

Keynote Speech about Refugee Resilience and Citizen Diplomacy
Prepared and Delivered by John Thon Majok
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Albert Einstein put it well when he observed, “Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.” **I have moved many times to find a safe sanctuary for my life. Today I will share a success story of human resilience** and its implications for citizen diplomacy.

We live in an era of global unrest where crises continue to increase in severity and magnitude while global peace is in short supply. The statistics are telling. More than 68.5 million people have been displaced from their homes by war and violent conflict. The monetary impact of violence on the global economy is \$14.76 trillion or 12.4 percent of the world gross domestic product. Since 1981, the U.S. has sustained a total of 233 disasters with a cumulative cost amounting to \$1.5 trillion. Things are trending in a bad direction. However, **proactive investing in early response to disasters and resilience programming is cost-effective, saves lives, and could reverse this trend to a positive direction.** While this requires global efforts, real action occurs at the local level where cities are at the forefront.

Cities can lead the way by building resilience, grooming citizen diplomats who can build a more peaceful world, and **integrating newcomers** into their communities.

More than seventeen years ago, I came to the U.S. as a refugee and part of a group known as the “Lost Boys” of Sudan. After thirteen years of living in limbo in two displaced camps and two refugee camps in Africa, I was given the opportunity to settle in Tucson Arizona where I quickly integrated myself into the American society, becoming a fan of the Arizona Wildcats basketball team. As I deliver this speech, I am making a case to perceive **refugees as resilient people who can be effective citizen diplomats** that will make **positive contributions to world peace.**

Pushed by war and persecution, refugees go through physical and emotional stress. Beyond physical insecurity, most of them experience ambiguous loss, failed mourning, and death of loved ones. Others experience separation from parents. In 1987, civil war separated me from my parents for almost ten years before I was reunited with the surviving members of my family in the refugee camp. A durable **solution to the refugee plight can best be achieved by addressing the root causes** that push them away from their homes.

Unless the impacts of vulnerability and forced displacement are tackled, they will continue to fuel global risks and undermine human resilience.

Simply defined, resilience is the ability to adapt to a difficult situation by bouncing back or moving forward. **Despite their huge losses and assaults on their identity and dignity, refugees demonstrate the human capacity to survive.** Let me share four resilience factors that emanate from my personal experience: cultural values, frame of reference, drive for education, and community support.

First, Cultural upbringing plays an important role in coping with stressors.

I was raised in a cattle-keeping society where the values of bravery, self-reliance, independence, courage, and mutual obligation were learned in early childhood. This gave me the foundation to endure hardships in refugee camps and later in life.

Second, It is critical to have a frame of reference that guides your decision. When I was six years old, my father wisely advised me, “**Be strong-willed...Do not let anything weaken your heart.**” His words have been my frame of reference.

In addition, I equip my mental toolbox with positive attitude, calmness, faith and prayer. These assets would always strengthen my resolve to move on, whether I was walking on a bare-foot in a desert over a thousand miles, or sleeping on a dirty floor in the refugee camps, or studying for exams on an empty stomach, or when having a bad day. What is your frame of reference? **What is in mental toolbox?**

The third resilience factor from my experience is drive for education. We all know that an idle mind is the devil’s workshop but **education keeps the mind busy and it pays dividends.** In my village, cows were the socio-economic currency and the means for livelihoods. Without any cows to cling to in the refugee camps, we embraced formal education as a substitute and it engaged us mentally. My first English class was in 1988 under a tree in the refugee camp. My first exam of the English alphabets was done by writing in the sand because there were no notebooks. For me, education was a wise investment now and then.

Fourthly, Community support provides a strong coping mechanism. Who do you turn to during an emergency? After the war disrupted our childhoods by separating us from our parents, we banded together and formed our own family of brothers in the refugee camps. In Tucson, I lived for five years with the same people I knew in the camp until I moved to Washington DC in 2006. Mutual dependence and network provide a strong support system to face stressors. **In a time of crisis, we need to turn to one another, not against each other.**

What are the implications of this story for citizen diplomacy?

I believe **current and former refugees can be an effective voice in the forced migration dialogue because they understand the context from the perspectives of victims and survivors.** Recognizing their strengths can help us to perceive them as source of inspiration, bridge-builders, and effective citizen diplomats.

When President Eisenhower launched Sister Cities International more than 62 years ago, he was envisioning a world where citizens can connect globally through people-to-people exchange. The theory of change is clear: **By forming strong community partnerships, people of different cultures would appreciate their differences and build relationships that would reduce the chance of new conflict, thereby fostering a more peaceful world where humanity can thrive.**

Engaging the youth in a movement to create a world peace through international exchange is a noble cause. **Young people can be good enablers of peace if they are given the right opportunity and the right tools to apply.** Impact stories of resilience provide an experiential knowledge for this growing demographic whose social media is the main source of information. Moreover, citizen organizations can engage the youth through education, employment, and cultural exchanges.

Mutual understanding is the bedrock of international relations. Let me tell you a story. In 2009, I managed a study abroad program that sends American citizens overseas to learn foreign languages. That initiative took me to China for a site visit in Harbin where several students were sent to learn Mandarin Chinese. One day I was walking with the students in Harbin mall when I saw some native people waving at me. I waved them back but I also responded in Chinese, “*Nǐ hǎo*”. They rushed toward me in excitement. I stopped and said, “*xiè xiè*”, and then we exchanged our hands. What started as a simple “hello” and “thank you” in a local language led to a memorable handshake between the natives and a stranger because of a mutual gesture and appreciation of culture. This is an example of a **people-to-people diplomacy at best, one handshake at a time.**

Finally, let me finish with a wise word from Dr. Rick Hanson, “Resilience is like the keel of a sailboat. As the winds of life blow, resilience keeps you balanced and moving forward.” He is right, just as Albert Einstein was. When life pushes you hard, keep moving forward and do not give up. In the end, **if we turn a crisis into an opportunity, we will reap the resilience dividends.**