

Lessons from The Climb:

How to become a global Changemaker from your Local Community

Episode 5: Gideon's Story

It is a sight that pervades many cities across Africa; out-of-school children roaming the street, hawking wares, undertaking menial jobs, and engaging in all sorts of activities apart from the most important activity for their age - being in school. According to the United Nations, there are over 200 million out-of-school children in the world today and of that astonishing number, over 40% reside in sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria alone, there are over 20 million out-of-school children, a situation that has been further exacerbated by the boko-haram insurgency in the north-east of the country.

This troubling and constantly rising number of out-of-school children in Nigeria and other parts of Africa formed the focus of the fifth episode of the climb podcast featuring young Nigerian social entrepreneur and Chief Executive of the Aid for Rural Educational Access Initiative (AREAi), Gideon Olanrewaju. In 2014, while he was an undergraduate student at the Ladoko Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomosho, a town in south-west Nigeria, Gideon encountered some out-of-school children on the streets; it was an encounter that would change the trajectory of his life and set him on a path to ensure that every Nigerian child receives good and quality education.

Since 2014, Gideon's resolve to tackle Nigeria's menacing out-of-school children crisis has led him to establish one of the most impactful non-governmental organizations dedicated to getting more children in schools. In under a decade, Gideon's organization, the Aid for Rural Education Access Initiative (AREAi) has recorded giant strides in the educational development space, winning sizable grants, designing, and implementing numerous innovative educational development programs reaching over 50,000 children in some of the most remote parts of Nigeria.

Some of these locally grown initiatives and projects designed and executed by Gideon and his team includes Fasttrack, Getting girls equal, DigiLearns, and Mission zero plastic, among others. Mission zero plastic was an especially remarkable project which sought to use one major problem facing communities across Nigeria - plastic waste, to solve another problem - out-of-school children. Executed in partnership with the Coca-Cola Foundation (TCCF), the mission zero plastic initiative set out to recover and repurpose over 600 tons of plastic coke bottles into modular bricks for building community learning centers for out-of-school children across six Nigerian States. This remarkable initiative which received a \$85,000 funding from the TCCF was aimed at tackling the problem of inadequate learning classrooms, which is a major driver of Nigeria's high levels of out-of-school children, while also tackling the biting problem of plastic waste pollution in the country.

The capacity of Local People to solve Local Problems

The ingenuity and effectiveness of AREAi's mission zero plastic initiative is a testament to the efficiency of empowering local people to solve local problems. It is also a pointed reminder and a call to action for more local people and especially young people to enter into the development space and deploy their vast understanding of their communities and its people to proffer solutions to developmental challenges like out-of-school children among others.

In her February 2022 testimony before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rebecca Winthrop, a senior fellow at the Brookings institute remarked that "All too often in the U.S., the dire news headlines about Africa obscures the ingenuity and innovative capacity of African communities". Remarking on the failure of western development actors to recognize the creativity and unique perspective local development actors bring to project designs and implementation, she went further to state that too often in the west, "focus is solely on the great needs of local communities, without simultaneously recognizing the tremendous assets of the people to solve these problems".

While commending the U.S. Government's Strategy on International and Basic Education 2019 report, which now prioritizes local organizations to receive USAID funding against U.S. based organizations, Winthrop advocates for even greater participation of local organizations and people in the design and implementation of development initiatives in their local communities.

According to Winthrop, this will enable local development actors to bring their creativity and vast knowledge of their communities to bear in the design and implementation of developmental initiatives, while also cultivating a sense of ownership of the project in locals which will drive the project's sustainability.

Your Role

Today, Gideon and his AREAi team are part of a growing list of young local development actors using their unique understanding of their communities to work with international partners to tackle major challenges facing their communities. From slum-to-school to the Lagos food bank and many others, these organic organizations and NGOs are dotted across Nigeria and several other African countries. Operated by passionate young people and driven by a deep understanding of the issues facing their communities, these young people are pushing development and engendering social change in the most extraordinary way.

Becoming part of these young changemakers isn't a grand or elaborate endeavor, and it surely does not require a sizable international grant to commence. All it takes is a recognition of the challenges facing your local community, developing a passion for solving those challenges, and bringing other young people together to take the first step. With these steps, you will be on your way to solving a major challenge facing your community, a local person solving local problems, and just like in Gideon's story, in little time and with your track record of work, grants and funding to further scale your work will come rolling in.