

TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD BY RACHEL OCHAKO

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PRESENTATION:

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS' SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND OVERSIGHT, AND THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND LABOR'S SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING, AND COMPETITIVENESS.

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I am truly grateful and honored to receive this opportunity to speak before this committee and more so to take part in a discussing a proposal that aims to improve America's Global Reputation by providing undergraduate scholarships to deserving International students from developing Countries as explained by the 'Uniting Students in America (USA)' proposal.

My testimony today will be an explanation from a personal point of view on the greater benefit this venture will have on many intelligent youth who have limited opportunities to further their education for various reasons. These students could be orphaned, or reside in areas prone to detrimental diseases like malaria and typhoid hence most finances are spent on health care. Others shelter in refugee camps where an advanced education is rarely an option. However, it is also important to realize that not all students face such challenges which are often assumed to be omnipresent in developing and third world countries. Even for the middle and upper class in many developing and third world countries, many still find the fees for an international student in the US to be unfeasible even with years of monthly wages saved. This is the reality.

I do not live in extreme poverty, nor am I homeless, nor am I from a natural calamity prone area. However, I am still similar to the people facing these challenges for we are all looking for options to further our education. I have a full comprehension of what a barrier my education would have faced if it were not for immense scholarships I have received.

Even though it is undeniable that this huge federal expenditure on International Students being advocated in the 'Uniting Students in America' proposal will have a powerful positive outcome on the global reputation of the USA, I strongly believe that in a similar manner it is undeniable that the benefits for these youth, their families and their countries of origin are copious. The United States is immensely privileged, with high standards of education, and with resources that surpass those of many developing and third world countries. You have the means to act to make many student live through my experience, in which I have seen and am still seeing the benefits to my life. It is undisputable that this proposal will be of greater good than harm to those who will receive this sponsorship to attend undergraduate studies in the US.

In my testimony, I will offer unshaken support for the ‘Uniting Students in America’ proposal through my personal experience. It is said that experience is the best teacher; I therefore hope my experience will hold an upper hand in this discussion.

For many students in Kenya, just as me, life has innumerable hurdles making life a daily struggle. Education, as essential as it is, remains the greatest hurdle, for its costs are enormous.

I am a student who has gone through most of my education on scholarship. I have grown up in a family of three, my mother, myself and my brother. This is not a special case, as single parenting is common all over the world regardless of the economic strength or weakness of the particular country. My mother passed away before I got to thirteen years of age. Since then I have lived with three different guardians, and I am fortunate in comparison to the hundreds of orphaned children left homeless. I have also been more fortunate to have received sponsorship for my education through a government bursary which was not sufficient to cover the full costs but the bursary¹ still lightened the burden. In Kenya many needy children still miss out on this opportunity for reasons like corruption or insufficient availability of these funds.

I have grown up to see the loss in death. Death not only brings sorrow but also a struggle to not only succeed but try to survive, especially when it is the death of a sole provider of a family. My brother and I have been unendingly dependent on outside sources of finances for our education after my mother’s death. It is hard to live under someone else’s care other than your parents. It is even harder to hope that finances will come through that will allow the completion of education so as to make the most of life.

International understanding and the benefits

When I completed my high school, I dreamt of becoming a pediatrician. While growing up, studying medicine was considered to be a prestigious career. After high school, I was selected by the Kenya National UWC committee to attend the United World College of South East Asia (Singapore) on a full scholarship. Here I studied the IB (International Baccalaureate). This is when my dream began to detour. I began to realize the difference between the commonly labeled “successful careers” and careers that yield success, careers that change lives. While in Singapore, I was exposed to a diverse international body and a community that strongly encourages positive involvement in both the local and international community. My eyes were opened to see the power found in the youth, to create positive change. It was this attitude that encouraged me to take a year off before joining Middlebury College in the US and take part in a project in western Kenya (Kiritu). This is the benefit of an education that allows international understanding. I will not claim to see no value in studying medicine, as these are the people who we are consistently dependant upon for health care. However, I will claim to have a better understanding now on what career I would like to see myself involved in a career that is

¹ A government scholarship granted to students in need. In Kenya it is based on your constituency and school. Some constituencies get higher bursaries handed out than others.

self-satisfying but also yields satisfaction to others, without societal influence especially in terms of the prestige.

It was while I was in Singapore that I realized the societal differences between Africa and Asia, especially economically and culturally. I also realized that poverty is not a problem that is common only to Africa, but also exists in other parts of the world. This I grasped when I left my country and ventured into a different world. If we can all use products from different parts of the world through international trade, there is not reason why we should not understand the cultures and economics of these “other” countries.

Receiving a ‘less rigid’ education and the benefits.

I am currently attending Middlebury College as a rising sophomore. I am a recipient of on a scholarship most of which is a from a Davis Grant award of 40,000 US Dollars. If I was asked to return to University in Kenya, I would accept, but with a slight resentment. Why? As demanding as my college experience has been so far, I have thoroughly felt academically enriched. I have exceedingly enjoyed learning in classrooms where the discussions lack boundaries. I treasure sitting in seminar room where my very knowledgeable professor discusses the political issues of my home country in a manner very unfamiliar to me. I have been in classes where economic policies are debated and we, the students, are not penalized for disagreeing with the professor.

It is this aspect of education which I have attained outside my country that brings out the beauty, worth and true purpose of education: *it is meant to be a coagulation of ideas originating from multiple directions regardless of whether these ideas are in agreement or disagreement.* In this age when the rest of the world is aware of the high poverty levels in many third world and developing countries, there are communities, international organizations and countries working to improve this situation. One answer is in provision of education, but a better answer is in provision of an all-round education. If the youth who are always referred to as ‘the leaders of tomorrow’ are educated through systems that do not permit them to question society, then how will these leaders gain the courage to resist conformity and negative influence? It is such an education that begins to build the skills in the future leaders -- not necessarily executive leadership in terms of presidency, but also at local levels. For example a local primary school headmaster can question corporal punishment for school children and instead opt for more humane methods of punishment. Such a line of thought is not encouraged to the maximum in rigid education systems. Education through an international system will therefore create broader perspectives for students. This is essential as it will enrich their leadership qualities. Such a program will succeed in creating leaders who will not act in complete disregard of foreign techniques and ideas, nor persistently attempt to conform to societal expectations. This can be achieved through an international education, and more so through a liberal arts education.

I am African. I can therefore only speak of a place I have had experience with: Kenya. In my hometown we need youth who are able to question the ways of society. Questioning normality stimulates progress. I live in a country where corruption is incessantly crippling many livelihoods. If education does not entirely encourage and permit the new

generation of leaders to create better policies that will curb corruption, then it is not a successful education system. Such openness is very limited, especially in the local schools in Kenya, which educate most Kenyan students. Having exposure to an American college would definitely change such occurrences, and provide not only an ability to reiterate knowledge taught in class and read in books, but also to think critically about knowledge received.

From a personal point of view, I realize now that my previous silence was among many other silent voices in my country and other countries like mine. We are silent because of fear or we are ignorant of the unfolding of events. We need to speak up for I believe that being granted an opportunity to experience an international system of education in the US can be a major step to achieve positive change among the youth in developing countries.

Education and long term effects (Opportunities)

In Kenya, we often say “*Elimu ni kifungu ya maisha*”. This is a Kiswahili saying that translates to ‘education is the key to life’. I strongly concur. Especially for the needy students, education is the only way break them out of this cycle of poverty. Education is the key that opens the door for opportunities. If the US government agrees to sponsor students from developing countries, this will be an investment that will have a great result the recipients of this scholarship in the long term. Through their education, they will own the keys that open the doors of skilled job opportunities. I have more peace in my heart for I know I will be employed in my area of academic specialization.

In conclusion, I can only agree with what Franklin Roosevelt, one of this country’s most loved presidents, once stated:

“The school is the last expenditure upon which America should be willing to economize”.

Education is more than a necessity; an appropriate all-round education is more than a privilege. This is one commitment that the US government need not debate about. The benefits are enormous, not only to the image of the US but in a greater scale to the recipients of these scholarships and to their countries who will receive the benefit of their education. This is not an expenditure that should be economized, but instead maximized. However many, the US government will have given enabled the eyes of these students observe their countries and the world through different lenses be it culturally, socially, physically, religiously and economically among other differences.

I want to see the US become part of the penetrating arms that are stretched out in provision of an opportunity to students from other developing countries to have an invaluable experience. If Mr. Shelby Davis, who has already offered scholarships to over two hundred international students just last year, has seen the benefits and is still opening up more scholarships, why should the US, which is one of the richest countries, deny itself such an opportunity to create positive change?

I am still receiving education nine years after my mother's death through financial support of well wishers, but mostly through scholarships. I am not doubtful of future employment opportunities because my degree and further studies will allow me employment in vast sectors of the economy. I know I can become involved in various activities back at home and influence some positive changes because I have tasted vast worlds and therefore have a better judgment. I love and I am immensely proud of my home and my country, which is why I would be passionate to be one of those who make a difference. This is the benefit to me and to my community and country. This is why I believe in this proposal in discussion today -- because I have seen the benefits.

Thank you so much for taking your time to read through this written testimony. I look forward to hearing any questions, comments or any further discussion. More than this, I look forward to seeing this proposal become a reality.