

# Dr Elizabeth Amukugo

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Elizabeth Amukugo became a member of Swapo in the early 70's and walked into exile in Angola in 1974. Continued into Zambia and then left for Kenya to finish her education and came back to Zambia. Left for Sweden via Tanzania after her marriage (married name Mbuende). Eventually received a UN scholarship in Sweden and studied for a Masters in Social Sciences, went on to a PhD in Sociology of Education. Worked actively in Sweden with several organisations: Africa Groups, ISAK, ABF and several political parties.



Dr. Elizabeth Amukugo

Bertil Högberg: This is 11 June 2005 and the start of an interview with Dr Elizabeth Amukugo. I would like to start with asking how you became engaged in the struggle for freedom here in Namibia.

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I must say I was very young when I got involved in the struggle. It was just in the initial stage of my secondary education. At that point it was Ongwediwa High School but now they have turned it into a teachers' training college, up in the north. And of course this was at the height of the Bantu education and the apartheid system and as young students that directly affected us. We saw how we were treated differently from others and even served rotten food sometimes. Porridge that was so rotten that it would even have worms in it but they felt it was good for human consumption. And it was also at the time when the workers were really fighting, struggling for Namibia's independence and their rights.

Bertil Högberg: Around the time of the general strike at the beginning of the '70s?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, the beginning of the '70s, this was the time when I started secondary school, I started '71, and you remember that was the time we were influenced by

the environment within society, what was going on in society, so we also did our part at that point in time. I remember at one point we had to walk, of course under cover of the dark at night and away from the main roads, to go from Ongwediwa where this high school was, to Ondangwa. Ongwediwa to Ondangwa is about 30km and we walked 30km actually to go and attend a trial for some SWAPO comrades. So we were quite involved and at that point in time as young people. I remember that we were very militant. Quite often the soldiers and the *caspirs* were called in trying to calm us down. At that point in time, I mean you were very young, you didn't have a family, you didn't have anything, and we were simply fearless. And that's how I got involved and eventually I joined SWAPO and then not too long after that I left the country in 1974, on foot via Angola.

Bertil Högberg: In that big exodus of so many other people around that time?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, a lot of youth left in 1974. I think my group was the third to leave the country. We would then drive from Oshikati up to the Angolan border and then you were left a bit away from the border because the border was guarded. Then we literally walked into Angola, we climbed the fence and that's how we got out of the country. You just had to make sure that you left everything behind, you just had really very little clothing and so on because of the walking and the carrying and so forth.

Bertil Högberg: Your family didn't know anything?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: My family didn't know. What I did was that I wrote a letter that I then took to one of my cousins who was living in Oshakati and instructed her to take it to my parents to inform them. So they didn't know. I remember when we arrived in Angola some Finnish missionaries tried to follow us. They were sent by parents to come and look for some of us. They had a long list of names, including mine. But we were many because people were leaving the country on a daily basis. You simply just disappeared in the crowd so even if they knew how you looked they couldn't get you out of the crowd. They went back empty-handed because nobody was ready to go back to the situation. We were very militant and we thought Namibia would be independent maybe within 3 years or so. All of us wanted to join the military and fight for the country.

Bertil Högberg: So that was your aim, to go and join the military?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Exactly.

Bertil Högberg: And what happened?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: You remember at that point in time there was this fight between UNITA, MPLA on the one hand and then the Portuguese soldiers. Although when we left, the Portuguese had laid down their arms because of the coup by the military in Portugal. It was

because of that kind of situation that we were able to leave Namibia. But the MPLA and UNITA were still in the bush there and at that time SWAPO was working together with UNITA. We were walking, although we travelled by train and buses and military cars until we were near the Zambian border. But because of the war situation, we were with the Portuguese now who could not drive us up to the Zambian border, we had to walk part of the way. They wanted to avoid a clash between them and the UNITA soldiers.

Bertil Högberg: Oh, so you were also assisted by Portuguese soldiers?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: So SWAPO, UNITA and Portuguese soldiers were involved?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: The Portuguese soldiers were helping us at the time and UNITA soldiers also. At that time we remained in the bush despite the fact that there were some kinds of peace negotiations in Angola, so everybody was involved and helped. When we arrived in Zambia SWAPO took over and eventually we got to a place somewhere outside Lusaka. We were the first groups and were the ones who built the very first refugee camp with SWAPO outside Lusaka. It was called Old Farm. So we had to uproot trees to clear the land in order to produce food for ourselves. But I didn't stay very long. Although all of us had the aim to go for military training and go back and fight we remained there for a while. I remember Nahas Angula was a teacher then and he was given the responsibility to teach in that refugee camp. But some of us were a bit advanced for him so he did not teach me, for example. But while we were queuing up then to go for military training I remember Nahas Angula arrived from Lusaka and then he pulled us out of the queue and said "No, all these young ones, you are not going to the military, you are going to school". And he organised an English course for us, the young ones, because here in Namibia the instruction was in Afrikaans so our skills in English weren't that good. While we were studying English SWAPO then organised scholarships and we were then sent to different parts of the world. I was sent to the Aga Khan Academy in Nairobi to complete my secondary school, which I cut short because I had to leave the country to escape from the apartheid colonial situation. In fact at the time when I left the country I was expelled from school for some political reasons. I was not going to school at that stage.

Bertil Högberg: And from Nairobi what happened then?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: After I completed my secondary school, we were quite a group of young ladies and boys who had gone to this academy, some were sent for secretarial courses because our offices everywhere needed secretaries. So we then went back to Zambia and stayed for a while in the Nyango refugee camp. I didn't stay for too long in Nyango actually, I stayed more in Lusaka, and I attended some short courses. Those were some courses in

electronics but I realised after one year, that this was not really the field I was interested in so I gave it up.

Eventually after this course I got married, at a quite young age, in Lusaka and thereafter I left for Sweden via Tanzania, because Kaire (Mbuende) had just completed his first degree at Makumira Theological Seminary in Tanzania. He did his first degree in Theology, his Bachelor of Divinity. A friend of his, the late Prof. Per Frostin who was teaching there had organised the scholarship for us actually. That's how we got to Sweden.

Bertil Högberg: And that was financed by the Lutheran World Federation?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes the Lutheran World Federation. This was a scholarship for Kaire and since I was married to him I left with him, but once I got to Sweden I organised my own scholarship. With the assistance of SWAPO I got a UN scholarship through the UN Fund for Namibia.

Bertil Högberg: And then you started studying what?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Education. I did education and sociology. I majored actually in both. Then eventually I did a Masters in Social Sciences and then in 1987 I enrolled for the PhD programme in education.

Bertil Högberg: Okay, if we go back to the time when you came to Sweden and you had this contact, was Per Frostin back in Sweden when you came or was he still in Tanzania?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: No, he was in Tanzania.

Bertil Högberg: Did you have any other friends in the area?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: No, Per Frostin organised his friends to receive us in Lund. And the person, do you know Prof Per-Erik Persson?

Bertil Högberg: Yes.

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: When we arrived in Sweden in February 1979, it was very cold, and the very day we arrived in Sweden there was snow. I remember when we arrived in Copenhagen our flight had to go around for some time while they were clearing snow on the ground. And we couldn't fly from Copenhagen to Malmö, we had to go by those special small boats. Per-Erik Persson had organised a committee to receive us. It was very difficult because the trains were not moving because there was too much snow. Some taxi drivers somehow managed to drive in the snow and that's how we got from Malmö to Lund. And Per-Erik Persson came to meet us on his bicycle. You know that he has never owned a car in his

life, he has always cycled. And we were very shocked because in Namibia you can't find a professor cycling.

Bertil Högberg: And also in the middle of the winter in a snowstorm.

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Exactly. So that was some kind of show. And he took us then to his house for the evening, after a meal and some discussion we spent the night there. Then the next day he took us to the place they had organised for us to stay.

Bertil Högberg: What was your impression of Sweden when you came there?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I found the Swedes to be a bit ignorant about what was going on in our part of the world at that point in time. I remember, for example, Per-Erik's wife asking me – she took out an orange and said "Have you tasted this before?" but I mean oranges come from Africa and Latin America and all these warm countries. But she didn't have that knowledge so she thought that I had never seen an orange and yet oranges they grow in Namibia and South Africa and everywhere.

Not only that, because it was minus 20 degrees when we arrived and that was too harsh because you know Dar es Salaam is very hot. We came from Dar es Salaam to Lund and from very hot weather to a very cold weather it affected me so I actually ended up in the hospital for a week. They thought that since I was coming from Africa then I must have some kind of tropical disease so they put me in isolation. Throughout that week they were drawing blood from me on a daily basis trying to find some tropical disease. I told them "I'm not sick, this is just a weather shock", but they couldn't believe me so they were drawing my blood literally on a daily basis and I was isolated not to spread the tropical diseases. So I felt there was a high degree of ignorance.

But Swedish people were generally very kind and we were well received and we managed to get into the society quite easily, partly because Lund is more internationally oriented. You have actually the whole world in Lund because of the university, it's a university town and you have people from all over Africa, Latin America, Asia, you name it, Europe, America, Australia, wherever, everybody studies at Lund. Although you have a strong Swedish tradition, because after all Lund is a Swedish university, I felt that there was some degree of international feel about it. It was also the time when both Namibia and South Africa were struggling for independence and we got involved with the Isolate South Africa Committee (ISAK) and the Africa Group. I was actually a member of both, we worked with people like Anne Schlüter, Thomas Schlüter, Gilian Nilsson (ABF) and many of them were in the Africa Group. And also ISAK and then we also worked together with Emmaus Björkå in Malmö when we used to collect old clothes and so on to give to SWAPO refugees.

In the end we ended up being quite busy because we had to do our studies but at the same time we were also actively involved in political work. We were invited all over, to different parts of the country, to speak on the Namibian issue. I have some of the speeches here

actually. When I learned to speak Swedish then I could do my speeches in Swedish and Kaire was doing the same. That was our life, a very, very busy life in Sweden.

Bertil Högberg: Those assignments did they come from the SWAPO office or did people contact you directly?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, sometimes they came from the SWAPO office but other times, in most cases, people contacted us directly. Or they would contact these organisations we were working with, ISAK, the Africa Group or even ABF because these are the organisations we worked with and also the political parties, the Social Democrats, Left Party and Centre Party. It was mainly those three parties we worked with at the local level.

Bertil Högberg: Lund is close to Denmark so were you also asked to go across to Denmark to speak or do things?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, Kaire went over some times to Denmark and some other places. I remember at one point on 1 May, the Worker's Day, I was invited to go and speak in Mo i Rana.

Bertil Högberg: Oh, far up north in Norway.

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, far up north in Norway. So we used to also cross the border to go and speak.

Bertil Högberg: Did you ever go to Finland to do anything there?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: To Finland no, we didn't because there were other students who did the same work there as we did.

Bertil Högberg: Were there other Namibians around in Lund or southern Sweden?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, there were two others but they were not I think, involved in the same way as us. We were more the ones who ran around to speak on the Namibian issue. Yes there was Joyce Nengenge and Rick Ndjoze who were also studying there and then there was also Willy Mbuende who was more involved with music. –And he lived mostly in Stockholm but he was there a lot. At one point we were joined by Jackson Kaujeua and quite often when we had political meetings Jackson was asked to play because his music was actually liberation music. It was very popular at these political meetings.

Bertil Högberg: But he was not in very good standing with SWAPO in those years?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: When he left, yes. So it seems!

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: We stayed there for quite a long time and because of that we saw all the SWAPO representatives coming in and being changed and so on, we worked together with all those representatives.

Bertil Högberg: Can you mention any positive highlights and experiences you had in these encounters with the Swedish solidarity organisations and solidarity work? Any particular memories that you have?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I do remember, for example, at the height of when the anti-apartheid movement was fighting against the big companies like Shell and also the whole campaign not to buy South African goods. I remember we had to organise ourselves and a combined Isolate South Africa committee and Africa Group. It was more or less the same people because we were members of ISAK and members of Africa Group at the same time. So we had to organise an activity where we had to expose the shops that were actually selling South African and Namibian goods. I found out, having come from Namibia, that there was one shop in Lund that was selling Swakara pelts. I went into the shop pretending to be interested to buy these things and meanwhile I was finding out more information why they were selling these. This was one of those shops that we then exposed. So after getting all the information the next morning when they woke up there were placards all over the place, including on their shops, discouraging, telling people not to buy apartheid goods from South Africa and Namibia. And the lady, I remember she was very shocked, because when I visited her the previous day she was very nice to me and so on but then I had other plans.

Bertil Högberg: And was that campaign effective? Did you manage to get shops to stop selling some goods?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: No, they didn't stop per se but it raised awareness, the level of awareness certainly became higher as we went along.

Then another good experience I can recall was when I was invited as the main speaker again for 1 May in Gothenburg and this was a huge gathering in some very big community hall. I don't remember the name now. Yes, the meeting itself was outside whereas the activities were in this community hall. But I remember it was a very big meeting. But it was a good feeling to see how much support we actually had in the Swedish community, so that gave me a lot of encouragement.

And also as SWAPO students we always met either in Stockholm, where the SWAPO Office was, or in Helsinki. SWAPO students in Sweden, we were fewer, than the ones in Finland. We all met annually to celebrate 26 August together. And this was organised by the SWAPO

office every year. That was good because it sort of kept us together but it also maximised our struggle because during that time many activities were organised. For example I have a photo here where I have a big placard, standing at Sergels Torg in Stockholm collecting money for SWAPO. So that when we came together as students then also the activities were maximised, not only in terms of getting our message out but also in terms of getting material support from the Swedish community.

And apart from these gatherings in August that were organised by the SWAPO representatives, the SWAPO office, we also sometimes met in Finland as a student community.

Bertil Högberg: Do you have any frustrating experiences?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: In Sweden ?

Bertil Högberg: Yes.

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, actually I experienced a bit of racism but this was some kind of hidden racism that you would encounter. I mean sometimes the way they would talk to you not actually being aware that they were being offensive. But that part was a bit irritating and it was not like in some countries where you can experience racism openly, this was kind of hidden. But otherwise I must say that I enjoyed my stay in Sweden and that's partly because I was very busy both with my studies and also politically.

I also experienced, for example, that for those of us who were students in Sweden we were actually better off. For example, I was allowed to write my PhD thesis in English whereas Namibian students in Germany, for example, their experience was different, they had to write in German. So the Swedish society is much more liberal in many respects and that was good for us.

Bertil Högberg: And then when things started to change at the end of '80s, things changed here, what were your thoughts?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I remember that just before my first trip to Namibia the Lund community had organised a large meeting around this issue. I spoke a bit at the gathering and told the crowd that I was preparing to go home because of the change and it was a special feeling somehow. Okay, in a way we had never given up the hope that Namibia would get independence one day but it was a very special feeling to actually know that now Namibia was getting free and that after 16 years in exile I would get a chance to go home.

I recall that 2 years before that I had travelled to Zimbabwe and Zambia for research purpose. I came to collect materials for my PhD thesis. I stayed for 2 weeks in Harare and then I remember I cancelled my air ticket between Harare and Lusaka. Because by then I had spent 10 years in Europe without going to Africa at all so I just wanted to experience the nature and

I took a bus from Harare to Lusaka. Just an ordinary bus. And as we were travelling along I could see some of the vegetation and the fauna on both the Zimbabwe and Zambian side that resembled Namibia so much and that gave me a strong homesick feeling. But at the same time I knew that as a person living in exile if I crossed the border then I would definitely end up in prison. So that was one of the stronger negative feelings I experienced at that point in time. I was so close to home and I had been in exile now for 14 years but I was not able to cross and go home to see my people.

Bertil Högberg: What were you thinking you would do when you came to the free Namibia? What was it your hope to do?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I just wanted to see my family again.

Bertil Högberg: That was the most important?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: That was the most important, to see my family again because there were some of my brothers and sisters whom I left so small and even just to come home, just that feeling how it would feel like to be there.

Bertil Högberg: And how was it to come home?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, this is when I realised that I had some kind of a visualised idealistic picture of what Namibia was and what it would mean to me. But when I came back I realised that I was no longer that young teenager who left this country but now I was a grown up person and that culturally I had changed and that I experienced some problems. Maybe not so much with my own family because they hadn't seen me for many years and my family wanted to do everything to make me feel at home. I felt that they let me be who I was without any interference and somehow we found a way to be together without much hassle. But I felt that now coming back as a married person I had problems with some of my in-laws. Not with my parents-in-law, they were very open-minded. I had a very good relationship especially with my now late father-in-law, Mr Mbuende, who also was a teacher. But I found that some of my in-laws they had this unrealistic traditional expectations of me. All of a sudden I felt that I was expected to behave like a village woman and I mean for a person that left the country as a teenager and came back now completely different that gave me some kind of headache. In fact I felt that it made me sick.

Bertil Högberg: Was it also a different culture because of your background from the north and his from the Herero tradition?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, there were also some differences. I realised that when I left the country I was not very exposed to the very strong Herero culture. Having also come from a

pastor's home my culture was kind of mixed and now to get into a pure Herero tradition, which I didn't quite understand was very difficult I must say.

Bertil Högberg: And what did you do? Did you take part in the election campaign? When you went back?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: No, I did not take part in the election campaign because my children were in school then and one of us obviously had to be with them for them to at least complete school. Kaire was here busy and we came here and stayed for 2 months and then after the 2 months I went back with the boys. That was in August, to help them to complete at least the school year, and then we moved finally in December.

Bertil Högberg: Then you started to work?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, when I came here the first thing that I did was to go and teach at the then Academy for Tertiary Education. There was no university at that point in time. You see I told you how strong the feeling was to come back home and at the time when independence came I had completed my PhD course work, which is a 2-year programme. I had also written about three-quarters of my doctoral thesis but I could not just stay in Sweden to finish that small part that was left. That's how my mind changed completely. I could not concentrate on my doctoral thesis any more. So I left everything and I came home and then I started teaching at the Academy. It was not a university really but it was an institution of higher learning. It was very hard in the beginning because I remember one of the first classes I had I was teaching history and the coloured students one day walked out. So I mean the apartheid division was still very much alive despite the fact that the country was just newly independent. So these are some of the problems we were confronted with.

I taught and then I left teaching and joined government, the National Planning Commission, where I worked for 5 years as Chief of Multilateral Cooperation. There I coordinated programmes of the entire UN system, the World Bank, SADC Affairs and also the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation, CTF. So that was a very busy job because I did a lot of travelling as well.

While working there I decided finally to go back to Sweden and complete the little that was left on my PhD thesis and I went to Sweden for 3 months twice. First in 1991 and then later on in 1993 and I completed and defended my thesis in October 1993 in Lund.

Bertil Högberg: And what are your contacts now with Sweden?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I still have a lot of friends in Sweden. In 2003 I was in Lund for Christmas. I just felt that I was longing for a Swedish Christmas and then I decided to go and spend Christmas there. It was also a chance for me to be with my son who is studying in Paris, so I brought him over also to be with me for a period of 2 weeks. I had a very good

Swedish Christmas. And during that period I stayed in Lund and I saw many of my friends. I was invited out almost every evening to one house or the other, it was really nice. But in between I had also been there but I hadn't been to Sweden for some years, that's why I went back in 2003. It was a special feeling to experience the Christmas, I mean the typical Swedish Christmas because although I had been going back to Sweden it was always at different times, it was never Christmas-time. I have always spent Christmas in Namibia or somewhere in the neighbouring countries. But this was the first time since I left Sweden to experience Swedish Christmas again and the food and the mood and everything just brought all the memories back.

Bertil Högberg: How are your boys? They are now studying at various places, how are their feelings towards Sweden?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Well to them that's the place where they grew up. Sweden will always be at the back of their mind but at the same time they appreciate the fact that I brought them back home and introduced them to the Namibian way of living, Namibian way of doing things and Namibian culture. So they appreciate that I have brought them back.

Of course at the beginning especially my oldest son he was very unhappy for the first period when we came to stay for the first time. For months he was crying about his friends in Lund and he just couldn't accept it. I think the change was too much for him, whereas for the younger boy he was okay, but the older one I think he had somehow grown some roots. He was a young teenager then when we came and to have left all the friends he grew up with that to him was a very big loss. But right now they are out of the country, the big one is studying music at the American School of Music in Paris and the young one is studying Business Economics in Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

Bertil Högberg: So they are really taking advantage of the fact that they are international in their background?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, they are taking advantage of that.

Bertil Högberg: And if you look back now on your time in Sweden how do you look at that time for yourself?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: I think I look back with great satisfaction that I spent my time in a worthwhile way. It was hard, it was very busy, but I'm glad that I was able to play my part in the struggle for independence. I am also glad that I was able to stick to my studies and see them through. It was not always easy to study with the family and taking care of young kids and then at the same time being so politically active. It was very tough, but I'm happy that I didn't give up. I completed my studies and I feel that that's also a contribution in its own way because it gives me satisfaction when I see my books, for example, being used by students at

our university and the teachers and so on. And not only that, I mean I spent some years also teaching at the university so I feel that my time was well spent in Sweden.

Bertil Högberg: Is there any particular thing that you learnt from the Swedish society that you brought with you here?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes, I think quite a lot. I must say that I always say that I'm a Namibian but Sweden is my second home because I still feel that link. It becomes more pronounced when I go back to meet old friends that I have been with for so many years. Sweden will always be part of me and I feel that my culture is a mixture of Namibian and Swedish. I feel that I have tried my level best to take the best out of my own culture and the best from the Swedish culture and combine the two and I think I am happy with who I am. So I don't see any conflict within me, I'm generally a very happy person.

Bertil Högberg: And you are now embarking into research around education for democracy. Is your interest in those things something you think you brought with you from Sweden?

Dr Elizabeth Amukugo: Yes. I feel that one thing that I have got from the education background is that the Swedish system does not sort of push you into one narrow way of looking at things but it somehow helps you to broaden your horizon. I feel that that's one strong aspect that I have inherited from my Swedish educational background. I'm able to do different things; I'm able to solve different problems just because of that broadened horizon I would say. And also having studied at Lund, which is a classical university with a strong international climate, has also helped to even broaden my scope much more and I appreciate that very much. Because I can talk to anybody, I can fit in anywhere so I don't feel conditioned.