



# A PRAGMATIC IDEALIST

Isaac Fokuo Jr. '98 is an entrepreneur who seeks to build Africa by investing in relationships.

By Chris Quirk

**B**y any account, the young Ghanaian had already achieved an enviable life. He had graduated from a prestigious American college, taking a top award. He went to Chicago and earned a master's degree from one of the country's top schools, then picked up an MBA.

A seemingly perfect job complemented his marriage to his undergraduate college soul mate. They were starting a family in a house that had the proverbial white picket fence. One day he came home from work and said to his wife, "This is not what I was meant to do."

The epiphany would carry Isaac Kwaku Fokuo Jr. '98 back to Africa with his family, where he would embark on an ambitious journey to shape the future of his home continent.

That Africa faces a raft of challenges is not news. The World Health Organization and other groups state that in sub-Saharan Africa almost half the population lives on a dollar a day or less, 40 percent lack regular access to clean water and four of five persons still use open fires for cooking and heat.

According to a report cited by the African Development Bank, an average English citizen used more electricity daily a hundred

years ago than the average African does today. What generates less press is how antiseptic statistics translate into a concatenation of unnecessary afflictions and obstacles that make simple things hard and hard things impossible for too many people in Africa:

Your child died from drinking contaminated water after the pump handle on the well the NGO installed broke. You suffer from malnutrition and the attendant fatigue and health woes prevent you being active much of the day. Your uncle has a chronic pulmonary disorder from smoke inhalation. Your brother cannot find a job and is depressed and desperate. You have to find a way to feed your family on almost no income. Annoyances less grave abound, like having to walk four miles to recharge your cell phone.

Since relocating to Nairobi five years ago, Fokuo has become involved in myriad projects that attack specific problems in African development. He brings to his endeavors a penetrating knowledge of what ails the continent and notions that may appear contrarian.

"Africa, in general, is poor but there are a great many people who are wealthy," said Fokuo. "There's enough liquidity on the continent to do a lot of good, but it has to be reprioritized. Africans need outside finance — the continent's capital shortfalls for infrastructure are real — but more importantly Africans must invest in themselves. If

communities mobilize their own capital for themselves, it is much more likely that outside investment will come.”

A genial man with soft features and a stylish goatee, Fokuo has a ready laugh and projects a relaxed confidence. He speaks crisply, with a warm accent and staccato cadence, his pace accelerating as he gets into a theme. While ideals drive his ambitions, Fokuo is very much an entrepreneur and prefers market solutions that serve the same vision: African prosperity.

He currently heads the African Leadership Network, which seeks to assemble Africa’s fragmented brain trust, spread across its 54 diverse nations. “We have an enormous cadre of talented people in Africa trying to figure things out, but do they know each other? I may be from Ghana and you may be from Togo, right next door. I work in IT and you work in IT. Our companies are the same size, but I have no idea who you are. How is that possible? You are two hours away from me!”

ALN is more medium than message. Fokuo said the group’s leadership doesn’t force an agenda, but instead fosters an environment for ideas and organic partnerships to flourish, which eventually leads to initiatives.

“We bring people together for whatever they choose to pursue. The ALN itself is not going to cure malaria, but if you have an initiative, we’ll match you with the right people, and get out of your way.”

Fokuo is also founder and principal of Botho Ltd., which helps brownfield African businesses attract capital and become investor ready.

“Botho is a Botswanan word that means a higher sense of being and empowerment,” he said. “It’s a collective idea of doing well while doing good. We raise money for honorable men and women (who) want to do the right thing, and provide them with strategic advice.”

A third venture is the Sino Africa Centre of Excellence Foundation (SACE), which seeks to promote collegiality and cooperation between students and those in industry and government through internships

and exchanges. Fokuo’s interest in China started at Hanover after forging a relationship with his then-track coach Yi Lin Liu, who challenged him to be a better scholar and athlete.

“It’s not about more Chinese in Africa, it’s about Africans getting to know the Chinese in the African context and for the Chinese here to learn more about Africa,” he said. “If these kids end up in places of power, they are the ones who will make policy and investment decisions about Africa. They need to know what Africa looks like and smells like beyond TV and the safari they went on.”

“Isaac’s work with China is very timely and visionary,” said Mi Yung Yoon, professor of international studies at Hanover, and former mentor to Fokuo. “China has a huge presence in Africa. They are primarily interested in raw materials and oil to support their economic growth, but they also want to improve their softer power on the continent.”

If all this weren’t enough, Fokuo and his ALN partner, Fred Swaniker, have an audacious project in mind for Kenya, starting 25 universities across the country and will open their first one this fall.

“I am proud to call Isaac a Hanover alum and am pleased that I have been asked to serve on the advisory board for the African Leadership University project,” said Hanover President Sue DeWine. “I will be eager to watch their progress. They have the potential to change thousands of lives and significantly affect the future of Africa.”

With the kind of upbringing suitable for working with social, cultural and political conundrums, Fokuo spent his childhood in Tamale, a predominantly Muslim city in northern Ghana. His father is an eminent minister for Ghana’s Presbyterian Church.

“My neighbors were Muslim and my best friend was Dutch,” said Fokuo. I broke Ramadan fast with my Muslim friends, and I celebrated Christmas with my Christian friends.” The family moved to the capital, Accra, a cosmopolitan metropolis of 2.5 million, when Fokuo was 11.

From left to right: The Fokuo family — Patti, Jayden, 7, Simon, 5, Zahra, 4, and Isaac.





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“My dad traveled a lot, and he would tell us stories about his trips. We had many international guests, and listened to the BBC. I have three sisters, and we were a tight family. We would talk about everything from gay rights to macroeconomics at the dinner table.”

When his father took an assignment in Louisville, Ky., Fokuo came to the U.S. for his last two years of high school. A scampish misdeed bent his path in the direction of Hanover, though his high school principal might appeal for partial credit.

One afternoon, Fokuo and a classmate were skipping class when they spotted the principal at the end of the hall. Fokuo and his chum launched themselves through the nearest doorway to avoid detection. Inside, a Hanover recruiter was in the middle of a presentation; Fokuo paid attention and left with his choice of college made.

A walk-on sprinter for the track team, he met his future wife, **Patti Emshwiller Fokuo '98**, on the ride to a meet.

“Isaac was incredibly friendly,” she said. “I was sitting by myself on the bus. Isaac came over, and we talked the whole way like we were long lost friends.”

The duo remained close throughout their time at Hanover and began dating after graduating, when they both found themselves in Chicago. Fokuo was at the University of Chicago, where he earned a master’s degree in international relations, and later an MBA at DePaul. Emshwiller Fokuo studied law at DePaul.

“What connected us were these intense intellectual conversations,” she said. “We could also disagree without hurting feelings, encouraging each other to do better.” The debates have continued to the present. Where Africa is concerned, they unsurprisingly take shape between the poles of pragmatism and idealism.

“I am a philosophical person, but I’m also a realist,” said Isaac Fokuo. “When you look at the world, do you see a Hobbesian, dog-eat-dog place, or is there room to give something up for the greater good, as Locke counsels? Regarding Africa, I still struggle to reconcile this, but I think you have to find the intersection of decency and self-interest. What that looks like is the journey of life.”

“The guy is fearless. He thinks big, and no task is too great to undertake,” said **Jerry Johnson '69**, executive director of Hanover’s Business Scholars Program, where Fokuo was a recent guest. “He really cares about Africa, and will do whatever it takes to help.”

In February, Fokuo came to Hanover to work with the BSP, giving presentations and talking with students. “Isaac reached out to us last summer,” said Johnson. “He was here for few days of intense activity. It’s important for our students to get Isaac’s perspectives. He’s an exceptional person, and we definitely want to have him back.”

His impressions of the program are equally flattering, and Fokuo has suggested the possibility of developing internships in Africa for BSP students. “I think it’s an excellent program that provides students with real-life scenarios, and blends theory and application very well,” he said. “I wish we’d had the BSP when I was at Hanover.”

While varied, each of the many projects Fokuo has undertaken may appear to be a facet of his overarching ambition, which is to bridge differences, create value and establish meaningful equality through human connection and mutual benefit.

“I have three kids. Their mother is American and their father is African. I want to do my part to create such a world that if they walk into a boardroom someday, they are evaluated by their merits and character, and not what they look like or sound like. I want a world for them where they see opportunity, human decency, and marvel at the awe of the arts and sciences.

“To achieve that I have to bring quality and consistency to everything I do. The baseline for me is creating a level of social justice, (for both) Africa and the global community. If I can do my part in that, I will call it a success.” ■