

German Africa Award 2022

Friday, 25 November 2022

Allianz Forum, Berlin

Laudatio by the Claus Staecker, president of the jury of the German Africa Award

Your Excellency, Mr Chancellor,

President Uschi Eid,

members of the Bundestag,

representatives of the diplomatic corps

but above all Prof Tulio de Oliveira and Dr Sikhulile Moyo,

Perhaps it is not the best idea to resort to football comparisons these days. But this one is apt, and besides, I stole from Dr Moyo himself. In football, he says, the striker gets all the glory when he scores. But behind him there are always goalkeepers, defenders and midfielders.

Now, please, let's forget about the World Cup and the striker question for a moment - we mean, of course, your team play in science, dear Prof Oliveira, dear Dr Moyo. Because team spirit, cooperation, a common humanism, that seems to drive you both equally:

Tulio de Oliveira seems to have been born with this in his cradle in Brazil. Those were the years of the military dictatorship and both mother and father rebelled against it. Your mother ended up in prison several times for this. You yourself showed considerable talent for mobilisation when you were young: you and your skateboard gang once brought one of the busiest streets in your town to a standstill.

When your mother, who grew up in Mozambique, returned to the continent, you followed her to study in Durban. Your study supervisor remembers you as a wild child who liked to break rules.

You, Sikhulile Moyo, grew up as the ninth of 17 children in the middle of the Zimbabwean liberation struggle, which was followed by a bloody civil war and a genocide of thousands of Ndebele that remains unpunished to this day. As a child, you always had to carry a shovel. You heard gunshots in the area. And more and more people had to be buried, neighbours, relatives. That's what the shovel was for. - On foot, your mother brought you to safety with a 65-kilometre walk.

Fortunately, you always found supporters. An uncle who rewarded you for your good grades. A priest who got you a summer job at the mission school so you could stay. In Botswana, a lecturer who hired you for auxiliary work. And finally, the renowned AIDS researcher Max Essex, who opened the world to you. You were nothing special, you told me, you were just given a chance.

It's impressive how you used it, Dr. Moyo, how you advanced AIDS research in your adopted country of Botswana - your highly regarded studies on mother-to-child transmission of HIV, for example.

Tulio de Oliveira was your doctoral supervisor in Durban. Not made for laboratory work, he admits. But fascinated by the fusion of computer science and genome research, the blueprint of the human being - and programming.

You, Professor, did research with HI viruses, Zika, Chikungunya. You developed software tools and fast, affordable laboratory procedures. You led the KRISP research and sequencing institute in Durban to the top of the world in speed and precision. Pathogens are detected there almost in real time. Your process helped debunk a propaganda lie in Libya that Bulgarian health workers were spreading HIV. In the end, you even saved the lives of the accused.

Your studies were published in all renowned scientific publications - your Corona action plan for clinics became the global standard. After describing the beta variant in 2020 and the omicron variant almost simultaneously with Dr Moyo a year ago today, you both made the Times list of the 100 most influential people of the year.

Of course, you were not alone. As team players, you named up to 300 African co-authors in your publications. In South Africa, you brought together private labs and government players, forming the South African Network for Genome Surveillance. In a crisis, networks matter, you say.

You were involved in training almost 10,000 doctors, nurses and microbiologists from 40 African countries. This has enabled the detection of pathogens to increase tenfold since 2020.

WHO Director-General Tedros radios you directly. South Africa's President Ramaphosa jokingly greets you with: Oh, it's you again, Tulio. Maybe you're the centre-forward in Team Anti-Virus, the one who scores the goals, the one who takes advantage of the good opportunities.

Dr Moyo gave you an assist. Converting them meant immediately sharing your findings on the new Corona variants with the world community. You sounded the alarm for the world to respond. Our response was compartmentalisation instead of appreciation, with devastating economic consequences for Southern Africa. For this, you were attacked and threatened with murder.

On Twitter, you, Prof Oliveira, vent your indignation, denounce the "vaccine egoism" of the West, the "scientific colonialism" of some professional colleagues. A renowned business columnist in South Africa publicly asked if someone could take away your mobile phone.

Yes, you admit, they are sometimes a bit harsh, your tweets. But that is nothing compared to the academic discrimination or the consequences of the nonsensical travel boycotts that Africa suffers.

Your former PhD student Moyo advises cool heads. Otherwise you might alienate those with whom you will have to work tomorrow. Viruses, as Corona has shown, respect neither information silos nor international borders.

Your lab in Gaborone has decades of significant experience in genome sequencing and monitoring through AIDS research. This helped in the Corona pandemic, but it could also help to build a global research infrastructure in just a few months, you say. The Global South is the best place in the world for this, you also say, Professor Oliveira. And proving that is your greatest dream.

The German Africa Award, in all modesty, aims to nurture these dreams, to make them public.

Dear Tulio de Oliveira and dear Sikhulile Moyo, you are a shining example of expertise, integrity and courage. You prove what many in this country do not believe possible due to a distorted image of Africa: that worldclass medical research is also at home in Africa and that successful crisis management was established in the pandemic, from which Germany and Europe can also learn a thing or two.

On behalf of the independent jury, I congratulate you wholeheartedly on the German Africa Award 2022.