



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at the presentation of the 2017 German Africa Award  
to Nicholas Opiyo from Uganda  
in Berlin  
on 23 November 2017**

My greatest privilege as Federal President is that almost on a daily basis I get the chance to meet people who are working for the good of our country: those who are fighting in the town council to keep their school in good repair, those who have launched a project for the integration of refugees or those who make sure that older people are still able to get into town to see a doctor. They all share a passion for our democratic society, as well as the willingness and courage to work for democracy and to shape it.

If we in Germany need the courage to stand up for democracy today – perhaps even especially today – in a country where freedom and the separation of powers prevail; a country with free elections by secret ballot as well as independent courts; a country in which different lifestyles are respected – if we need the courage to stand up for democracy here today, then what does it take in those countries where all of this cannot be taken for granted?

How much courage is needed to defend human rights in a country where they are perhaps enshrined in the constitution but where the reality is all too often quite different? How much courage does one need to take the grievance of the victims of corruption and arbitrary actions to court in the face of murder threats and without the certainty that the proceedings will be fair?

Nicholas Opiyo, you have demonstrated more than just the courage to stand up for democracy. You have demonstrated your unconditional love for democracy!

Let us look back at your childhood: you witnessed the bloody conflict in Uganda between the Government and the Lord's Resistance Army, which also affected your family. Who would be surprised if –

given these key formative experiences – you had wanted to pay back in kind? An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?

You chose a different path. You chose the path of forgiveness, reconciliation and justice. As a lawyer, you even defended a former rebel commander – even though your family had been the victims of these very thugs. You reacted to violence and injustice by fighting to uphold the law.

What do we here in Germany actually know about Uganda? As he has said, Nicholas Opiyo always conducts the same experiment during every trip: in every new town he asks the taxi drivers at the airport questions. I do not know what the Berlin taxi driver told him. Perhaps he knew Uganda Street in the African Quarter in Wedding, a reminder of the difficult colonial history of the European powers. I am interested to hear, Mr Opiyo, what you will tell us in a minute about your conversation with the taxi driver – and about what you have learned about how your country is seen here in Europe.

When I was last in Uganda two years ago, I saw with my own eyes the shortcomings, the huge challenges and tasks in your country, but also the progress which would have been inconceivable without you and others. Thanks to you, Africa increasingly has a new image here in Europe: Africa is no longer the “dark continent”. Europe is realising that Africa is more than a continent beset by crises. There are places where hope has sprung up, where progress has been achieved and where astonishing turns for the better have occurred, as we witnessed most recently in the Gambia. I am looking forward to travelling to that very country soon, as well as to Ghana. However, the move towards democracy is all too often undermined by the rise or return of authoritarian forces. All too often, old wounds are re-opened where the root causes of conflicts and rivalries continue to smoulder and weak institutions are unable to secure peace on a durable basis. All too often, efforts to establish democracy are thwarted by the lack of responsibility or by the corruption of those in power and their cronies. I hope that Zimbabwe, too, will now become a beacon of hope.

At the very latest since more and more people have been making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean in an effort to escape hardship, war and persecution, I hope that everyone has realised how very close Africa is to us. We Europeans cannot and should not be indifferent to what happens there.

And we most certainly cannot sit back complacently when huge sums of money from Europe ultimately seep away without bringing about lasting improvements. For change needs a political basis. That is why we have to give special support to those countries whose governments demonstrate a sense of responsibility and an earnest desire to promote development and in which the green shoots of democracy are growing. In particular, we have to lend a helping hand

to those who are fostering and cultivating these fledgling democracies on a daily basis with their courage and perseverance. For only where people are living in freedom and without fear of repression, can there be stability and peace in the long term. Only there can people build a life in dignity and without hardship. And only there can a foundation be developed on which people can stand on their own two feet and earn a livelihood on a sustainable basis. Nicholas Opiyo, you epitomise this unswerving commitment to democracy – and that is why we are presenting you with this award.

Mr Opiyo, human rights lie at the heart of all your work: universal, inalienable and indivisible human rights. In my country's history, this maxim was violated in a most grave and unprecedented fashion last century. Especially for us in Germany, it was a long journey – a journey, by the way, which would not have been possible without the help of our Western partners – a long journey towards the first sentence in our Basic Law: "Human dignity is inviolable."

This sentence applies everywhere. It is not a luxury of Western constitutions. For that very reason, this year's Africa Award is especially important to me. For it is going to a man who does not accept the disregard, violation or denial of these universal human values. Nicholas Opiyo, you are thus both a role model and an inspiration for an Africa which is on the rise. Your own biography personifies this rise. In contrast to many young adults in Uganda, you were given the chance to study. You became a lawyer for the minorities – and also of that former rebel commander who, just like any other individual, had a right to a fair trial.

Furthermore, you founded the organisation Chapter Four Uganda, which fights for the civil rights contained in the constitution. Chapter Four became known internationally with the successful lawsuit against the anti-homosexuality act. This was a splendid success for tolerance and justice – and a great success for you.

Yet this case is only a small part of your work: you were one of the authors of the law which made torture a punishable offence in Uganda. You defend activists who have taken a stand for human rights and democracy and against corruption and intolerance.

In short, you truly are a key figure in your country's democratic development. For you inspire your fellow Ugandans with courage. And courage is the lifeblood of any democratic development. Dictatorships and autocracies thrive on the fear of those under their control. The more people there are with courage and self-confidence and who see that their own political engagement can do good, the less fear there will be. I would be delighted if the message today's award sends were to contribute a little towards this. With this award, we are saying to you and your fellow Ugandans: we in Germany stand shoulder to shoulder with you.

Nicholas Opiyo, your courage and commitment also show us how to advance human rights and democracy.

In recognition of your courage to stand up for democracy, we present you today with the 2017 German Africa Award.