



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
Foresight Africa Podcast**

**“Pursuing an education ‘Against All Odds’”
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Episode Summary:

Author and activist Betty Ogiel Rubanga joins host Aloysius Uche Ordu for a conversation on dreams, hope, hard work, learning, authentic leadership, poverty, and survival. She is the author of the memoir, *Against All Odds: A memoir of Resilience, Determination and Luck Amidst Hardship for an African Girl Child in Her Passionate Pursuit for Education*.

ORDU: From the promise of new technologies to the innovative and youthful population shaping our continent's future, Africa is full of dynamism worth celebrating. Hi, I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution and host of Foresight Africa podcast. Since 2011, the Africa Growth Initiative has published a high-profile report on the key events and trends likely to shape affairs in Africa in the year ahead. Entitled "Foresight Africa," the goal of the publication is to bring attention to these burning issues and to support policy actions to address them. With this podcast, we intend to engage the report authors, as well as policymakers, captains of industry, Africa's youths and other key figures.

My guest today is Betty Ogiel Rubanga. She's the author of *Against All Odds: A memoir of Resilience, Determination and Luck Amidst Hardship for an African Girl Child in Her Passionate Pursuit for Education*. In addition to being an author, Betty is also a coach, HR consultant, and founder of the Betty Ogiel Foundation. Betty, welcome to our podcast.

OGIEL: Thank you, Dr. Aloysius.

ORDU: Let me start by asking you what motivated you in the first instance to write this book?

OGIEL: Before I mention what motivated me to write the book, I will just say to the listeners that I am a speaker who speaks majestically, not by choice, but by circumstances beyond my control. Where I got a motorcar accident 15 years ago, and I lost my ability to speak completely because of a brain injury I suffered and paralysis. But I can assure you that you will be able to get what I am communicating.

So, with that said, now I can answer, what motivated me to write this book. *Against All Odds* is my life story. And it is geared to inspire hope and transform lives. And it gives people who are in a dire need or facing challenges of hope that the obstacles or the challenges they are currently facing could be preparation for something greater.

So, I wrote this book to show that person that there's hope. And to the person who has never known the other side of life, they would also be able to appreciate life and know that there are different perspectives to life, and perhaps be able to appreciate more what they do have and never take anything for granted.

The second point I wrote this book was to challenge people—you and me, listeners—to look around them, to look around us, because in your neighborhood could be a girl with a dream or a passion with a dream, and you could be that angel God will use to move that person to their destiny. So, that is why I wrote the book.

ORDU: Thank you for sharing those, Betty. In today's world in particular, what you just said resonates enormously. The need never, never, ever to take anything for granted. And as you say, in the neighborhood of which there are many, many in need across the continent and elsewhere, the guardian angel could well be the person next door. Reading through your book, I get the sense of dreams, of desires, of decisions along the way, sprinkled all over the book. Could you explain to our listeners a bit more what you had in mind about some of these dreams, desires, and decisions?

OGIEL: I believe we are all born with dreams and desires, and at some point in our lives, we have to make decisions that will affect those desires and dreams. For me, my dream right from the onset, having grown up in a poverty stricken home and born under a tree not even a hospital, I felt poverty before I was born.

So, while growing up as a destitute, orphaned girl in the remotest part of Uganda by then, and most insecure region of Uganda by then, I had one desire and one dream, and that was to attain an education. Because I saw women whose life was admirable to me were those that had gone through education and those were my teachers at school, those inspectors of our schools, whenever they came, I could admire them.

So, to me, my dream, my desire was to obtain an education, and not just any education up to ordinary level. I wanted to attain a degree. But my dream, like any other dream a person can have, was challenged by lack, by circumstances beyond my control. But in the book, you can see that determination is why I am even able to speak to you. I had very many opportunities to give up my dreams. But I did not.

ORDU: Thank you very much, Betty. And then in addition to what you just explained, one of the things I was most impressed in reading the book is the power of hope and resilience. Could you share with us a little bit more on your sense of the power of hope and resilience?

OGIEL: When I lost my father—the sole breadwinner of our family—at three, then I was taken by my uncle. And later on abandoned by my uncle because life was tough. He had his own kids to look after, to care for. And I was there also crying every day for school fees. It was hope that tomorrow can it be better. Tomorrow will be better. That is why even throughout my primary and secondary school level, every time I had to cry for school fees and I cried every day until my uncle found a way of sending me back to school.

So, that cry of hope, that cry was not a cry of hopelessness. That cry was a cry of hope and belief that tomorrow just might be the one to bring me what I am crying for. I am a believer, and in the Bible we are told that when a person loses hope, they have lost everything. So, I kept my hope alive in the face of lack, in the face of poverty, in the face of rejection, in the face of abuse. It was hope that kept me alive and moving forward. So, to me, resilience is inspired by hope, and hope is motivated by dreams and desires for a greater tomorrow. So, that is how I look at resilience and hope, the power of hope. Will keep you going, will keep you getting up and dusting yourself when life throws challenges at you.

ORDU: So, this sense that when life throws us those curveballs, basically, the hope in a better tomorrow was fundamental to your being here today. The other thing, Betty, in a chapter of the book you say, “there is no substitute to hard work and determination.” To paraphrase you, nothing works until you work. Could you explain more what you had in mind to our listeners, please?

OGIEL: I wanted to emphasize the fact that, as they say, dreams are free. Dreams are free. But we must work to make that dream or those dreams a reality. It is not just enough to have dreams, you must work. And to me, I started work at a tender age of, I don't know, six, six years. I was already cooking and looking after my uncle's children. I was cooking for the family, fetching water six kilometers, brewing local potent gin. And doing all sorts of domestic and commercial chores.

And so, to me, work is a way of life. It is not a punishment. It is through work that we realize our dreams. It is through work that we get what we desire in life. I read somewhere this writer was saying that if you choose a easy life today, tomorrow you will have a hard life. So, working hard and smart—and smart, of course, by then I believed in working hard, I did not even know the concept of working smart. But now I believe working hard and smart with the consistency and determination will get you results. Hard work has never disappointed.

It is true that nothing will work until you work. Nothing will work until you work. I had to work for my school fees when my uncle abandoned me. I walked for 120 kilometers with a 20 liter Jerry can across the border, smuggling local potent gin to fend for myself and nurture my dream of education. I had to work. It was work.

ORDU: Again, the book is *Against All Odds*, speaking with the author, Betty Ogiel. Betty, in the book you also, in addition to the emphasis on hard work and the rugged determination, you emphasize the power of luck, good luck. Could you explain a little bit more about that, please?

OGIEL: My luck, came wrapped in an unfortunate circumstances. For example, the luck of getting a scholarship came after I had been bitten by a poisonous snake at school. And so that raised the eyebrows of the school administrators to say, who is this girl, how did she end up in our school? She does not have any next of kin. So, yes.

But that luck came because I did something to prepare, I looked for money to get myself to school. And when I was in school, the luck found me prepared, prepared to get the opportunity for a bursary through a snakebite. So, I was bitten by a snake, I was lucky I did not die. I was poisoned by a neighbor, I was lucky I did not die. Of course, being a person of faith I believe the angels were protecting me. So, yes, that is how my luck came wrapped in very unfavorable situations, but it was luck.

ORDU: Luck in adversity. And then very interesting. The role of mentors for success is something that many, many of us don't often emphasize. In your case, what roles did mentors play in the Betty I'm talking to today?

OGIEL: The role of mentors in success is very, very important. And I did not know that the community was mentoring me or the circumstances were mentoring me until later on in my life. In my career I got people who committed their lives and their resources to make me the person I am today. Right from the beginning, when I was struggling in and out of school, about to drop out of school, God brought people in my life, like Sacred Heart Sisters did mentor me to the woman I became and I have become now.

For me, mentorship at an early age came through school. I met my mentors at school. My teachers were my mentors. Everyone who positively impacted me was my mentor. And yes, I was hoping to learn, to learn what they were teaching me, they were telling me, they were seeding in me.

So, yes, a young person listening to me, even old people, you can't make it alone. You need someone. You have heard the saying that you can't see the picture when you are in the frame. We need people in our lives who see what we don't see, who see us beyond our current situations.

And for me, at school, there was a nun called Sister Susan Anyango. That sister met me in my middle school. And she became a mother that I did not have, a mentor that I did not have, an auntie that I did not have. I remember when I missed government sponsorship to enroll to Makerere University, Sister said that you deserve university education. Let's not settle for less. And she believed in me. So, every one of us needs to have a person or people who love them unconditionally, who believe in them, or see what they are not seen for their life. And here I am today, because Sister Susan believed in me.

The professor of Makerere University all paid my tuition at a time I nearly dropped out of university. Believed in me, saw something in me, invested in me. So, in turn I had to do my part and not disappoint the people who believed in me.

And the role of mentors is really critical. I cannot name all my mentors. Yes, but for the sake of all this discussion, *Against All Odds*, I have people I have highlighted, including in the last chapter, the leader of the company, the corporation I used to work with, the director who came to the hospital and told me when I was in a state of a coma, when I was struggling for my life, I could hear him. And he said, "Betty, we will wait for you." Why? That man believed in me. That man saw something in me, which I probably I did not see in myself. So, we all need mentors. Every mentor needs a mentor. Every person needs a mentor.

ORDU: Betty, in addition to mentors, which you talked about, the book is also full of people you classify as "destiny helpers." What is the role of these destiny helpers in your life, in your success, would you say?

OGIEL: Your action of kindness today for someone in life has the potential to redirect that person's life and affect generations, and be known to you. At times, we want to call something like a miracle when God directly performs a miracle. But miracles happen through people. And those are the people I call my destiny helpers. The people who came at every point of my life.

My uncle being the first one. My uncle abandoned me, but I love my uncle. I still love him. He is still alive. And he is the one who walked me, who handed me to my husband on the wedding day. So, if my uncle had not picked me from my mother, chances are that I could have become like my other six siblings who ended up all dropping out of school and getting married at a tender age. I remember when I was still young, my follower was 13 years and I hear they had come to marry her off. I cried, but I had nothing to do. So my uncle was my first destiny helper.

The neighbors who helped me, everybody who contributed to helping me, some contributed by giving me tough love like my uncle's wife, who detested me, who beat me every day for anything and nothing at all. So, she is also my destiny helper. The life she put me through is probably why I got this this resilience to even overcome other things that life threw at me at a later stage in my life.

So, my uncle, the professor, of course, the Sisters, I have many, many destiny helpers. And I am still getting, even this interview is part of my helping me to move to the next level of my destiny. So everybody you meet really will impact your life, and those are the ones I call destiny helpers.

ORDU: Fascinating, Betty, it's very, very fascinating indeed. The concept of destiny helps as different from mentors. And it becomes clear now that you clarified it further from what I read in the book. In the book also that you talk about leadership, that in particular, you talk about the power of authentic leadership. I wonder if you could explain some more to our listeners what you mean by that.

OGIEL: Leadership is influence. One of my great mentors is Doctor John C. Maxwell and he is known as the expert in leadership. So, he says, leadership is about influence. Nothing more, nothing less. And as I have grown in my own leadership, in my influence, I have got to understand that not all leaders are authentic. There's something about exceptional leaders. They are leaders who do things that others don't do. Yes, everyone has influence. We all have influence whether we have positions of leadership, in leadership, or not. We all influence those around us, our neighbors, we all have influence.

In the last chapter, which is "Betty, We Will Wait for You," that is when I saw leadership when it matters most. This managing director who comes to hospital and starts sticking life to an employee who is paralyzed completely, unable to move any part of her body and not able to speak or say anything. And he was able to say, "Betty, we will wait for you." Words of hope.

Authentic leadership is very, very key in that it gives people life, it gave me life. I could not move and I could not even respond. But I heard what he had said. It took me over six months to utter a word. But I heard. And I am here today because of the words that leader said.

It was not leadership out of all pretense. It was real, authentic leadership, leadership which values relationships. Leadership which knows when to give up. And that impact of that that leader in my life, and Sister Susan also impacted me a lot. Her leadership was authentic. Professor Opio Epello, the deputy vice chancellor by then of all Makerere, impacted me a lot in terms of generosity, knowing when to help a person in need.

So, all these people, in my view, demonstrated true, authentic leadership. And for me personally, I value authentic leadership. For example, recently I quit my job. I have a belief that if you are not able to give something 100%, then you should be able to be true to yourself and to others. So, I was hit by COVID two times in two years: 2020 December, I had COVID. 2021 December I got COVID. So, I saw my energy levels going down. And this is something I had worked hard for, to make it in life. But I came to the point where I had to choose my priorities right. I had to let go. Knowing when to quit, knowing when enough is enough, is authentic leadership, and in being true and honest to yourself and to the people around is my definition of authentic leadership.

ORDU: I've been speaking with Betty Ogiel, *Against All Odds* is her recent book. Betty, in parts of the book, you actually described yourself as a living miracle. Could you explain further other things you said in the book about how you came up with describing yourself as a living miracle?

OGIEL: It is my faith in God that makes me believe that I am a living miracle and hope, which is a force beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Look at these situations and scenarios. You are in your mother's womb. Your mother falls off a roof pregnant with you, seven months or eight months, you don't die. You are born under a tree. Your mother and yourself pass out until a passerby comes to rescue you, you don't die. You are taken to the

most fierce regions of your country. You are beaten, tortured physically, mentally, emotionally, name all those tortures—you don't die. You are poisoned by a neighbor—you don't die. You reach school, a poisonous snake bites you—you don't die.

Long story short, at university you spend three years sleeping at the university sports ground on the benches. The same grounds where students were being killed—you don't die. And four years later, you have graduated and life is beginning to happen to you, for you, with you. Then you get a motorcar accident, suffer a brain injury, a broken neck, paralysis from head to toe. You are declared 100% disabled by medical doctors, and you are still here speaking.

Corona comes, hits the world, it does not spare you. The first time it hits you, you survive. The second time it hits you and you even get diagnosed with acute pancreatitis—you don't die. You are still here. Doctor, what is that? Maybe you can have a different definition, but that is being a living miracle. I will not die until the day God has destined need to die. So, that is why I call myself a living miracle.

ORDU: There is indeed no better word to describe you, Betty, other than a living miracle, which indeed you are. And we're all the greater for it that you're here talking to us today. One other thing that was also a sense from the book is this notion of learning, lifelong learning. And, as you put it, unlearning and relearning. Could you explain to us a little bit from your personal experiences of learning, unlearning, and relearning?

OGIEL: I will answer it in short. The greatest pursuit in my life has been learning. Learning to be patient, learning to be kind, learning to be resilient, learning to take care of myself, learning to care for others. Learning. Learning. Learning. Learning. And that is why my dream and desire at the onset was education. No wonder I am still learning. I am still learning. Education does not end when you graduate. It starts when you graduate and learning moves with the education. Formal education may end when you graduate, but informal education does not end. So life every day presents us with opportunities to learn, relearn, unlearn, and move forward despite what is happening.

ORDU: Betty, the other thing that came across very strongly is the embracing uncertainty and taking risks, sometimes calculated risks in your life. And in fact, in one of the chapters in the book you talk about resilience is a daily practice, you don't graduate. Could you explain further what you mean by that?

OGIEL: Doctor, have you ever seen a beautiful plant budding through the cracks of the concrete?

ORDU: Yes.

OGIEL: That is the total representation of my life, against all odds. So, this uncertainty everywhere. Life is uncertain. Life itself is uncertain. Yesterday, I was okay; in the night, I was in pain. Yes. I had to embrace uncertainty. We have to embrace uncertainty. And people have been really thinking that maybe COVID affected my mind by the mere fact that I suffered, I brood, I went against all odds to get an education so that I graduate, becoming the only graduate in my family of seven children. And, 19 years later, you quit your job. You quit certainty, security. You let go whatever you had worked for. It is mind-defeating. But that is, to me, embracing uncertainty. The ability for you and me to try to get out of our comfort zone, safety zone, to embrace unknown zone while hoping and believing that yes, tomorrow

will be better than today. So, that is embracing uncertainty and indeed resilience. You don't graduate in resilience. University of Life, you don't graduate, you keep learning, learning until you die.

ORDU: Betty, you also end the book in an optimistic way, by talking about this concept of paying it forward. Could you clarify a little bit more?

OGIEL: I established a foundation which supports orphan children, especially orphan girls who are less privileged like the way I was to attain an education. So, that is my intention. My intention is, like I said at the beginning, is to rally all of us, to look around us, take stock of what we have, and consider being a blessing to anyone around us who is in need, who is deemed to be less fortunate. So, that is my concept of paying forward.

I received generosity, I received kindness, I received grace. I am paying it forward and rallying everybody to pay it forward by helping the people who are deemed less fortunate. That is why I told you when we had a one-on-one conversation, I told you my desire, my dream right now is to have this book, *Against All Odds*, turned into a movie because I know, I believe, it will give hope to many, to many people more than the book, the hard copy, has been able to reach. So, that is paying it forward, in my words.

ORDU: I have been speaking to Betty Ogiel Rubanga, author, *Against All Odds: Memoirs of Resilience, Determination, and Luck amidst Hardship for an African Girl Child in Her Passionate Pursuit for Education*. Betty, it's been a pleasure having you on our show. Thank you very much.

OGIEL: Thank you for having me, for hosting me. And, yes, God bless.

ORDU: I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, and this has been Foresight Africa. To learn more about what you heard today, find this episode online at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast. Each episode will be listed on its own web page and there will be links to the content discussed in the episode.

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Thank you very much.