Disparities can be invisible until you see another way. Growing up in Tanzania, Cal Poly Pomona graduate student Sharifa Kato slowly and later wrenchingly realized that education, healthcare and the basic standard of living are not what they should be in her country.

Her family of four — her mother, who didn’t finish high school but was determined that her children be educated; her father, a self-employed auto mechanic; and her younger sister, Shakila — lived in poverty in what she says is one of the “shantiest” towns near Dar es Salaam, a city of more than 4 million. Electrical service was sporadic, and most people earned what meager living they could doing odd jobs.

“They’re still not educated,” Kato says. “People are dying of HIV.”

As she works toward a master’s degree in public administration that she expects to complete in 2020, Kato is determined to use the skills she is gaining to make a difference in Africa.

“I want to be part of an organization that can actually bring change in a real, effective manner,” she says.

Already Kato has interned for the United Nations in New York, a position that political science Professor Brady Collins — a former UN intern himself — helped her pursue, acting as a reference.

“I could tell right away that Sharifa was a good fit for the UN,” Collins says. “She is naturally diplomatic and capable of working with people from all different backgrounds. More importantly, she understands how large public organizations can and should connect to the communities they are serving.”

While at the UN, Kato used the statistical skills she learned in Professor Sandra Emerson’s quantitative methods course to record and measure digital and traditional media coverage of issues related to the UN in African countries where English or Kiswahili — Swahili, as it is also referred to — are spoken. Kato’s language abilities also allowed her to take the lead in creating social media posts in Kiswahili for the UN, and she was interviewed about her personal experiences in her native language for UN Radio.

Collins’ former colleagues at the UN told him Kato was instantly an asset in her department.

“Not only were her analytical skills valuable, but her ability to write and communicate herself to multiple audiences,” Collins says. “This is a crucial part of the training our students get in the MPA program: how to be both an analyst and a leader.”
At 26, Kato already has a life story that is both inspiring and tragic.

She was about 4 years old when her mother, Maria Inviolata Kato, realized that her daughters were intellectually precocious, especially the youngest, Shakila, who was 2. The girls’ talents were confirmed when their parents had them tested. Their mother sought scholarships that allowed them to attend international schools in Dar es Salaam instead of the substandard local schools. It was at the international school that Kato began to notice the disparities, especially because of her classmates and friends who were children of people of African descent.

"My school was amazing," she says. "The moment you step through the gates it’s a whole different system and mentality, and coming back home you’re seeing all these differences. I’m noticing and thinking, ‘Why were my sister and I so fortunate to get the opportunities?’”

But the younger sister soon became ill. Both girls had been diagnosed at an early age with sickle cell anemia, a condition that is common among people of African descent.

"She had a sickle cell attack and her legs had a swelling, and we took her to different specialists," Kato says. "Everybody had their own opinions and they kept misdiagnosing her despite us telling them we know what the underlying cause is. We eventually took her to the district hospital, and they didn’t give her the proper medications. She died of heart failure caused by the sickle cell attack. She was about to turn 15.

"My sister passed away because there was no suitable health care. If she was here in the United States, she would probably be alive today."

She was unflappable," Emerson recalls of her early encounters with Kato. "She was committed to a particular future for herself, for her country, and maybe even for her continent. You could see that in her."

Kato’s determination continues to show. She has earned scholarships, works part time at Bank of America as a teller, and only recently took out a student loan. When it came time to go to New York for the unpaid UN internship, Cal Poly Pomona offered financial support to help defray her costs.

"My professors, my church members, some family friends all contributed. Friends of friends, friends that I don’t even know," she says. "I would create a newsletter showing my grades, showing what I want to do and what I’m learning here. I had people give $20. Somebody donated $8,000."

Emerson understands why people want to help.

"She’s got the skills," Emerson says. "We have done a good job of providing her with the skills."

Collins agrees.

"I am excited to see where Sharifa’s path takes her. In our program she has learned a great deal about how public policy can shape health and education outcomes for vulnerable populations. I believe she now has the tools necessary to affect change wherever she decides to go."

"I think there are other organizations that are still advocates for change, like World Vision, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund," she says. "I believe she now has the tools necessary to affect change wherever she decides to go."

"She is genuine in what it is she wants and what she hopes to do," the political science professor says. "What she has is a unique capacity to bring people on board with her. She’s not trying to lead so much as she is sharing what her experience has been, and people are just willing to support that."

Although the United Nations has been a dream, Kato is open to working for government entities or for non-governmental organizations.

"I’m not limiting myself, because I think there are other organizations that are still advocates for change, like World Vision, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund," she says. "I believe she now has the tools necessary to affect change wherever she decides to go."

Emerson understands why people want to help.

"I am excited to see where Sharifa’s path takes her. In our program she has learned a great deal about how public policy can shape health and education outcomes for vulnerable populations. I believe she now has the tools necessary to affect change wherever she decides to go."