Connecting the dots...

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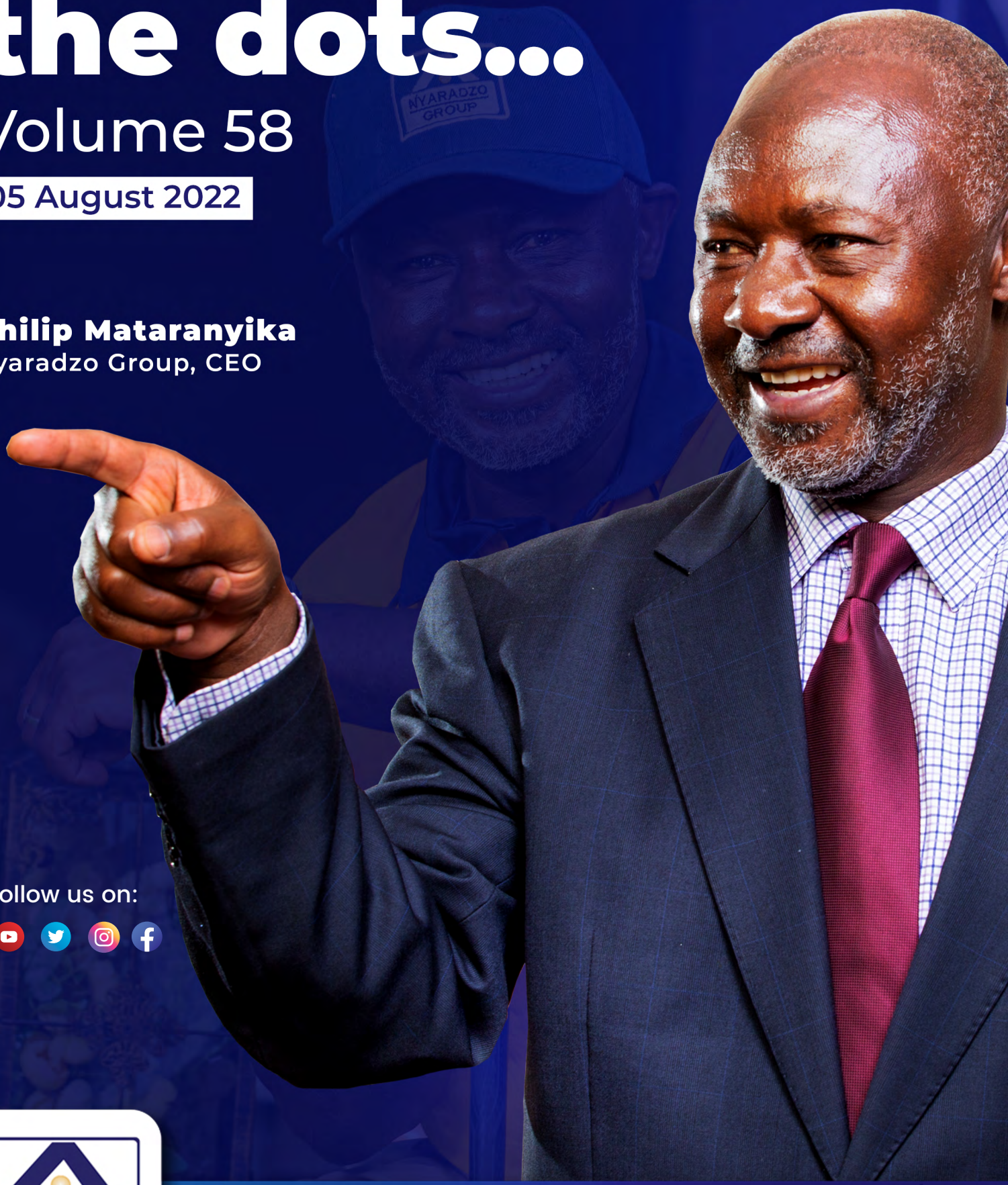
Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group, CEO



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Building communities together...

Out of the many lessons that I learnt from my humble beginnings, one that still stands out or remains true was the important role that communities play in raising children, regardless of whether or not their biological parents involve themselves in their lives.

Before ubuntu values were diluted by urbanisation, which came with colonisation from the fifteenth century onwards, it was unheard of for a child in any typical African village to lack in any way, because their communities would provide for necessities such as food, clothing and shelter, which were considered as unwritten inalienable human rights. I believe this was the origin of a profound African proverb that says, "It takes a whole village to raise a child." I experienced community benevolence first-hand. My brothers and I were beneficiaries of the generosity and love showered upon us by the communities we lived in after our parents went their separate ways when I was still in elementary school, resulting in the extended family and communities around us playing a huge part in shaping us into the men that we became.

If African communities continued providing that much-needed support to those in need, we would not be having as much of the ills that our societies are confronted with today. Symptomatic of the breakdown of the social fabric is the mushrooming of children homes even in unlikely places and the street kids' menace which is driving shoppers away from central business districts to exclusive and more secure upmarket malls. As I tried to make sense of what I went through growing up, I came to accept that God had a purpose for it because I derive some of my philosophical underpinnings from my upbringing. That I am a product of communities that I lived in at different times also influences how I perceive my purpose in life and that of the businesses that I am honoured to serve. I will tell you why!

At the heart of my business principles is the philosophy that Nyaradzo Group serves its purpose only when it helps the communities within which it operates to meet some of their needs. While the needs vary from one community to the other, studies have shown that the universal ones are to do with living in a safe and secure environment, which provides members of that community with opportunities to earn a living, advance in education and lead healthy lives.

Governments have a role to play in creating an enabling environment in which the needs of communities can be satiated. However, businesses have a bigger role to play as they are well placed to identify and support local needs as well as working with the communities themselves to support and sustain more compelling needs. From that perspective, I would say that making a profit ceases to be an end in itself, but a means to an end. Ultimately, it is when the interests of businesses intersect with those of the communities they serve that one is able to build enterprises that transcend generations, sustainably.

For the past twenty-one years, we have been able to lend our humble hand in building communities, as a responsible corporate citizen. Some prefer calling it 'giving back to communities', 'corporate social responsibility' or 'corporate social investment'. Whichever terminology one prefers, we take such responsibility seriously because our survival depends on our ability to co-exist with the stakeholders that make up our communities. It is in these communities that we were born, and it is also in them that our remains shall be interred. As such, the fruits from the seeds we are planting and tending in our limited time on this earth are what we shall be remembered for as our legacy.

My beliefs were tested as we were trying to find our feet in the industry. This was after a severe cholera outbreak hit several parts of the country, claiming the lives of nearly two hundred people in January 2002. Instead of folding our hands and blaming it on someone else, we rolled up our sleeves and took it upon ourselves to provide safe drinking water to mourners at funerals we were handling.

While it is true that diseases such as cholera should not have a place in any civilised society such as ours, there we were in the twenty-first century fighting a primitive disease passed from one person to the other, mainly because of poor sanitary conditions caused by lack of clean water. The carnage in the early days of the outbreak was frightening, and it was as clear as day that our health delivery system was not ready for it. As Nyaradzo, we could not bury our heads in the sand like ostriches and wish away our problems simply because we were still green behind the ears.

Because the toll on human life, the industry and the country at large was likely to be too ghastly to contemplate, I made a strong case for Lane Engineering, where my uncle Timothy Chiganze and I had a combined shareholding of a hundred percent, to start manufacturing water bowsers en-masse for deployment at all funerals that Nyaradzo Funeral Services (NFS) was handling to contain the disease by providing clean water to mourners.

That effort persuaded many other organisations into placing orders for water bowsers at Lane Engineering and elsewhere for deployment in their localities to improve hygiene and reduce the spread of the disease. From that baptism of fire emerged one of the solutions that helped communities cope with subsequent outbreaks of cholera from 2004 through 2008.

In view of the road traffic accidents on the country's roads which claim the lives of an estimated two thousand people annually, in 2016 we saw the need to partner with the only government institution mandated to promote road safety nationally, the Traffic Safety Council of Zimbabwe, to raise awareness on the need for drivers to be cautious while behind the wheel and to avoid driving at night. Because to err is human, accidents have continued to leave permanent scars on families and communities.

Whenever major accidents have happened on the country's roads, we have been there to lessen the burden on families and communities by assisting with burials, and I highlight a few of those here. In June 2017, Nyaradzo Funeral Services (NFS) had to establish a command centre at Chinhoyi Provincial Hospital following the Nyamakate bus tragedy which claimed the lives of forty-three people. Through an arrangement entered into with the government and the Insurance Council of Zimbabwe (ICZ), NFS assisted with the burial of forty deceased. We were also on hand in August 2018 to assist with the burial of some of the victims of the road traffic accident involving a Chawasarira bus and a commuter omnibus that killed thirteen passengers near Muzvezve Bridge, about ten kilometres outside Kadoma. In November of the same year, we partnered yet again with the ICZ to provide coffins and transport, after two long-distance buses plying the Harare-Mutare Highway – Bolt Cutter and Smart Express – collided, causing the death of forty-six people. There are several other instances we have had to answer the call of duty and put shoulder to the wheel to assist bereaved families during the dark times of man-made disasters.

Due to the increase in mining activities involving artisanal miners and gold panners, there has been an upsurge in unsafe mining methods, especially at disused mine shafts, resulting in accidents that can be avoided. In August 2018, we were part of a mission to retrieve bodies from Eldorado Mine Shaft, which killed fourteen suspected illegal miners. Unfortunately, the effort had to be called off when it became apparent to the authorities that we were risking losing more lives. In February 2019, we joined forces with other stakeholders at Cricket Mine to retrieve the bodies of artisanal miners who lost their lives after they drowned in mine shafts that flooded after a night of heavy rains. Twenty-four precious souls were lost in that disaster.

We were back in the trenches in November 2020 when an estimated thirty artisanal miners were reportedly trapped at Ran Mine in Bindura following the collapse of a mine shaft. To enable the rescue mission to work around the clock, we provided a lighting tower, portable toilets, a standby ambulance, a water tank, tents, chairs and body bags. Disaster gives no notice, as we have come to know, and some of the tragedies have happened in unlikely places. For instance, a silo explosion at the Grain Marketing Board's Lion's Den depot killed four people in August 2018. We had to provide decent burials for the deceased.

When we started operating years back, many people were under the mistaken belief that Nyaradzo was only about burying the dead, which is far from it. While we shall all make our exit since death is unavoidable, the end-of-life industry is not at the core of our operations. We have solid interests in life assurance, insurance broking, asset management, money transfer, farming, hospitality, and events and lifestyle management.

Our story is, therefore, about love, hope and inspiring generations to live well and longer. Due to the nexus between the quality of the environment and health, or the lack of it, we had to think about the factors contributing to environmental degradation and how they contribute to the reduction in life expectancy. In 2010, our attention was drawn to the challenge gripping our communities countrywide, which are being laid bare due to the indiscriminate cutting down of trees.

Globally, deforestation is estimated at ten million hectares per year, down from sixteen million hectares per year in the 1990s. The area of primary forests worldwide has decreased by over eighty million hectares since 1990.

Locally, deforestation has decimated thirty-seven percent of Zimbabwe's forested land between 1990 and 2015, which means that we are losing over three-hundred-and-thirty-thousand hectares of forest annually. The consequences have been dire, amongst them the depletion of natural resources at an alarming rate, soil erosion, air and water pollution. These negative consequences add to the chorus of chaos that increases human mortality and reduce longevity.

The foregoing motivated us to invite like-minded corporates to be part of an environmental movement we called Friends of the Environment (FOTE) to promote environmental conservation through awareness-building, establishing tree seedling nurseries across the country and planting trees with various stakeholders. Our vision is to see FOTE growing to become the most active catalyst for reforestation and environmental conservation in Zimbabwe. To date, we have established thirty-five nurseries across the country, producing various types of tree seedlings among them the popular eucalyptus, shade and ornamental varieties, and both indigenous and exotic fruit trees. Since we embarked on the initiative in 2010, we have planted more than thirty-two million trees, along with our partners and various other project sponsors. It is becoming increasingly likely that we will meet our target to plant five hundred million trees by 2026 as more partners join the effort.

We have several corporate partners to the initiative, some of whom have supported FOTE initiatives such as the annual walkathons, and these include OK Zimbabwe Limited, Old Mutual Zimbabwe, Mimosa Mining Company, Standard Chartered Bank, Zimplats, Bain Iveco and Sable Chemical Industries, among others. Other partners to the cause have sponsored the establishment of tree seedling nurseries. Mindful of the need for sustainability into the future, we established and donated the nurseries to schools so that they can turn them into income-generating projects and platforms for their students to learn about trees and tree planting.

In 2020, we hosted our first virtual walkathon in the wake of Covid-19, as it was impossible to continue with the traditional format of conducting the event. Last year, we were back to our standard walkathon format, with preparations for this year's event now underway. As FOTE, we believe that the scale at which mankind is destroying everything on planet earth given to us by our creator to exercise dominion over, constitutes a tragedy that is quietly destroying our heritage. How I wish we were wrong!

Already, the whole world is paying a heavy price for abdicating our God-given mandate to protect the environment through the effects of climate change and global warming. Zimbabwe has not been spared the brunt of climate change-induced ecological disasters. Recently, Nyaradzo had to join other private sector organisations in rescue efforts after parts of Chimanimani and Masvingo were hit by Cyclone Idai, which killed over three hundred and forty people on the night of the 15th of March 2019, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake in the form of destroyed homes, roads, schools, bridges and electricity infrastructure, amongst other things.

Seeing that the Civil Protection Unit was overwhelmed by the disaster, the government was quick to declare a state of disaster to allow aid to come through. Along with our partners, we moved to set up the Old Mutual Village at Skyline, which was the highest point in the area and the landing spot for all rescue helicopters that were bringing in the deceased and those seeking medical treatment.

We also set up four huge tents, complete with camping beds at the campsite, to house displaced families, a makeshift clinic and shelter for other first-time responders such as the police, army and members of the national youth service. Several portable toilets were set up around the camp, as well as mobile lighting towers to keep the place illuminated at night. Within seven days, we had set up another campsite at Chimanimani Civil Centre to house residents from Ngangu who had lost their homes to the cyclone. The secondary campsite had the capacity to house over two hundred and fifty people.

When we thought we had seen enough of the tragedies, the Covid-19 pandemic reached our shores in March 2020. The first death was too close for my comfort. I would tragically lose my mentee and close friend, Zororo Makamba, to Covid-19. The Covid-19 induced death toll in Zimbabwe has since reached nearly five-thousand-six hundred as of the 1st of August 2022, making it one of the worst tragedies to hit Zimbabwe. With no signs of letting up at its peak in March last year, this monster of a pandemic wreaked havoc and appeared hellbent on wiping humanity off the face of the earth. Not even the interventions by governments in line with the World Health Organisation's requirements, among them the mandatory wearing of face masks in public; sanitising of hands regularly and observing physical distancing in public places, could stop the bloodbath.

The funeral services sector was one of the industries hardest hit by Covid-19 as deaths soared. Suddenly, we found ourselves amongst the frontline workers who had to risk their lives to provide an essential service to our fellow countrymen who were not allowed anywhere near their deceased in times of bereavement. Despite the overwhelming death figures and rising infection and hospitalisation statistics, it was only natural that everyone had to look up to Funeral Directors to rise to the occasion by putting our lives on the line to provide the essential service of burying the dead with dignity. Being in the end-of-life industry and in the absence of state bailout packages, meant that we had to invest heavily in infrastructure and equipment (hearses and mortuaries). I am glad we had invested in increasing mortuary holding capacity at our service centres and built or upgraded storage facilities at the following, Chikurubi prison, Bindura, Gwanda, Chegutu, Kadoma, Shurugwi and Nyanga District Hospitals as well as at Murambinda Hospital.

To enhance the safety of our staff, we had to buy personal protective equipment (PPE), train them on the new Covid-19 protocols and acquire chemicals to sanitize our premises. We also had to work long hours, bearing heavy workloads, stigma and discrimination due to Covid-19. With a significant market share in Zimbabwe, and a branch network covering the whole country, including South Africa and the United Kingdom, Nyaradzo became one of the champions that put their necks and their very lives on the line to fight back a pandemic that was not just killing people and destroying entire economies, but was on an unrestrained warpath against hope itself! We became a key part of the public health service delivery value chain, ensuring that the deceased were afforded professional care, respect and decency on their final lap.

As we are constantly reminded of the words of former British Prime Minister Sir William Ewart Gladstone who said, “Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals,” we took all this in our stride.

As I connect my last dot and say goodbye to those who have followed the “Connecting the dots” series over the past year, I wish to end by pointing out three important things. The first being a clarion call on the private sector to play an active role in assisting government in building a robust health delivery system, to which all members of society can have access.

A new crop of corporate leaders in the mould of the late Southampton Assurance executive, Victor Muchatuta, must emerge to roll out fully-equipped medical facilities that suit one's pocket. At Nyaradzo, it is a challenge I have taken up in my personal capacity where I am collaborating with like-minded investors in the field. As we continue to build communities together, we have also been making donations to hospitals and clinics at a corporate level.

The second point is that anyone who can afford a penny to spare should channel it towards investing in the country's future, which can only be achieved by financing children's education. At Nyaradzo, we have taken it upon ourselves to provide scholarships to the underprivileged in order to strengthen their future as tomorrow's leaders. Last but not least, we believe that a house divided against itself will not stand. We are therefore continuously seeking ways to keep our communities glued together using the uniquely unifying power of sport. We did not think twice about responding to a plea for assistance from Zimbabwe's women's national netball team, the Gems, ahead of their trip to Liverpool for the World Cup played in July 2019. Apart from supporting various other sporting activities such as golf, rugby, cricket and athletics, we have sought to capacitate the major football clubs in the country as our way of revitalising them. We bought nine buses for various soccer teams in Zimbabwe in an initiative that has gone a long way in soccer development and support for the popular sport. Teams that benefited from the initiative include Dynamos, Highlanders, CAPS United, Chicken Inn, Chapungu United, Black Rhinos, Black Mambas, Buffalos and Hwahwa.

I also see potential in growing our annual Nyaradzo-Nyazura Run, an anniversary run we hold in March, into a regional event that we could use to spotlight the vast potential in the second largest urban settlement in Makoni District. Looking back from where we started as Nyaradzo and where The LORD has taken us, we can only be limited by our imagination; otherwise the power to turn our communities into modern-day Eldorados resides in ourselves. I often ask myself if I have achieved the purpose of our existence considering that Nyaradzo's vision is, "To be the preferred provider of total insurance risk and events management solutions through sustainable, dynamic and innovative products delivered to world-class standards, globally." The answer is that you haven't seen anything yet as more is still to come - don't miss the full story in my forthcoming biography!