

# My Friend and Colleague Hans Rosling

Hannah Akuffo

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Hannah Akuffo first met Hans Rosling when she became manager of the KIRT programme at Karolinska Institutet in 1997. He was then chairman of the KIRT Committee. Their diametrically different temperaments made it difficult to work together to begin with. She being more cautious found Hans a bit too "cocky" for her liking. In this article she recalls the turning point – a conversation that marks the beginning of a friendship and a working relationship where they instead came to complement each other through their differences.

Hannah Akuffo lärde känna Hans Rosling år 1997 då hon blev chef för KIRT-programmet vid KI. Han var då styrelseordförande i KIRT-kommittén. Deras diametralt olika temperament, hennes försiktighet och hans spontanitet, gjorde att hon till en början hade mycket svårt att samarbeta med honom. I den här artikeln skildrar hon vändpunkten – ett samtal som blev början på en vänskap och en yrkesrelation där de istället kom att komplettera varandra genom sina olikheter.

When I was offered the job to be the manager of the Karolinska Institutet Research Training (KIRT) programme, aimed at research training of students from Central American countries and Ethiopia, I was really excited, because I could combine my work in the laboratory on infections that disproportionately affect the poor such as my favourite parasite species *Leishmania*, with working in a broader sense to possibly influence people who live with these diseases. I had interacted with previous KIRT managers and noted from my point of view, their independence to direct the programme as they saw fit. I felt that I would be able to form this programme according to my interest and experience. However, after "signing

on the dotted line", committing me to take up the position to be the KIRT manager, I was a bit surprised to find out that reorganisations had been made which meant that it was not me as the manager, who would be "calling the shots".

After some time of vacuum where I was informed that there were going to be changes, with little more information, I was told that the whole Karolinska Institutet Research Training was going to reorganise (as Karolinska Institutet often does) and I as a manager was going to be instructed by the Chairman of the KIRT Committee. This did not bode well for me, because this was not what I signed out for. However, the overwhelming conviction that

there was some worth in my being in KIRT organisation if I am to have any remote impact on researchers from low and middle-income countries kept me in the position. Having reconciled with the thought of different interpretations of what a manager was, I was open to another approach. However, it was not pleased, but this is where we were at. So like it or not, I entered a rather male dominated committee to work with a dominant person, within an organisation that had what I thought was an unclear mission.

### Collaboration with Hans

Hans Rosling, and I started working together in 1997 at KIRT, with Hans as the Chairperson of the KIRT Committee and me as the KIRT Manager. Two very different people! Hans, a man who made spontaneous statements; me more cautious, stating what we had previously agreed upon together, rather than go for an “Eureka” moment that comes to mind during the meeting. I found Hans a bit too “cocky” for my liking! This person with whom I was to work was my nemesis! This combination did not bode well for a good working relationship!

KIRT Committee meeting were hard-going. Only Hans seemed to know the script. What we had spent hours discussing as our “position”, was left unarticulated as Hans got new spontaneous ideas. This was a real challenge for a young scientist like me. I often left the meetings feeling rather dejected, but with time

often managing to harness enough energy to not be crushed. I developed my own argument better and won a few discussions. However, all in all I found Hans a very difficult person to work with, but being a person who does not give up, I persisted and managed to work with Hans.

### Mutual respect

However, when I had the opportunity to be with Hans in a situation when we were not running from one place to another, I begun to see the better side of Hans. Thus, on our first duty travel together to Costa Rica, as we sat by the pool of the small but cosy hotel, I put my frustrations to Hans of how I found his inability to keep to an agreed joint point of view, on the table. I was truly taken aback when he looked at me with trust and said to me:

*“I hear what you say, but Hannah, I have so many medical conditions that can end my life prematurely at any time; I thus do not have time to waste time trying to follow courtesies when, new, good, testable and spontaneous idea are introduced to me and seem good to me”.*

Hans spoke of his various ailments, cancers, hepatitis. My openness and understanding of his point of view, led to mutual respect and an open working relationship between us with many arguments, which resulted in a strong trusting friendship. Our timing in terms of getting things going did differ and while I would characterise our relationship as Hans accelera-

ting through life in a shiny Ferrari, I moved forward in my reliable Volkswagen. But we complemented each other.

### Joint degree possible

I moved to the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) where I had the privilege to be in charge of developing a new research cooperation programme with Uganda. Makerere, identified as the focus University for Sida support, was a university with tradition of research but which had fallen into disrepair. The decision was thus to support Makerere university's *own* PhD training rather than degrees from Swedish universities. This posed a challenge for the potential Swedish partner Universities, including Karolinska Institutet. There was intense pressure on me to change this idea. However, I did not budge, convinced that the time was ripe for a paradigm shift! I think that Hans appreciated a good argument presented with conviction. When it became evident that my arguments were good ones and in line with his own, when he put his mind to it, he moved to try to find solutions. In typical Hans' style he investigated the legal possibility of a "Joint Degree" between Makerere and Karolinska Institutet and together with Rector Hans Wigzell, was able to find the avenue that allowed joint degrees (now called double degrees) between the Makerere Faculty of Medicine and KI to become a reality. A truly historic achievement initiated by Karolinska and Makerere University! This cooperation has

been very productive and has resulted in many highly relevant degrees by Ugandan and of Swedish research students. Most of the other Swedish Universities involved had said such a solution was impossible! They were wrong. KI through Hans looked for evidence that it was possible and went on to make it possible!

Over the years, Hans did not let me forget that the Department for Research Cooperation, Sida/SAREC rejected his proposal for financial support of the proof of concept of the idea that came to be known as "gap-minder". It did not matter how many times I reminded him that despite this rejection by Sida/SAREC another department at Sida *did* understand the idea and had the possibility to provide some of the needed "seed funding". Despite this collective condemnation of the erring of a Sida department, Hans was a very regular visitor to Sida where he came as a requested and trusted speaker at different types of meetings, providing evidence of the ways that the indicators of health show that conditions have continued to improve for many people living in areas previously known to have unacceptable levels of infant and maternal mortality amongst other indicators.

### Changes in African countries

At a meeting at Sida about Africa, the mantra was how awful everything is and becoming. I was quite frustrated knowing from my own travels that there were changes happening in a number of African countries which

indicated that things were getting better. However, saying so at Sida during this period was “like swearing in Church”. Hans was going to go on stage later in the day. I caught him and told him how fed up I was with all the doomsday projection for the African continent with no nuances to distinguish countries in this huge African continent, while many Swedes would be appalled to be bunched together with their European cousins in Belgium or Slovenia! Hans had the data and he went on stage to present it. It is remarkable that from that date onwards the doomsday predictions for Africa, based on no data, seemed to fade away!

Hans understood that I am hesitant to being in the limelight, and in different ways he found ways to push me to get out of my comfort zone, such inviting me and encouraging me to say “yes” to stand on stage to question Bill Gates in public, or I suspect, putting my name out there to push me into the Swedish public arena, on TV and on radio. I can only say *“Thank you Hans for the trust and for helping me get out of my comfort zone, in order to express things of importance”*.

Knowing you, has meant a lot to me. You knew me and my conviction that the many good things that have happened to me are all by the Grace of God. While respecting your lack of faith, I learnt a lot from you and I refuse to let my strong belief be dampened just because you do not like/believe. I thus thank God for that wonderful Grace that I was given to have you as my colleague and your friend! Thank you for the dignity that

you and your work brought to a lot of people in this World. May your soul rest in peace!