

For Dr Gerti Hesseling, Chairperson

Response to Mrs Lucia Quachey's presentation

*From Anver Versi, editor of the London-based **African Business** magazine, winner of the Diageo 2005 award as best publication. Versi won the award as the best journalist for 2005.*

I feel privileged and humbled after listening to Mrs Quachey's inspiring account of how she beat all the odds to end up as a successful businessperson as well as a major activist for African enterprise.

What was most significant for me was that the problems that Mrs Quachey faced in her early career and the dilemmas she had to resolve are so typical for so much of Africa.

Consider her story: forced to abandon secondary school thus not completing her education; a very early marriage and birth of her children; her traditional role as mother and wife. This is usually the end point for most women in Africa. After that it is a constant struggle to survive, raise children, maintain a home and be totally dependant on her husband's income.

By breaking out of the traditional expectations, Mrs Quachey not only managed to escape what seemed an inevitable life of poverty, but prospered and is now working hard to make other women dream the same dreams she had and to show them how they too, can escape the clutches of their condition.

Her solution was to undertake training – at the Singer sewing school. She did not need academic qualifications for this – just the ability and will power to work very, very hard. And learn. That is very important – the recognition that one can learn and keep on learning and make use of that knowledge. It is the basis of all enterprise.

You can sum up the entrepreneurial spirit as a desire to learn, master an occupation and use it for your own and other people's benefit.

At the end of the training period, she was equipped to begin a paying occupation. She also displayed the other condition that entrepreneurs almost always exhibit. She was prepared to take risks. She employed people without, in her own words 'knowing how she would pay them.'

This began her career as a business person. She learnt and the more she learnt, the more she knew she did not know. But she knew the answers were there if you sought them out.

It is hardly surprising then that over the years, her enterprise has grown substantially, she has travelled all over the world, met many very interesting people, organised major events and is here today as part of that upward curve which began when she was not satisfied by her station in life and was determined to do something to change it.

That is probably the most important lesson she brings to us. You do not have to accept your fate or your misfortunes. If the desire is strong enough and you are willing to work hard, you can change things.

Her own biggest transition was a change of outlook. From one of hopelessness to one of hope and the knowledge that she could make it happen.

If there were enough Mrs Quachey, all determined to change their circumstances and prepared to do whatever it takes, learn whatever is needed to change it, Africa as a whole would automatically change.

Unfortunately, the five fingers of a hand are not equal. Mrs Quachey's are still very rare in Africa. Most people grumble about their situation, curse their luck, blame leaders and find a million other excuses, but few work their way out of poverty. Most do not believe there is a way out.

The question before us is how do we encourage more people to make the plunge? How can we create institutions that will help nascent enterprises? What help, guidance and support can we provide to those who want to go into business? In short how can we bring about a change of outlook in Africa from one of hopelessness to one of hope?

Thank you

- * Discussion points – the role of the informal sector;
- * Banking and credit for small businesses
- * Information about markets, regulations, competition

- * Application of science and 'scientific' business models
- * Training and qualifications.

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