

Nelson Mandela Prize winners feted

By [Bo Li](#)

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The planting of a small food garden this summer just outside United Nations headquarters in New York was more than a decorative effort by a gardener with a green thumb. It was one of many 'Time to Serve' activities in the worldwide 'Take Action, Inspire Change' campaign motivated by former South African president, the late Nelson Mandela.



The two laureates, Helena Ndume of Namibia and Jorge Fernando Branco Sampaio of Portugal. Photo: UN/Rick Bajornas

Inside the UN, Mandela's legacy was further recognised with the announcement of the first winners of the UN Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela Prize, announced by the president of the UN General Assembly, Sam Kutesa. Speaking to an informal meeting of the 193-member body, Kutesa named Dr. Helena Ndume, an eye surgeon from Namibia, and Jorge Sampaio, former president of Portugal, as the inaugural laureates of the prize.

The award, said Kutesa, recognises the outstanding achievements of two distinguished people who have dedicated their lives to the service of humanity, particularly in the promotion of reconciliation, social cohesion and community development.

Speaking to Africa Renewal, President Sampaio called the honour "a fantastic surprise." Dr. Ndume, similarly, said she couldn't believe her eyes when the news came by email.

The two were selected from about 200 nominees by third-party organisations that believed their commitment to community health (Dr. Ndume) and social change (Sampaio) fulfilled Mandela's ideal of community service, to which the former South

African president devoted most of his life.

Sampaio began his activism at law school. Elected head of the students' union of the Lisbon Law Faculty, he became a leader in the struggle for the restoration of democracy in Portugal. The government at that time was a dictatorship and the country had no press freedom or political parties. When the Carnation Revolution of 1974 deposed the dictatorship, Sampaio left his law practice, where he had been defending political prisoners, and entered politics. It marked the beginning of a journey that would take him to the presidency two decades later.

He left the presidency in 2006, having enabled the handover of Macau - Portugal's last remaining colony in Asia - to China and actively promoted East Timor's independence.

As the UN secretary-general's first special envoy to stop tuberculosis from 2006 to 2012, Sampaio helped bring international attention to the scale of the disease and its impact on the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. As the UN high representative for the alliance of civilisations from 2007 to 2013, he set up an important UN forum for dialogue and cooperation against hatred and violence, and promoted common action at local, national and regional levels to meet the challenges of cultural diversity across the globe.

Most recently, Sampaio has been involved in two main fields of action: as a member of the Global Commission on Drugs Policy, he has been advocating for major reforms of drug policy worldwide; he has also launched the Global Platform for Syrian Students, a multi-stakeholder initiative that provides emergency scholarships to Syrian students that allow them to resume their university studies.

Dr. Ndume, who describes herself as "just an ordinary eye surgeon," has helped over 30,000 Namibians receive at no cost eye surgery and intraocular lens implants, reversing blindness, cataracts and myopia. To her patients she is a "miracle doctor" for restoring their vision.

After fleeing apartheid Namibia, Dr. Ndume grew up in refugee camps in Zambia and Angola. She dreamed of a career in the fashion industry, only to realise, when she was about to make a career choice, that an independent Namibia would need more highly skilled people like engineers and doctors rather than fashion designers.

"The secretary of education of SWAPO [South West Africa People's Organisation, Namibia's liberation movement] in our refugee camp said, 'No way! We don't need fashion designers in an independent Namibia,'" she recalled in an interview with Africa Renewal. "'We need doctors, and I want you to be a doctor.'"

After graduating from medical school in Germany, Dr. Ndume returned to an independent Namibia. "One doctor in the refugee camp who had been like a mother to me during the struggle for liberation advised me, 'With these little hands, you must go for ophthalmology.' So I went back to Germany and did ophthalmology, even though it was not really what I had wanted. But today when I look back I say, 'Thank God I had these guiding angels that have now enabled me to give back to the poor today.'"

Dr. Ndume's husband, Dr. Solomon Guramatunhu, also an eye specialist, was instrumental in introducing her to US organization Surgical Eye Expeditions (SEE). Later, while attending a medical conference in the United States in 1995, she visited SEE's booth and registered to join the organisation's roster of over 600 volunteer eye surgeons. She soon started to organise ophthalmological treatment camps throughout Namibia. As a result, a number of volunteers from groups like SEE and Seeing Without Borders have travelled to Namibia every year, dedicating their time and employing their expertise to care for the eyes of the underprivileged.

The success of her eye camps in Namibia led Dr. Ndume to expand her project to neighbouring Angola. She currently serves as head of ophthalmology at the Windhoek Central Hospital and has received numerous international honours.

"I have participated in international political affairs because I'm a believer in diplomacy, cooperation and multilateralism," President Sampaio said of the significance he attached to the award, adding that he wished to share his prize with all those

who work in modest ways, without any publicity, to fulfil promises and to improve the lives of the poor and the marginalised.

Dr. Ndume could be an example of those who work in modest ways, having teamed up with international organisations to restore, at no cost, vision to thousands of cataract-affected people in Africa. She says, "People have helped us to be where we are today, that is why we have to give back to communities." Besides, she adds, "No money can pay for the joy of a blind person who can now see."

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