From volunteer to UN resident coordinator

She started out as a volunteer at the United Nations but Rosa Malango has risen through the ranks to head the UN office in Uganda. This is her story.

BY EDGER R. BATTE
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W hen Rosa Malango was appointed to the position of United Nations (UN) Resident Coordinator in Uganda by Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon, it was a naturally humbling moment for her. She is the first woman from Equatorial Guinea to hold such a high position in the UN. She worked her way to the top. When she joined UN in 1994, she did not have permanent placement. Malango joined as a volunteer with United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef), to help with social campaigns and outreachs to children in war-torn Angola.

“I joined because I wanted to do something different. I felt I had a gift because I had lived in different countries and different continents and this was an opportunity to give back which was very important for me,” she recounts.

Uplifting women, children

Children and women are subjects Malango speaks about passionately. At a recent meeting about Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Kampala, she shared personal stories to drive points home about the need to promote and underscore issues that affect the two.

She thought it was normal, as a child, to go to school, go swimming, have water and electricity but realised, as she grew up, that these were not a given for everyone.

She started thinking about being the bridge for the underprivileged like mothers who could not feed their children after losing limbs to landmines. One particular story touched her. This was during her first humanitarian affairs mission.

“This girl must have been five years old. She had never seen a black person lead in the UN. She kept asking me if I really worked with the UN. I realised I was a rolemodel for people I was working for. I asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up and she said she wanted to be a teacher. I will never forget that. She was sitting on a rock, her whole family in a tent, in a wartorn country,” she recalls.

From that day, and incident on, Malango decided that whatever she would do, women and children’s would always heard.

Driven to deliver

Malango’s work has earned her respect and recognition back home. When she was appointed to the position of Resident Coordinator of UN in Uganda, she was invited to speak on national television back home in Equatorial Guinea. She shared what it means to be an emerging leader.

She is amazed by the work youth are doing in developing apps on how to monitor the SDGs. Malango is a literature of novels. Malango strongly believes in innovation as a driver of change and is actively involved in the activities of Pulse Lab Kampala. Just one month after taking office, she officially welcomed participants to a ‘Two Way Talk: How radio content can support the monitoring and achievement of the Global Goals’ session in April.

The radio content analysis tool is an application she thinks holds great potential for early warning and preparedness.

“And also that story hasn’t been told. I find Uganda has a lot of potential, good practices and opportunities to make sure that this knowledge is better known,” she observes.

Malango further explains, “It has been done for a long time in Uganda but the story has not been told, so, one of the things that I am trying to do is to make sure that these good practices get recognised at the global level, and should help us get investment.”

Docket

Her docket is a rich one. As UN coordinator in Uganda, Malango oversees the coherence of the UN programming in Uganda under 17 agencies.

She is also Resident Representative of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as global administrator of the international development network. Under UNDP, Malango supervises and supports the development aspirations of Uganda. She is also responsible for UN personnel in the country.

When the war in South Sudan resurfaced, she moved her office to Entebbe, to oversee the evacuation of personnel from the troubled nation. ‘That is how much Malango goes to get work done.’

Passionate about results

She is a firm believer in investing all your energies in whatever you pursue. Plus, being part of a team or project should be your chance to learn and deliver.

“We work for people. This is not a computer company where you are dealing with innate projects. We are dealing with people’s lives. So depending on how you do your work, someone may live or die. I take my work very seriously,” Malango argues.

That is what 22 years of experience have taught her. She believes in self-learning to improve and also to be able to communicate. She is fluent in Portuguese, English, Spanish and French. She recently started learning Mandarin.

Family comes first

With all the hunger for results at work, family still comes first. Even before she had her son, she looked out for her siblings and supported their father. Today, her son comes first. They travel together and she has taught him to understand what she does. She is a single parent.

Malango balances work and family by delegating and dealing with work issues with colleagues. She has three siblings, and is the first born and only girl.

At home, she is called the independence child because her parents decided not to get married until their country was independent. She was born a year after Equatorial Guinea got its independence.

“My parents were part of the independence movement in my country and I never thought I would ever be able to march their achievements at all. My now late father was part of the first ever permanent mission we had at the UN when Equatorial Guinea was accepted as the 126th member state,” she adds.

She is following in her father’s footsteps. When I ask her about what could have propelled her to where she is today, she sighs, and then gives the glory to the God. She attributes her rise to her insistence in all projects she has had the opportunity to be part of.

Her work ethics are another reason. “dishonesty leads to all sorts of bad things. If you are dishonesty, you can end up corrupt or mismanaging a situation. One has to have respect in personal or professional life. We all deserve respect for the role we play no matter the level. Team work. We all represent a community,” she spells out.

Tourism on her mind

She has travelled to some parts of Uganda, doing work but she wants to see some tourism attractions too. “I have been in Adjumani for refugee settlement. I have been to Hoima for Labour Day celebration and as I travel what I see is a beautiful country. As UN representative, I would like to push for tourism so that Ugandans get to appreciate and tell their stories,” she says.

She adds, “One of my very first outings was to a small community of hunters in Batanda who simulate that to benefit from tourists. I would like to go to the national parks and see the wild animals and what else is there.”

When not working or tending to her son, Malango sits by her balcony and sips her favourite drink as she listens to soothing music. If not, she will fit into some casual outfit and play football with her son or friends.

FACT FILE

Previous assignments.

Before this appointment (2015-2016), Rosa Malango undertook an assignment as part of the UN Inter-Agency Field Leadership Programme with UNDP as Head, Resident Coordinator’s Office, Guatemala. From 2005-2015 she worked with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as Chief, External Relations and Partnerships Section, New York.


From 1995-1998 she was based in Angola as OCHA’s Chief Information Officer. Before joining the UN, Malango worked in the private sector in Nigeria as an Advertising Practitioner with STB & Associates Ltd and as an Executive Assistant/Translator for the First Secretary, Embassy of Argentina.

Education.

Malango holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Mass Communication from the University of Lagos, Nigeria. She speaks French, Spanish, English and Portuguese. She took on her new assignment in March 2016.

Malango is passionate about children and women’s rights, PHOTO BY EDGAR R. BATTE

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NUMBER OF YEARS THAT MALANGO HAS SPENT WORKING AT THE UNITED NATIONS