Connecting the dots...

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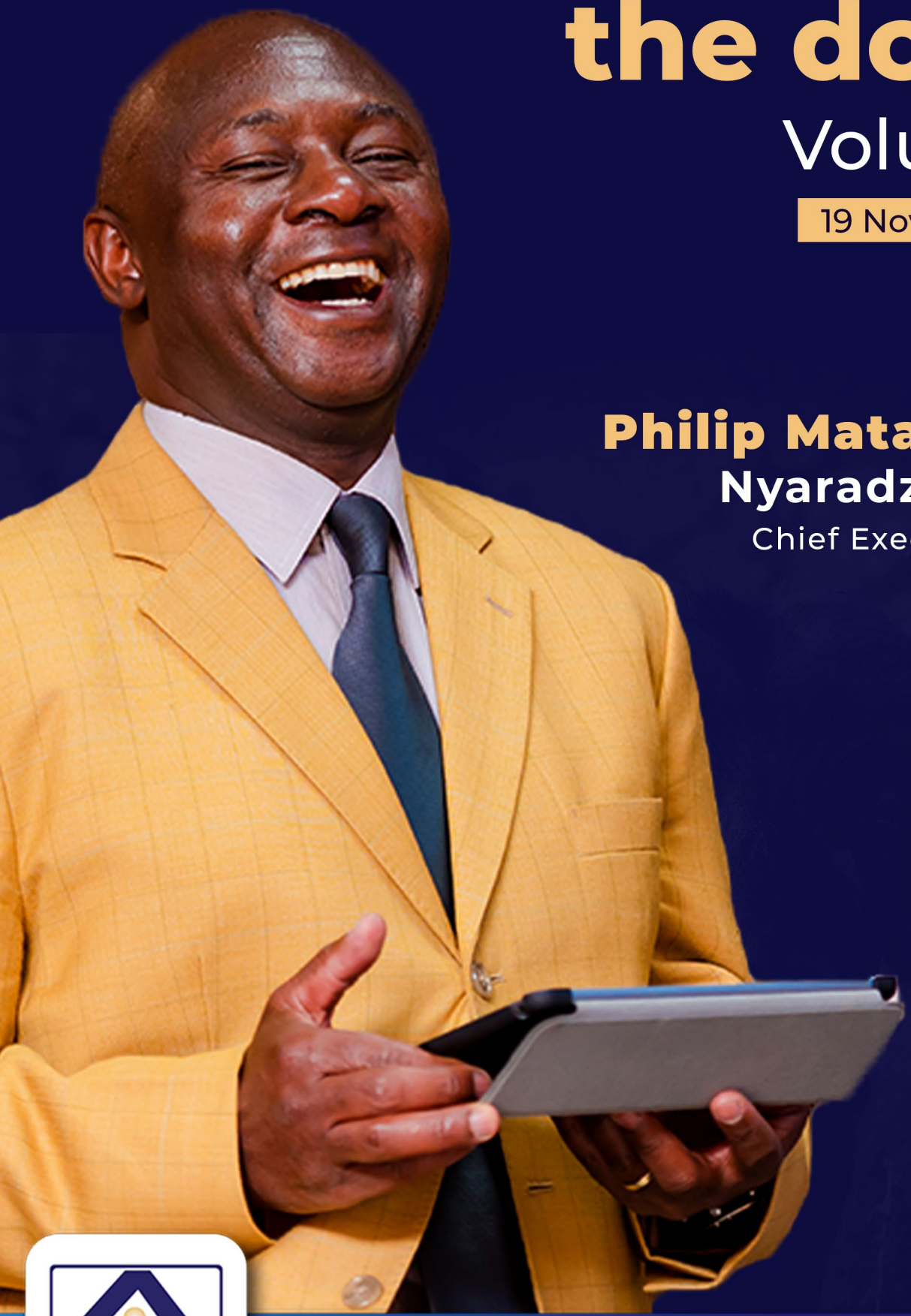

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When our light shines brightly, we light the way for others...

Most people who left their villages for urban areas at the height of the liberation struggle in the 1970s had very few options available to them as to what they could do to earn an honest living in the cities, where opportunities were few and far between.

In the village, opportunities to eke out an honest living were plentiful. Villagers would look to the skies for good rains in summer, pinning their hopes on a successful cropping season that would give them enough food to see them through to the next rainy season. In between the farming season, from around about May to end of October, gardening and other household chores would keep rural folk busy, with side activities such as brick moulding, bricklaying, woodwork, fishing and hunting for those with the skill sets.

As the freedom fighters increasingly gained ground on all fronts, rural schools were forced to close as they had become unsafe for students and teachers. Combatants from both ZANLA and ZIPRA forces had also turned these learning institutions into fertile grounds for recruiting cadres.

As a result, the rural areas became hot and unsafe to live in, particularly for young adults who were targeted for persecution by the Rhodesian Forces (RF). Smaller towns were also not safe as their residents were often harangued by the RF, just as Johanne, Thomas and I had experienced a few years earlier when we had to put up for the night in Rusape, along with our father, on our way to Chifuri Village in Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands.

The only places of refuge were the cities, particularly Salisbury and Bulawayo. Salisbury was pretty well developed, even back then, with the rural to urban migrants having the choice to stay in Mufakose, Kambuzuma, Mabvuku, Tafara, Highfield, Dzivaresekwa, Glen Norah and many other locations that were designated for Africans, depending on where one's relatives stayed.

These suburbs had been created to support the colonists' booming industries with labour, with Mbare becoming the first township to emerge in 1907. Formerly called Harari, before it was renamed after paramount Chief Mbari. The suburb was established to house labour, made up mostly of men working for companies in the Graniteside and Workington industrial areas.

It took nearly two decades after Mbare had been developed, for the colonists, under Godfrey Huggins who served as the fourth Prime Minister of Southern Rhodesia from 1933 to 1953, to construct Highfield Township on what used to be Highfields Farm. Fio, as the suburb became affectionately known, provided housing for labourers to the Ardebernie, Southerton and Workington industrial sites as part of the government's urban planning.

As industrial and commercial activities exploded, more townships were established. Mabvuku was the next to be developed as a result of the displacement of the Shawasha people, which is why some of the streets are named after the clan's ancestors, amongst them Shambare, Nzvere, Chaitezvi, Nyahuni, Nyamare, Chauruka, Marembo, Godzonga and Tingini.

While the origins of the name Mabvuku may not be clear, popular belief has it that it was derived from the Shona word "bvuku" or "emerging waters", which was prefixed with the plural "Ma" to refer to swampy areas that had sprouting fresh waters in and around Mabvuku.

The establishment of Old Mabvuku, which housed labour for industries in the Msasa industrial area, dated as far back as the 1950s, with Mufakose emerging in the 1960s to provide housing for low-income labourers who worked in the Workington industrial area. Mufakose, affectionately referred to as "Mufombi" was named after the Hwata dynasty who settled in the Mazowe Valley in the early nineteenth century before internecine struggles within the family forced some of its members to resettle in other parts of the country.

Dzivaresekwa, initially called Gillingham, emerged to the south of the city on land that had been bought by the Rhodesian government to accommodate additional African urban labourers. Commonly referred to as DZ, its first buildings took shape in 1961, with Dzivaresekwa's first primary school opening a year later.

Kambuzuma Township sprung up a year before the Rhodesian government declared unilateral independence, (UDI) in November 1965. The township was named after Cambitzi, a businessman of Greek heritage who operated a shop in the area. While urbanites called the area "KwaCambitzi", many struggled to pronounce the name, resulting in its adulteration to Kambuzuma. The same Greek Cambitzi family are the proud owners of the Cambitzi building at the Avondale Shops.

The punitive economic restrictions that followed UDI would catalyse the construction of more such housing and industrial developments as the racist regime became further inward looking in order to survive the biting sanctions. More suburbs emerged after UDI, amongst them New Mabvuku in 1972, and Glen Norah (formerly Baxter Farm), whose construction was completed in 1973. Highfield was founded on what used to be Highfields Farm. The farmhouses were incorporated into the Rutsanana Clinic and municipal buildings in what is now Glen Norah suburb.

As the Rhodesian government struggled to cope with the growing housing waiting list, Glen Norah would become the first pilot project where employers were encouraged to build and lease houses for their workers. This resulted in big corporations such as CAPS Holdings, Carnaud Metal Box, Old Mutual and the Postal and Telecommunication Corporation (PTC) taking up the challenge.

Staying in any one of these townships or locations was not so easy for those coming into the city as refugees. One had to have a close relative who would be generous enough to welcome them in as a guest for an indefinite period, which could turn into weeks and months, if not years. Besides providing the unexpected visitor with accommodation, the host also had to provide them with food, toiletries and other basic necessities during their stay.

Depending on the nature of one's relationship to the host, it was not unexpected to extend the hospitality to the provision of clothing in cases where the visitors were cousins, nieces, nephews, uncles, aunts or any other similar close relation. If the host was lucky, their guest would break camp once they were able to fend for themselves, or had secured employment.

For the unlucky hosts, the burden could trail them to the grave. There were also unfortunate situations where visitors would end up engaging in adulterous relationships with their close relatives, or would badmouth them to surrounding friends and neighbours. Talk about "biting the hand that feeds you!"

When that red line was crossed, and a visitor or visitors had overstayed their welcome, they would be summarily shown the exit door, with the next port-of-call being to go back to their war-torn villages or to find an alternative place to stay, such as the shacks at Mbare Musika.

Back in the day, families were large as communities were generally not familiar with family planning. Because the properties they lived in were basically core houses, with at most two bedrooms, a kitchen and a lounge-cum-dining room, it was more or less standard practice that the larger bedroom would typically be occupied by the parents, the owners of the house. Where the family was made up of boys and girls, the latter were allocated the other bedroom for safety reasons, leaving the former to squat in the sitting room. The advent of television in 1960 provided some entertainment for those who could afford the small screen, while those without would immerse themselves in folklore. When everyone else had retired from the living room to sleep, it would then revert to being the bedroom for the boys.

Sleeping in the lounge meant being the last to go to bed after dinner had been served, kitchen clean-up had been done, and family time had been enjoyed. It also meant waking up early in the morning and vacating the room to allow whoever had been assigned cleaning duties to do so, freely and efficiently.

In between, boys had to find somewhere to occupy their time, usually playing with other boys from the neighbourhood who were in a similar predicament. Early in the morning, boys could therefore be seen tending gardens or playing football or mini soccer (slug) at shopping centres. Others would spend their time hanging out with friends on the parapets of bridges where they would be tempted to try out drugs and alcohol. Early mornings was also time for those who had reached working age to try their luck in industry, or assisting their close relatives with errands and chores if they needed a helping hand.

Under the circumstances, to be taken in by families with such limited facilities was still a privilege for those who found themselves in this situation, as most who came to the city looking for greener pastures were not that fortunate. A good number of them ended up staying in squatter camps at Mbare Musika, Epworth, Chirambahuyo and elsewhere where they didn't have to answer to anyone or ask for permission to do this or that. Building a shack or "chitangwena," at any of the squatter camps or "zvitangwena," was fairly easy and straightforward. All that was required was a sheet of polyethylene plastic similar to that used in building greenhouses, an industrial-type of thread, poles and some nails. Once the structure had been completed, not much was needed to maintain it.

Legend has it that this reference to shacks as "chitangwena/zvitangwena, came from the historical narrative of Chief Rekayi Tangwena, who hailed from Kairezi, which has a special place in Zimbabwe's history. Manicaland Province, in the Eastern Highlands, was home to the chief, who was of the Nhewa/Simboti/Leopard totem and remains the only traditional chief in Zimbabwe to be buried at the National Heroes Acre after having been accorded national hero status upon his death. In the 1960s and 1970s he defied Rhodesian Authorities by refusing to leave ancestral lands usurped by white conquest. Also a member of Zimbabwe's first parliament, he is well known for helping late former President Robert Mugabe and late freedom fighter and national hero Edgar "Two Boy Tekere" cross into Mozambique to join and lead the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) guerillas who were waging a fierce bush war against Ian Smith's Rhodesian government. However, Chief Tangwena was even better known for his fierce resistance to having his people evicted from their ancestral lands, which was a total of 50 square miles of land in Nyanga District, by the racist white minority settler government, refusing to make way for the white settlers who were coming into the country in the 1960s. Africans had been dispossessed of their land through the Land Apportionment Act of 1930, the Land Husbandry Act of 1951 and finally the Land Tenure Act of 1969.

Despite being arrested more than a dozen times, he continued to resist and rebuild even after his people's homesteads had been destroyed by settler forces. The chief and his people were ordered to move to Gokwe to Bende some reserve 650km away, an order which they steadfastly refused. The Tangwena people who had lived in the Nyanga area for centuries fought the evictions and took their case to court. When the government realised in 1968 that Chief Tangwena and his people could not be lawfully removed, they issued a decree that effectively gave way to the new Land Tenure Act. With this piece of law in hand, on October 29 1970 the police arrived at Kaerezi village at around 4am with 34 land rovers, five trucks and a bulldozer to evict them.

The security forces burned down their homes, destroyed their crops, arrested them, closed down their school, and impounded their cattle which were immediately sold by the pound-master. Pictures of the destroyed villages appeared in the local press and the matter was widely reported internationally. However, nothing was done to resolve the situation. There were no sympathies from abroad, no protest by the international community.

Rather than move to Bende, Chief Tangwena and his 1 000 people fled to the mountains surrounding their homes and stayed there for about six years living a hand-to-mouth existence subject to sudden police raids and patrols. The then Umtali Post of November 4, 1970 screamed, "There can be little sympathy for the Tangwena tribes people who are behaving like stubborn fools and threatening to defy the laws of the land . . . Today, more than 1 000 Tangwena people are reported to have gone into hiding in the Inyanga Mountains, living like baboons. "No one wants to see them living like baboons in the mountains or dying from starvation or anything else . . . If the present situation continues or worsens, it would not surprise us to see more people in court and they may not all be Tangwena tribesmen."

Living a hard life in the mountains, the Tangwena people would come out of their hideout during the night to replant and rebuild homes destroyed by the Rhodesian government. It is against this background that most people who were putting up shacks to live in undesignated places did it in protest even when they knew the conditions would be far from comfortable. More than the discomfort and ridicule that came with living in zvitangwena, it became a symbol of defiance. So many years later, even to this day, people refer to shacks or makeshift structures as "zvitangwena". Chitangwena also refers to the temporary shelter or structure that is put up before the main building is up at housing construction sites.

Once one had chosen squatting in these "zvitangwena", their next problem was where to get daily food provisions and dealing with unpredictable weather patterns. In summer, the plastic shack would be fairly warm, if not too hot, whilst in winter, it became more like a refrigerator as the structures were not insulated to keep the inside warm. When it rained, occupants would have to be on their toes to prevent water from finding its way into the shack, making a good night's sleep difficult, if not impossible. Needless to say, living in a shack was therefore miserable, which would push inhabitants to find ways to earn an income.

During my days in Mbare, often boys of my age would find girls within their community whom they married, starting their families as squatters. As for me and my nephew, Sekuru Edward, it helped that Sekuru Samson provided us with the opportunity to work for him and earn a living, even though we didn't declare some of the income which was due to him.

While our Volkswagen Van was not the best of places to call home, at least we had a roof over our heads which was preferable to living in a shack. The icing on the cake for us was when Leonard Basiyawo came into our lives, having met him at Mbare Musika while shopping for veggies. That chance meeting would open doors, not just for Sekuru Edward and me but for others too. As his light shone brighter, it lit the path for many others.

After Leonard had fully established himself at Kaufman's in Mbare, most of the people living in nearby shacks would find creative ways to benefit from his LB (Leonard Basiyawo) Timber merchant business by offering to carry whatever bulk purchases his customers would have made from his shop for a small fee, using hand carts, or push carts. A new occupation and title was created; those who carried the loads were called Majega, which is an adulteration of the word jack, the hydraulic device used to lift heavy objects, especially for hoisting one side of the axle of a motor vehicle so a wheel could be changed or so the underside could be inspected.

There were two types of Majega at Mbare. The first category was of people who offered to carry loads on one shoulder for a small fee; along the way, they would be giving the client a watchful, lopsided look as they hurriedly walked in the direction of the buses with a posture resembling that of a vehicle hoisted by a jack on one side. The other group comprised those who could afford to either hire out or buy hand carts to lift loads on behalf of their customers.

With Leonard's business thriving, most men who lived in the nearby zvitangwena and hostels came to offer their services to the timber buying customers, using hand or push carts to transport their loads to the nearby Mbare Musika Bus Terminus where the timber would be freighted to various destinations.

Another job opportunity created at Mbare Musika Bus Terminus as competition among rural bus operators increased, was that of the Hwindi. Bus crews would enlist the services of strong, chatty men, called upon to jostle for passengers so they could fill up their buses before departing for their destinations in accordance with set timetables. In time, these men would be called "Mahwindi." Back then, rural buses plied their routes according to set timetables to avoid over-speeding which contributed and still contributes to much of the carnage on our roads.

In the event that a bus was found to be operating outside it's set times, whether ahead or behind schedule, the crew would be fined heavily by police officers manning roadblocks, which were a common sight at designated points.

While the origins of the word Hwindi, are premised on legend, one being that, it originated from the ghetto lexicon regarding winds, which refer to an individual who behaves as if they are possessed by some evil spirit. The unruly behaviour sometimes exhibited by some them is thus likened to that of an individual under a spell. Another version is that, they were so named because they moved fast, even faster than the wind to get customers onto their preferred buses, filling them up before the customers even knew what was happening!

The moniker would stick for good after the liberalization of the urban transport sector which broke the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company's monopoly in the 1990s when it blended perfectly with the swinging vernacular "Hwiiii" and "Ndiiiii!" loud sounds made by kombi doors when Mahwindi hurriedly and recklessly opened and closed them as they fell over each other to get commuters into their vehicles. Even more fittingly, the Mahwindi usually touted for passengers' attention through the kombi's windows or mahwindo in Shona.

Back in the day, when rural bus crews wanted to start off early and remain within set times, they would incentivise the Mahwindi to help them fill up their buses, paying them a small fee for their services, and they would sweat all day to earn enough to feed themselves and their families.

Sekuru Samson was one of those to benefit from Leonard's shining light. As he was now using Leonard's shed at Mbare Musika to exhibit his scotch carts, he identified another business opportunity, which was to construct hand or push carts used by the Majega to ferry timber, fertiliser and other heavy items that needed lifting and transportation to the nearby Mbare Musika Bus Terminus. This new line of business ensured that, besides making scotch carts, repairing cars and fixing pots and pans, we now had a new line of business at our workshop.

Other than creating his own employment and that for the people who worked for him, Leonard had wittingly or unwittingly created opportunities for those who stayed within the surrounds of his LB Timber business, including the hostels and shacks of Mbare. Next door to LB Timbers was Jarzin Super-market from where rural farmers bought fertilisers and seeds. all of which required heavy lifting and transporting. Here too, the Majegas would come in and do it for them, albeit for a small fee.

Having settled in well at Mbare from the time I was taken in by my mother from Chifuri Village in Chiduku following the injury to my leg, I never saw my-self saying goodbye to this amazing community where I had cut my teeth in the field of hustling. That day would come, however, when I least expected it. The dawn of a new era in Zimbabwe would end my stay there when Sekuru Samson decided to revive his fortunes in Mhondoro, after abandoning his two shops there at the height of the liberation war.

The attainment of independence in 1980 motivated him to relocate back to Mhondoro in July 1980 to be with his wife, Mbuya Susan, and the rest of his family. Sekuru Edward and I joined him, taking with us every little thing that he had acquired during our time at Mbare Musika.

Among Sekuru Samson's prized possessions, were water pumps that he had kept at his workshop. Once in Mhondoro, he used his submersible pumps in the Shamba River, about a kilometre from his home, to irrigate the family fields, which were an absolute marvel to watch. It rekindled memories of the flourishing crops my grandfather, his father, Sekuru Samuel used to produce in Bvumbe.

At Mubaira Growth Point in Mhondoro, we continued to build scotch carts and do repair work as we had done in Mbare, the only difference being, that there was less traffic and less sales, both of which could be attributed to the fact that we were new to the area and that it may not have been an ideal location for our trade. I became restless and yearned for more action. We had become an independent state a few months earlier with great pomp and ceremony and now here I was, in the back of beyond with little hope of self-advancement, even if we continued to do most of what we did in Mbare.

Our sleeping arrangements however, were better and we now slept in a house, instead of the back of a disused Volkswagen Van. The ablution facilities were rural Blair toilets with no running water which was not very different from what we had in Mbare, although the chances of regularly finding the toilets messed up were slim as these were private toilets as opposed to the public ones we were accustomed to in Mbare.

Mbuya Susan always had good harvests no matter how much rains were received in the preceding season, this must have been attributable partly to the good type of soils and the region in which Mhondoro lies. Also, because Mbuya Susan worked her fields. This ensured that, when we moved back to the village, food was plentiful, mostly traditional meals and my favourite nuts. The only problem was that the meal quality was different from the commercial meals and recipes we were used to from my mother and the occasional opportunity we had of spoiling ourselves with whatever it was we chose to eat; beef, chicken, pork or lamb. Back at the village, all our meals were planned by Mbuya Susan.

This was another Chiduku Tribal Trust Lands situation where opportunities for self- development were limited, I reasoned. I had dreams even back then to be successful, although I didn't know what this would be or how I could go about it. I certainly did not see myself having a bright future in the village setting given my previous experience as a herd boy in Chifuri. Consequently, I asked Sekuru Samson for his permission to allow me to go back to Harare. Thankfully, he didn't need much persuasion and with his blessings, at the beginning of December 1980, I headed back to the bright lights of the city.

I had made up my mind before hitting the road, to get my driving licence so I could chance working as a taxi driver. In the event I failed, I imagined I would go back to school, so as to benefit fully from the promise that Zimbabwe presented at independence in 1980. Although I didn't end up being a taxi driver, I did succeed in doing the other two, getting my driver's license and indeed, going back to school. I have lived in the shadows of greatness and benefited immensely from the light of others.