

Isaac Kumah (1938-Present)

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"There are many grants and opportunities available for minorities to get involved in environmental business." Isaac Kumah, 2006.

Overview

Isaac Kumah was inspired to pursue an environmental career because of the paradox presented by Africa, a resource-rich continent that is simultaneously poor. "Everyone sees Africa as a continent rich in natural resources, but at the same time it's the poorest in terms economic development," Dr. Kumah, a native of Ghana, explains. "I wanted to focus on what those resources can do for our people, not just how they can be exploited for the benefit of other people." Kumah says his principal interest was in how, and for whose benefit, natural resources should be exploited or preserved. He continues to explore that same topic through various outlets today, including as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Akron, Ohio.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Education

Kumah attended high school at St. Augustine's College, Cape Coast in Ghana, where he majored in English literature, geography, and history. He then taught geography and English literature at the high school level before earning his undergraduate and graduate education at Friendship University in Moscow, USSR. In 1970, he obtained a master's degree in economic planning, and went on to get his doctorate in international economic relations in 1974. The following year, he was recruited by Ghana's National Economic Planning Council to help draft a "Five Year Development Plan" for that country. Kumah's responsibility was to research foreign financing for development projects outlined in the 5-year plan. He later joined the Ministry of Economic Planning, where he was responsible for producing capital budget estimates for the Ministry of Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Assistant Director for Sector for Economic Infrastructure. Kumah also did post-doctoral research in Poland, Japan, and India.

Kumah has lectured at Kent State University, University of Akron, Baldwin Wallace College, and Cuyohoga Community College, all in northeast Ohio, and has taught Cultural Diversity, Demography for International Marketing, World Regional Geography, and Regional Geography in the United Soviet Socialist Republic. In addition to lecturing, Kumah is currently the director of the Minority Business Assistance Program sponsored by the Ohio State Department of Development's Division of Minority Business Development.

His responsibilities include business counseling, business plan development, small business management, and business training seminars. He also managed a micro-enterprise loan program for groups underrepresented in the business world. Kumah is proud that because of his connections and expertise in the area of environmental business, many minorities and foreigners in Ohio seek him out to help develop their businesses. He says his real world; international experience in environmental business issues also means that his classes are usually full. "Students enjoy learning about different cultures from around the world," he says.

Importance of Mentorship to Career

Kumah credits Mrs. Gloria Nikoi, his first boss at the planning commission in Ghana, with teaching him to negotiate with foreign governments for development aid. "She taught and influenced me a lot," Kumah says. Kumah says that his most significant career accomplishment has been influencing his own students to pursue environmental careers, as well as linking underserved communities with economic opportunities. He has at times been disappointed in his effort to secure financing for an underserved community because they were not able to satisfy eligibility criteria; however, the occasional setback has not stopped him from pursuing what he considers very important work.

Advice to Young Professionals

Kumah is proud that his work has been instrumental in helping more minorities, women, veterans and the disabled to pursue environmental business opportunities. He notes that opportunities in the field are numerous for traditionally underrepresented groups. Minority students should "diversify in their quest to become entrepreneurs," Kumah advises. "Many [minorities] have chosen personal services, and avoided lucrative areas in environmental business. There are a lot of grants and opportunities available for them to get into the field."