

Profile

Jotham Musinguzi: delivering for Africa

Every day, as the sun rises over the dense forests that skirt Uganda's borders with Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo, hundreds of children stream out from the shacks dotted all over one of the world's most densely populated rural landscapes and set out along the dirt roads on their arduous trek to school. It's a sight that, according to Jotham Musinguzi, recipient of the 2013 UN Population Award and the current Regional Director for the Africa Regional Office of Partners in Population and Development (PPD), hasn't changed much over the past half-century. And he should know, because he used to make the same journey.

As a boy growing up in the late 1950s, Musinguzi used to walk 7 miles to school each morning under the thick forest canopy. "There were far fewer people there at that time and I was walking alone. It was a national park, and there were lots of animals there, snakes, all manner of challenges", he says, and the challenges weren't limited to the terrain. "There were very high levels of poverty, food was scarce, there was very little money, and at the same time you would hear of people dying from preventable diseases, malaria, malnutrition was a major issue. It was a challenging time to grow up in those areas." That he managed to win a scholarship to what was then Uganda's only medical school at Makerere University says a lot not only about Musinguzi's academic prowess, but also his incredible strength of resolve. The fact that he has worked tirelessly ever since to "give something back" to the community he grew up in and others like it in Africa is testament to the compassion and commitment of a man who Jill Sheffield, founder of the advocacy group Women Deliver, describes simply as a "treasure".

From the outset, reproductive health and family planning have been his abiding passions. He is a rare combination of "practitioner, advocate, academic, and diplomat", says Sheffield, and "even more rare", she notes, "he has had a significant impact for girls and women at the local, national, regional, and even global levels through a lifetime of service and dedication". As a junior doctor on his way to specialising in obstetrics and gynaecology he worked in hospitals in western Uganda, and was shocked, he says, by the "plight of women who were dying so needlessly in childbirth and pregnancy". They died "because they were bleeding or they had had so many children and their nutritional status was not good", he recalls. "I knew we could prevent these things. We had the technology and the knowledge and the skills, but for some reason these women were not getting them."

The watershed moment came in 1987, at a landmark conference on safe motherhood in Nairobi, Kenya. It was there, he says, that he was first able to see that the solution to maternal mortality lay not with medical doctors alone, "but had an element of really making sure that leaders know

that they can protect the health of women and children by investing more in the reproductive health of women and young girls". With the Safe Motherhood Initiative that was launched at Nairobi, Musinguzi realised that change could be achieved only by bringing politicians on board, and that this would require skills that aren't usually covered in obstetrics and gynaecology training. So in 1989 he left for the USA and Albany, upstate New York, to spend 2 years studying for a masters degree in public health, sharpening his advocacy skills, and learning more about how policies "get up and running on the ground". The move paid dividends, and the 1990s saw Musinguzi gaining an international reputation for speaking out on reproductive health and family planning. He was chosen to represent Uganda at various UN meetings and summits, and was extensively involved in the negotiations that preceded the landmark 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, as well as representing Uganda at the conference itself.

From the late 1990s Musinguzi headed the Population Secretariat of Uganda, a government agency within the Ministry of Finance; a position from which he was able to influence policy and, crucially, win the trust of Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni "despite the latter's disagreement about the importance of family planning", says Sara Seims, a senior adviser on population and reproductive health for the David and Lucile Packard Foundation based in Los Altos, USA.

Impressed by his achievements in Uganda, in 2007 PPD came calling with an opportunity that Musinguzi says was too good to refuse. "Before I was working for my country, which I love so much", he says, "but here was an opportunity to work for the region of Africa". At PPD's Africa Regional Office his remit extends across the continent, with a mission to engage policy makers and marshal political will, and an increasing focus on west Africa. At the 2012 London Summit on Family Planning, "all three African heads of state who were there were from east Africa: Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda", he notes. "They articulated their commitment, and where they need help, and once leaders talk like that donors respond, their national structures respond. We need to get something similar from the west African countries." Reflecting on his own achievements, including the UN award last year, Musinguzi is clear that any sense of satisfaction would be premature. "I'm mindful that the recognition is not only of me for the work I've done, because I've not been doing this work alone", he says. "There's much more work to do, and my work is not yet done."

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