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## **PRAXIS Interviews Practitioners: Kiganzi Nyakato**

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### **What do you consider success in development?**

This depends on what you define as development and why. To me, development in Uganda entails basic needs like having enough food to eat, clean water, good health, and proper education. If average people do not have to worry about these necessities it creates a foundation for other issues to be meaningful and of value. These factors can be the right to religion, freedom of speech and movement, the rights of association and expression, and the right to peace and a clean environment.

It says in the Bible, “My people perish from a lack of knowledge.” Similarly, for many people in developing countries, the lack of knowledge contributes to many negative consequences. It’s very important for a community in the developing world to know its rights, even to know that it can say ‘no’ to development and relief aid—for example, technological equipment that is inappropriate for the environment. Or, in relief situations, food aid that leaves recipients vulnerable to attack by rebels. Aid agencies should give local solutions a chance and stop just paying lip service to the importance of community involvement. I believe strongly in this, so I intend to specialize in participatory development work and community-based programming.

### **Is there a right to development?**

I believe there is this right. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which evolved out of basic principles for living and behavior, generated the right to development as a legitimate human right to be enjoyed by all individuals and societies. Articulating what development is and how it should be achieved is another story. The world has not as yet decided its answers to those questions.

### **Have you ever seen development agencies do harm rather than good?**

I have. I can’t strictly say that I’ve seen a ‘development agency’ do harm because I’ve mostly worked with the World Food Programme (WFP), which does not primarily focus on development in Uganda—although they do in other areas like Rwanda because of post-conflict reconstruction. The story I remember most vividly concerns the frustration and even annoyance that was generated in 1998 when WFP organized a Food for Work

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project in Gulu. A community was clearing a large tract of land near the main road and planting maize. It was going very well. People were happy to participate and they received modified rations. Then when harvesting time came around, the same community came back to the WFP field office requesting more food in order to have enough energy to harvest the maize. The people's request was ignored and I never found out who harvested the maize. This just reiterates the fact that if an idea doesn't originate from within a community it's not owned and valued as theirs, and that when external resources are channeled into the mix it distorts normal processes. I've seen a lot, but this instance forever stands out in my mind.

Actually, remembering that example reminds me of a further detail: it was a security threat to have large tracts of land completely overgrown next to the road because rebel activity and ambushes were very common. That might be another instance of a development agency putting people in harm's way. But what happened to that community doesn't sound like development, anyway. What *is* development?

**Does WFP incorporate human rights into its mandate? What mechanisms should be created within the Programme to address human rights in its work?**

The WFP mandate is based on the idea that everyone has a right to food, especially those who are in need. People in need are categorized according to certain criteria:

1. Food for Life goes to groups with immediate need. These might be direct victims of conflict or natural disasters, among others;
2. Food for Growth is for those who are particularly vulnerable, such as children under five, and pregnant or lactating mothers;
3. Food for Work, which is more development oriented and is intended to act as an incentive for community-based projects.

The entire WFP mandate is based on the right to food and this may detract from other rights that I feel are equally important, for example, economic rights. It is easier to focus on the business of transporting food, targeting those most in need, and monitoring programmes. This is the pattern that operational agencies and NGOs on the ground seem to be locked into, but who will ensure that other rights are met? Lack of resources should not hinder advocacy and working in collaboration with those who can ensure that more rights are provided. This could even mean that effort be made to end violence and conflict as the most durable solution for ensuring that people return to environments where they can enjoy their human rights again.

The most cost-effective mechanism that can be adopted for the WFP to address human rights in its work is teaching about what human rights are—their legal basis as enshrined in international and domestic law. This must be done transparently and openly to aid workers

and those receiving food assistance. If gaps are identified, that will start the second process of finding solutions, finding competent local, or international institutions, or advocating on behalf of beneficiaries rather than ‘clients.’ I prefer to use the word ‘clients’ because you cannot represent beneficiaries who are just on the receiving end. The term beneficiary I think is demeaning and paternalistic towards people who have the misfortune to be caught up in conflicts.

### **Why are you in development?**

I am not in development but somewhere along the continuum of emergency response, relief, and development. My previous work has leaned more towards emergency assessment, vulnerability analysis, and relief programming in protracted emergencies.

I’m spending a year at the Fletcher School learning about and reflecting on development because I came to realize that the type of work I plan to do requires solid understanding of what is happening in the development world. I also need to understand how to apply these lessons to what I know about my own country and region. I was working as a national staff member with WFP in Uganda, specifically with specialized GIS and mapping skills, so I provided technical support to programming and targeting activities. It’s a different way of looking at relief and development work. WFP has resources, regional networks and international connections that gave me much more latitude compared to working as a Ugandan government officer.

### **What skills do you need to succeed in the field of international development?**

Languages. In some organizations you need two international languages, but it’s also helpful to know the basics of the local dialect. And have a big smile. As Charles Petrie [Senior Advisor for UNOCHA in Africa’s Great Lakes Region] said, you “must be able to laugh with people and read faces and body language even if you don’t understand what is being said.”

I came away from a conference that Charles recently helped organize at Tufts University on the Democratic Republic of the Congo with very useful insight from a mix of diplomats, advocates, and practitioners.<sup>1</sup> All of them had a passion and care for the people they were discussing. The participants from other countries were most respectful of the personal opinions of the Congolese that attended the workshop. They stressed innovation and flexibility as well as negotiation skills. I would add that I think you should also have a special reason for working in the country or region you choose, one that centers on your own explanation about why it is important to you and not just a job. Finally, be culturally sensitive, sincere, humble—you may not have any solution to offer a community—and willing to listen and learn.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Human Security at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, UNDP, and Tuft's Feinstein Famine Center held this conference, *Improving Human Security in the DRC*, in February 2002.