration with University of Mzuzu on entrepreneurship. Columbia, Johns Hopkins and MIT universities are doing a lot of stuff too with African partners, and there are probably many more.

What I believe is that anyone who doesn’t engage with Africa now is going to be left behind. Because the Africa people knew a long time ago is no longer the same. The late arrivals will show up and realize they have no space. This is why everyone is trying to engage with Africa now because Africa is the future.

CH: You talked about that. Describe to me the percentage of young people in Africa. I think it was like 60 percent?

PKM: Yeah, the under 25. And some statistics indicate that under 35 represents more than 75 percent of the population.

CH: And what are you seeing with the young people today? I know you just described that they are ready to go. They’re ready to innovate, they’re ready to take this to a different level. What do they care about? What do they look for when they are inviting other people in to help them develop their communities and things like that?

PKM: Many young Africans—and I’m generalizing here, keeping in mind that Africa has 55 countries or 54 depending on whether you include Western Sahara—the ones I have been lucky to interact with decided not to complain any more for the heck of complaining. When they see an issue, they try to see how they can solve it and they try to see who can support them, who can they work with to solve it. They try to use the low-hanging fruit, if it’s about using recycling material in order to build something they’re going to do that. And their intention is to show to anyone else who pays attention what they can do with nothing, and to demonstrate that if I can do this with what I have, imagine what I can do if you give me access to other tools.

Luckily there’s a hype now around innovation/tech spaces. As mentioned in my talk, right now there’s over 440 tech hubs or innovation spaces. They’re usually between incubators/ accelerators and pure co-working spaces. Those are places where also many young people go to hang out with other young people who also want to become entrepreneurs because somehow when you’re working alone it’s even harder. But if you find yourself in a room where someone else is trying to take the same road, you feel encouraged. And those spaces are also trying to mobilize opportunities, whether it’s resources, or providing tools etc.

What’s lacking right now is cash investment. I think investors get it. They realize there is quite a lot of money to be made, but because they are risk averse, they still wait until an entrepreneur has done very well and all risks have been addressed. Which means the young people who are still trying to prototype and benchmark what they have created continue to struggle to secure needed early stage cash investment and enter markets.

If they don’t get needed investment at that early stage then not many will be able to move their ventures to the next stage. I talked about this in my presentation, the Valley of Death referring to how investors wait on the other side of the bridge, saying if you make it here we are ready to invest in you. Luckily, I know a few people and organizations who are doing or facilitating angel investments or addressing the valley of death issue (e.g. GreenTec Capital Partners).

CH: One of the things that you alluded to—and this was something I heard from another international visitor, a speaker that we had come in—She had also said Africa is so big that it is not monolithic. It is a very diverse and very complex continent. So if you are not organized as a continent, if you’re still influenced regionally by the 55 different countries, it is hard to have everything more coordinated, right? I mean is that part of the challenge? Because there are some areas that are way more—they’re in one spot for their innovation and acceleration into where they want to be in economic development, but then you have other pockets that are yet still emerging.

PKM: You just touched to the core of the problem within Africa. Fragmentation is certainly an issue. The good news is since about a year ago there is a push to have an intra-Africa free Trade agreement— a pan-African open border, where Africans can trade among themselves. It was pushed through the African Union. I believe more than 40 countries have signed on now, which means they can start trading internally, easily. The other thing was that Africans can view themselves as one market. From that perspective, it means then if Nigeria needs something made in Tanzania, it can just be shipped easily. And it probably will be cost effective and with good ecological footprint, compared to if the products were shipped from China or the West. There are so many benefits for open borders within Africa.

I believe also that once Africa positions itself as a unified market, it can probably be able to bargain better when dealing with other countries like the US, China, European countries etc. Because now Africa will be offering opportunities in 55 different economies with over 1 billion consumers and with unified clear rules.

CH: You’re drifting over into government and political sorts of considerations then. The other things I’m sure you’re aware of are when you talk about what MSU may do in the surrounding community with our ability to work with community partners. I’m sure you know about innovation areas in these major university settings too, like in Carolina in Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina, what do they call that—not Innovation Alley—

LCJ: Triangle Park?

CH: The Triangle. And things like that. Are there university-community efforts emerging in African communities like that? Are the universities investing in economic development and creating these sorts of communities that do these investments?

PKM: I’m probably not the right person to confidently talk about what’s happening within universities because that’s not where I hang out. But from the little I know, with an example of South Africa, I know the Gauteng Province has made a conscious decision to have innovation as a core of its development strategy. So they set up a bioscience park, which basically involves working with universities/researchers and innovation hubs to come up with solutions responding to issues that have been identified by the province. There’s a whole ecosystem set up to make sure that identified solutions are supported so that they end up solving real problems, and this includes some funding and investment opportunities.

I have seen the outcome of this effort. During the time I have spent running the Innovation Prize for Africa (IPA), many winners of the IPA prize came from South Africa. Most of them were part of that whole innovation ecosystem and linked with universities. Their solutions are impressive in terms of how well-crafted they are and how well they have identified a market and also the strategy to diffuse those solutions to wider markets. Also, in my talk, I mentioned Ashesi [University]. Ashesi might not be having the cutting-edge innovations as the ones coming out from bioscience/ biotech institutions in South Africa, but Patrick Awuah [Ashesi founder and president] has managed to innovate how to train future leaders who go out and become problem solvers.

CH: And ethical leaders.

PKM: Ethical—yes—creative thinkers and ethical leaders. Exactly. I have met few students who came out of that school [Ashesi]. Very impressive. So it’s happening, and again the question is how do you scale this into all African countries and make it that this is the rule of the game and not an exception. That’s the work still to be done.

CH: That leads to our conclusion and basically one of the favorite questions we always ask, is where do you see the future?

PKM: I see the future where everyone is running to Africa, to do business with Africans and deal with them as equals. I see the future where poverty becomes a part of the things we visit in a museum, because I believe it’s for everyone’s benefit to eradicate poverty. I believe it is not good and sustainable if you are very rich and there many poor people next to you. You probably can think about putting walls around you, but I don’t know how that solves the problem. You’re just putting a bandage on the problem.

There’s so much potential out there and I think—this is talking as an American who also happens to be an African, or an African who happens to be an American—this whole narrative about developed countries vs. developing countries has to end, because it does not make sense. The whole notion about development is, it doesn’t stop as there is always more to be done. Today emerging economies are tremendously creating products and services you don’t even find in the so called developed countries. They are leapfrogging the developed countries. This means it’s for everyone’s benefit to now look at each other as partners and join forces and unleash innovations everywhere, globally. And I believe innovation is the way to eradicate poverty and create inclusive economic growth.

CH: It’s been very nice having you here. You have a big job and you have an interesting job, and we’re really glad you could share some of your experiences with MSU. Thank you.

PKM: Thank you.