Rowlands Kaotcha, Global Vice President and Southern Africa Regional Director:

Courage — what is courage to me?
It’s taking a risk.
It’s listening to your inner voice.

It’s the stories of Eliza, Robert and Eveletta —

Through their contact with The Hunger Project — in particular the Epicenter — a community-led facility that supports vision, leadership and action.

They discovered the courage inside themselves -- and changed the world. This is Eliza. She recently passed away, but for me, she lives on because of the impact of her life — her triumph of mindset over circumstance.

Eliza was a mother, in 2004 she found out she was HIV positive. At that time, no one in her area talked about having HIV because there was a lot of stigma and misunderstanding about the disease.

People believed that if they used the same cup as someone with HIV, they would catch the disease. If a person tested positive for HIV, they thought that they would die within days. Lending institutions would not give loans to people with HIV because it was considered too risky.

So, that was the context Eliza lived in. Then, she attended a Hunger Project HIV/AIDS workshop — and found the courage to disclose her HIV status —

She said: I am here and I am alive. I want to use myself as an example.

She formed an exclusive club for HIV positive people. Together, they applied for and received a loan from the Epicenter.

With the money, Eliza started buying and selling beans and maize grain — it was a risk - others might not buy her product, afraid that if they did, they would become infected.

Eliza spoke to each one of her customers — educating them about HIV — letting them know it was impossible for them to catch the virus simply by buying her products.

One-by-one more people came. No one became infected. And so, her business grew.
She supported her family with the profits, but more importantly, her business was a tool to fight stigma. A tool to change the mindsets of people and of lending institutions.

Because of Eliza’s courage, the issue of stigma is gone from her community of over 37,000 people. Today, people there talk about their HIV status openly. All this because Eliza was willing to let herself be truly seen and known. Today, the membership in Eliza’s club continues to grow, even two years after her death.

Eliza isn’t alone. For the last 10 years, across Africa, at more than 100 Epicenter clinics built in partnership with the Hunger Project over 91,000 people have accessed HIV/AIDS health services. Last year alone, at least 82,000 people gained access to credit through The Hunger Project’s Epicenter microfinance program -- among them, many living with HIV.

This is Robert — he’s another example of courage in Malawi. Robert lives outside of the Majete Game Reserve.

For decades, the communities around the reserve cut down the forest for charcoal and firewood, and they poached the animals both for profit and to protect their fields and homes.

Robert was a master poacher. His father started teaching him how to poach elephants and rhinos for their tusks when he was just six years old.

Robert taught others how to poach, believing it was his responsibility to train the next generation, including his own son.

That’s why, 15 years ago, the reserve ran out of game. In fact, the entire forest — down to the bees — were in serious decline.

The government of Malawi asked an organization called African Parks to repopulate the game reserve. But African Parks knew that it wouldn’t work without a mindset change among the people around the reserve. They along with others turned to The Hunger Project for help, so the communities could see the game reserve as theirs, as a source of pride, and as a resource to be protected and not something to be destroyed.

Robert attended a Hunger Project Mindset Change Workshop.
He learned that poaching was not a sustainable livelihood for him or his son and that to create a prosperous future for his family he needed to find a way to redirect his energy.

Robert enrolled in a beekeeping program because he learned that bees help the forest thrive, and because honey is money.

Today, Robert is transformed, he is now an advocate for land conservation and management. As a master beekeeper, he trains others, including those he first trained as poachers! About 65% of the people who were poachers are now beekeepers!

Thanks to Robert and others like him, the Majete Game Reserve has not had a single rhinoceros or elephant poached since 2004.

Robert had the courage to lay down what was familiar and to learn something new, creating a new possibility — a new future.

Eveletta, like Robert and Eliza, is a person of courage.

Four years ago, Eveletta Damiano believed that her children were bewitched. They fell ill frequently and Eveletta would take them to the hospital as often as she could, but nothing the nurses did helped.

Then one day, a Hunger Project volunteer visited Eveletta’s house. We call our volunteers animators for their special skill in moving their fellow community members into action --

This local animator did bring Eveletta a type of magic — in the form of a moringa tree. The leaves and pods of the moringa tree are very nutritious — think of all the protein of yogurt plus all the vitamin C of lemons plus all the minerals in spinach. In Africa, it’s known as the miracle tree.

So the animator visited Eveletta’s house with some moringa powder and fresh leaves from the Epicenter demonstration garden. She showed Eveletta how to cook with moringa. Eveletta didn’t believe it would work.

But eventually, she became desperate -- her children were sick and missing so much school. She decided to try the moringa, and her children were healthier. She received a report from school. Her children were much more active in class. When Eveletta looked at the faces of her children, she could not deny it: their eyes were bright.
Eveletta dared to set aside what she believed to be true. She dared to try something new. Today, Eveletta has a total of 125 moringa trees around her homestead.

She processes leaves into powder at the Epicenter. She sells the powder to fellow community members.

Across Africa, The Hunger Project partners with people like Eveletta to cultivate moringa — reaching more than 650,000 people.

If I were to take you there, you would see the bright eyes of the young children living in those communities.

Tonight, I hope you fill yourselves with the spirit of Eliza, Robert, and Eveletta -- The courage to be known and seen, to dare to let go of the familiar and to lay down old beliefs and to try something new.

We invite you to take a risk -- for what is possible -- for the good of the world.

Thank you.

Montse Salazar, Country Director of The Hunger Project – Mexico

Would you believe me if I said this thread represents the spirit of hundreds of women in Mexico? It looks delicate but it is powerful especially when bound together. It is as powerful as the look that Faustina, Margarita, Maria, and Gilberta gave me the first time I met them. It is a look that only empowered women can give.

I met these young women and others when I became the new Director of The Hunger Project Mexico. I said to them: “Hola todas, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. We have many things in common; we are moms, social entrepreneurs and we are working for a Mexico without hunger and poverty.”

Then, a woman asked: “Yes, yes… .. but who are you, really? Why do you want to be here with us?”

An endless number of questions followed from all the women in their textile cooperative.

In my 22 years in the field, no other group of women has ever asked me such hard questions. They asked about their business plan. They asked about cash flow.
They were interviewing me for my job as their partner.

The women were so completely empowered, they spoke their minds without ANY fear. Their questions, the confident look in their eyes; it wasn’t always that way.

You see, in Chiapas, indigenous women face discrimination and violence every single day. They are seen as inferior to men. Their voices are not heard in conversations about politics, community development, or business. Indigenous women are only allowed to speak with other indigenous women.

Outside of their communities, they often experience double discrimination: both because of their gender, and because of their ethnic origin.

So when The Hunger Project first went to Chiapas in 2011, we were thrilled that two hundred and forty women chose to participate in our first Vision, Commitment and Action workshop.

Together, the women created a collective vision for their future, and they formed a textile cooperative where they could sell their handmade indigenous clothes and other indigenous textiles at a fair price.

Faustina, Margarita, Maria, and Gilberta were 8 years old at the time. They attended the workshop too— and they were listening. Their moms envisioned their new future during the workshop, the girls formed their own vision, too.

You see, for years, the girls watched as their moms faced discrimination when they went to the only thread supplier in the region. They watched as their mothers were forced to pay a 20 to 50 percent markup, because they had no other options. They watched as their mothers struggled to be understood. Because no one spoke Spanish, the language of the store owners.

They watched as their mothers were told:
“Don’t touch the threads!”, because they were women.
“Don’t touch anything! You’re dirty.” Because they were indigenous.

The girls knew that their mothers could not ask for the colors they wanted. Their mothers had no say. The girls had watched their mothers all their young lives.

Now in their 20s, they were ready to make the vision real that they had formed when they were just 8 years old: they would open their own thread supply store.
Through it, they would work stand with indigenous artists — including their mothers — providing them with thread at a fair price.

It would be the first thread supply store owned by indigenous women in the region.

These young leaders along with 51 other women, mostly young — the second generation of women working with The Hunger Project — came together to build this future.

They drew on the victories, experience and knowledge of the oldest women in the cooperative. They learned how to source thread. They learned how to write a business plan. They built the building by their own hands. They arranged the shelves, and then rearranged them, to make sure everything was perfect for the grand opening.

They opened their thread store in June, 2019.

Today, no one pays a 20 to 50 percent markup for their materials! Everyone can touch the thread, get the colors they want, and speak in their own language.

Their new profit margin meant that the young women could afford school supplies for their children, and seeds for better crop yields. Together, they are taking their profits and reinvesting them into their community for women’s healthcare, for girls scholarships, and to hire a literacy teacher for the cooperative.

At the grand opening, they said, “We want all artists in the region to feel that we can support each other and not to compete with each other.”

“Today we are reborn as butterflies that fly together towards the sun.”

The Hunger Project has partnered with 33 such indigenous communities across Mexico --

In each community, indigenous women are setting their own vision for a future that is free from hunger.

They are letting their vision transform them finding their voices, learning whatever they need to learn, directing their resources toward the betterment of their communities.
We have a long way to go in Mexico, but thanks to work with The Hunger Project, just a small investment in one generation of women is already causing a rapid transformation in the next generation of women.

These generations of indigenous women, young and old, are weaving the way to a world that works for everyone.

Gracias.