

INTRODUCTION

I come from a community in a city that is supposed to be the capital town of my country. The community, although not big enough, is a twin-community with a bloating population. The community is a deprived one, even by my country's standard. Majority of the people are not educated (western formal education), and the irony is that majority are not prepared to go to school because of a number of factors which I will mention in this paper and make an attempt to provide antidotes. I am raising these fundamental issues because I want you to appreciate the type of community I come from.

Furthermore, because the community is situated in the heart of the capital city, it is thought, rightly or wrongly, to be receiving some kind of attention from both the central and the local government. And because of these unfortunate assumptions, the community, like other communities in the capital, is largely marginalized, deprived and not "taken seriously". There are quiet a number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) working in my country. Most, if not all the NGO's, chose the Northern part of the country as their focal point. And this is understandably so because the North is largely deprived and marginalized.

My involvement in the activities of my community started in March 2003 when I founded my first Community Base Youth Organization. The Organization was formed because of my desire to use the youth as the catalyst for community development since we (the youth) are in the majority in my community. Before I outline the activities and impact of the Organization, it will be helpful to state why I formed the Organization beyond my desire to use the youth in this crusade. I was browsing the Internet one day when I came across some useful Internet links about what other young people are doing in various parts of the globe to effect change and make their situations better. In fact I read extensively about these developments. I came home thinking and meditating seriously on what anybody or I can do to help solve the problems of my community. I said my community because I always hold the belief that we can build a country or a nation from the communities, at least a developing country like mine. After my meditation, I came to the conclusion that the change has to start from me, however small it may be. So it was on this premise that I decided to form an organization that will bring the youth together to discuss and take action on issues affecting us in particular and the community in general.

THE ORGANIZATION AND ITS ACTIVITIES IN MY COMMUNITY

The primary objective of the Organization I formed in 2003 was to help fight the spread of HIV/AIDS in my community. The main reason for the adoption of this objective was due to the fact that I was, and still not happy about the life styles of the youth in my community. Most of the youth in the community are in one kind of relationship or the other. There are, and this is a fact, a lot of young people having multiple sex partners. This to me was a worrying development because of

the fact that we live in a society where illiteracy is high, youth employment is nothing to write home about, abortion (supposed to be illegal) was becoming the order of the day, *streetism* is a problem, and all sort of related problems and yet the youth have turned a blind eye. The unfortunate aspect of all these disturbing development is that no one seems to be concern or taking steps/measures to help the youth out. Everybody seems to be careless.

These and other reasons made me to believe that there is the urgent need to help the youth out of these social problems. The Organization I formed in my community was the first serious organization to take the fight against HIV/AIDS seriously. I started by mobilizing the youth around me, to a weekly meeting to discuss the AIDS problem in the community. I must admit that as at the time of our first meeting, I had a very little knowledge about HIV/AIDS. This, however, did not stop me from organizing the youth. I knew very well that we needed to start from somewhere before we get to the desired destination. So the meeting was the first step. Gathering of HIV/AIDS information was the second step. I then started a research work on HIV/AIDS by visiting the Internet frequently to look for more details about the disease. I visited websites like www.aids.org and www.avert.org to learn more about the disease. These websites helped me to learn more about the disease and to educate my fellow colleagues who were still deficient in terms of knowledge and awareness about the disease. One should not forget that all these (the formation of the organization and the research work) came with its own challenges such as the financial resources involved and the time and energy to organize the youth.

Furthermore, it is difficult to form an organization like the one I have founded in my community. There use to be other similar organizations in the past but were all, to say the least a failure. These organizations failed because of lack of vision and leadership on the part of the founders and leaders of these organizations. One has to admit the fact that forming an organization in my community is challenging, but then it is possible to form one and succeed. People normally attribute reasons of failure of their initiatives in my community to lack of interest of the youth in such activities. Perhaps this is also true. However, with different modus operandi and leadership one can succeed. My organization is succeeding because of the strong leadership we have. It was the first time I was leading a group. I had no idea and/or experience about leadership. What I needed to do was to learn more about leadership and take courageous steps. I did exactly that. I acquired books on leadership and managements to learn and improve on my knowledge as a leader. I am saying this because leadership or lack of it was the straw that broke the back of our predecessor organizations. I made sure that the Organization has a clear objective and very well organized to stand the test of time. The few members that we started with also took it upon themselves and invited other youth to join our ranks. As the leader of the group, my focus was on growth and development of the Organization. I always believe in partnership and collaboration. This was even more important in our case because we have financial resource constraint. When we started, the group was not registered;

therefore, it was difficult for us to get any financial aid from other organizations. I met with various organizations working in the HIV/AIDS sector for help and assistance. At first I was talking about financial support but I realized that if the Organization focuses its attention so much on financial support rather than getting materials and other technical support on HIV/AIDS, we would lose the crusade from the onset. So the focus turned to getting more HIV/AIDS materials, training more peer educators, inviting experts to talk to us and for the group to ask questions, organize forums, so on and so forth. These became our prime objective, and for us it worked successfully. Today we have peer educators who go to other smaller youth groups to create awareness and educate people on HIV/AIDS. We do this by distributing materials and talking to the youth.

TURNING POINT

The Organization, however, changed with the cause of time. Like any other group, members began to express their views and opinions on the activities of the Organization, and it became obvious that we needed to include other pressing issues concerning our community as part of our objectives. So the objectives of the Organization was expanded to include the promotion of education among the youth, understanding fundamental human rights, ensuring environmental sustainability, imbuing in members leadership traits and attributes, and organizing social activities like entertainment and educational tours, empower young ladies and promote gender equity. Permit me at this juncture to expatiate further on these sub-topics and how the Organization is working to advance them.

EDUCATION

Our educational programmes are purely awareness creation. And it is so, at least for now, because of the strength of the Organization. The financial resource base of the organization is still not adequate to sponsor the youth in their quest to achieve academic laurels. Because of this and other reasons, we decided to focus and put our energies into advocacy and awareness creation. This is working in accordance with our educational blue prints.

My country, like any other country of the United Nation, has subscribed to the United Nation Universal Declaration on Human Rights. This as well must be supported by enacting other national legislation to further concretize the commitment to pursue the objectives of the Declaration. The right to free compulsory universal primary education is enshrined, among other rights, in the Declaration. In my country, this right was further articulated well in chapter five of our national constitution. Our Organization took it upon itself to advocate for the expedite implementation of this constitutional provision. Thank God with our advocacy, among other advocacies from other organizations, and as part of the policy of the current political administration in the country, we have what we call Capitation Grant. The capitation grant subsidizes the tuition fees of students in public basic schools in the country. The capitation grant, to me is not enough. However, it is a step in the right direction. What my organization is doing in this

direction is to encourage the young ones in our community to enrol in public schools so that they can also enjoy “free education”.

My Organization wants to take these further. We want to provide school uniforms and other educational materials for the less privileged children who are not so lucky enough to have these materials. We are still at the decision stage. And we believe that the implementation of this initiative will go a long way to boost the capitation grant policy a la our community.

When I formed the Organization, none of our members was in any tertiary institution. Today we have about ten of our members enrolled in different tertiary institutions in the country. The Organization is introducing an Educational Support Trust Initiative to help support members who are already in the tertiary institutions and also who wants to pursue further studies. The main financial contributions to this initiative will come from annual contributions from members. It will be launched in November this year baring any unforeseen eventualities. When launched, it will be the first of its kind in the community. All these initiatives are to encourage the youth to be the real future leaders and succeed in the challenging times ahead.

CIVIC EDUCATION

The civic education programme of the Organization is basically limited to the constitution of our country and other international human rights instruments like the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and the Convention on the Right of the Child. In this vein, the Organization held a series of workshops on the aforementioned documents to its members. We couldn't expand it to other youth groups yet. However, it is now a major plank of our Organization.

In the introduction to this paper, I mentioned that I founded two-community base youth organization. The other one deals with political and civic awareness, except that it does not deal with human rights issues. I would like to talk briefly about the activities of the second organization under this sub-topic.

My second organization was formed in February 2004. It was formed to give voice to the young people of my community. I have always believed in the power of the youth and what they can do. In my life, I have resolved not to be limited or be intimidated by anything whatsoever. So when I think and ponder over something worth doing, I just go ahead to do it before “the law of diminishing intent” sets in. The law according to Robin S. Sharma says that *the more you delay to take action on something, the more your interest in it diminishes*. So, therefore, in my quest to provide a common platform for the youth to discuss pressing issues affecting them, I launched a website, although not professional, to serve as the desired platform. I served as the editor-in-chief of the site. Again I have no knowledge about editing or on-line journaling. This time around what I did was to observe a lot how newspaper articles and stories are being written and arranged. The website had a page for expression of views by the general public. The site also provides information on youth activities in the community

and beyond. Unfortunately, with all these advantages, patronage to the website was not encouraging. The youth do not even visit the site (there is a counter on the site). So, therefore, it means the basic objective has to be changed. I then turned the website into a community base organization. That was how come I established two Organizations. Later I came to believe that the lack of patronage of the website was rather a blessing in disguise. And I say so because of the success the organization I formed is chalking. The Organization deals specifically with political and governance issues affecting my local community.

The Organization creates awareness on the need for the local people to take active part in the politics and governance of their community. In the first year of its establishment, i.e. 2004, the Organization organized a community youth forum to sensitize and educate the youth on the importance of non-violence and tolerance during elections since the year was an election year in the country. The forum was sponsored by one of the governance institutions in the country. It was successful by all standards because for the first time in the history of our community, an election was held without any serious act of violence. The forum brought together stakeholders and all those who matter in the community at one place and discussed the elections. This brought opponents together. It was reported in both the local and national media.

ENSURING ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Living in a clean community or environment has always been my wish. So, therefore, as part of our new objectives, based on the changes the organization underwent, we take the issue of environment very seriously. We adopted the wording, *ensuring environmental sustainability*, from the Millennium Development Goals. It is important to note that since our transformation from being an HIV/AIDS awareness creation group to a rather broader organization, we've adopted some of the Millennium Development Goals as part of our objectives. We believe in the achievement of the Goals and I shall talk about it in this paper.

Our environmental programme is basically clean-up exercise campaign. The Organization does embark on a regular clean-up exercise in the community. And the objective of this exercise is to keep the community clean and ensure good health for its inhabitants.

Furthermore, to further advance this objective, I am bringing out a new initiative that will bring together all the youth groups in the community to be part of a mass clean-up exercise campaign. The initiative will be coordinated by a Federation of youth clubs in the community which my organization is an active member. The issue of waste is a big problem in our community, and it will require every hand on deck to be able to solve it. The new initiative will involve every person who matters in the community. In other words it will bring together duty bearers, youth groups, market women, etc.

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

The empowerment of our women is one of our important objectives. It is

Professor Ali Mazrui who said *'in real life, motherhood leaves the African woman at the centre but not necessarily in power. In rural African life, the woman is also at the centre of the economy, and of water, and of energy supply, without being powerful. This is the legend of the African woman as custodian of fire, custodian of water. Women at the centre but not empowered'*. I quoted this saying of the learned Professor in question because I believe that it represents the clear picture of our women. In my country, the woman is virtually the pivot around which everything revolves. However, the woman is also virtually the weakest member of the society. I think this is not fair. Democratic principles require that the majority should rule and not the other way round. Women are said to be in the majority in terms of world population, ironically they are in the minority when it comes to the issue of power.

My Organization is taking steps to reverse, or break even, this unfortunate situation. We have what we call the Ladies Clique. This ladies clique is the leading voice of women in the organization. The ladies clique organizes programmes and activities to advance the cause of promoting gender equity and the issue of women empowerment. I believe strongly that when women themselves take up the fight to empower themselves, they will succeed rather than allowing or waiting for groups or bodies who do not share the goal to fight for them. The ladies in my organization are beginning to realise this and they are taking steps to reverse it.

Furthermore, the organization makes sure that its female members take active part in the activities of the community. More women are beginning to appreciate their role in the community now than before. And this is a step in the right direction.

THE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMME

As part of its leadership programme, the Organization has instituted what it calls The Millennium Dream Team. The Millennium Dream Team is a ten year personal development and leadership initiative that is expected to run from October 2005 to October 2015. The objective of the initiative is to ensure that by the year 2015, members of the Organization shall achieve their vision of whatever they want to become. The initiative allows individual members of the Organization to set for themselves realistic goals and targets. For instance, my ambition is to become a legal practitioner and a politician. Now it is expected that by the end of the year 2015, I achieve my goal of becoming a legal practitioner and a successful politician. What the initiative seeks to do is to connect the individual member of the Organization like myself, to their role model or mentor in order to ensure that the stated goal and objective is achieved. The initiative took off in October last year and it is making steady progress. We also invite personalities who have distinguished themselves in their chosen profession to speak to the group and inspire and motivate them to achieve their target.

The vision of the Millennium Dream Team is to produce distinguish set of

professionals for our community. We intend, as part of our expansive measures, to include every young person in our community. This we believe will go a long way to help achieve the desired results of making our community the most admired community in our country. Currently, our community cannot boast of professionals like lawyers, accountants, doctors, journalists, Computer experts, and so on and so forth. We want to reverse the trend and make sure that come 2015, our community can boast of all sorts of professionals in their excess.

The initiative also organizes leadership workshops for the members. And the brain behind these leadership workshops is to train members to become leaders in their own field. At the Millennium Dream Team, we believe that everyone is a leader. It is important for a community like ours to produce more leaders to take up the challenges ahead.

ACHIEVING THE MDGs – THE ROLE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people under the age of 25 constitutes about half of the world population. This figure is no mean a mere figure. It says a lot about the role young people can play. Perhaps some of us have realised our role in achieving the Millennium Development Goals. However, there are a larger number of the youth, who are still not certain, perhaps do not know what to do or their role in achieving the MDGs.

In order to bring every one on board, it is vital and significant that as young leaders we establish our credibility as people who can be trusted to lead. Leadership to me is important. Without leadership we can not achieve the MDGs.

We in our Organization have resolved to make the achievement of the MDGs a reality. How do we ensure this? ... We have integrated some of the goals we thought we could work effectively on in our activities. For instance, we have programmes on HIV/AIDS and Malaria, achieving universal primary enrolment, promote gender equality and empower women, ensure environmental sustainability, among other programmes. What we mean by believing in achieving the goals is that, we want to ensure that by the end of 2015, we in our community will reduce dramatically the incidence of HIV/AIDS and Malaria, ensure that every young person will have at least completed basic education, have achieved gender balance in our scheme of doing things, have one of the cleanest environment in the country. These are what we mean by believing in achieving the goals. Our Millennium Dream Team initiative for instance can reduce the incidence of poverty dramatically. When every young person in the community becomes a professional in his/her own right, there is no way the person can be poor.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

All the activities of the Organizations that I founded in the community are youth-led and youth oriented. It is the youth that come out with programmes and ideas,

and it is the same youth that ensure their implementations. With respect to the first organization, members meet every Saturday to discuss progress and development issues affecting them. The meeting serves as platform for expression of views and opinions on issues affecting the youth on the local, national as well as global arena.

My effort and leadership in the community has brought hope and confidence in the youth. In the immediate past, one cannot find any well organized and well focused youth group in my community. However, today one will not only find a well focused and well-organized youth group in the community, but will also find a youth organization that is setting the standard and pace for other youth groups around the country. These are positive signs for us, especially coming from a community that is not respected in the country. I always feel proud when I look back at my initiatives. My community would have lost these opportunities if I had failed to take action.

I consider the activities and work of both organizations, thus the two organizations that I founded as very innovative. I consider them to be innovative because I started the organizations without any example or similar organizations to look up to for directions. Both organizations emerged as the results of the problems and challenges of the community I come from. The programmes of both organizations vary from time to time depending on the priorities and the need of the people of the community. Moreover, because the youth have accepted both organizations as their own, they are the major financial donors to both organizations.

The impact of the activities of both organizations is felt across the community. We have a community that used to be a dormant community, and today our community is vibrant due to the activities of these two organizations. One only needs to be in the community to see or feel the impacts of these organizations. Most of the youth who will have otherwise be engaged in activities that might be inimical to the community, are today, thanks to these organizations, playing active role in the life of their community. Loyalty to the community is very high and confidence among the youth is also very encouraging.

In conclusion, I can say that my impact in the community can be improved dramatically if I get the chance to partner with other well established multinational Non-Governmental Organizations and institutions in the country. The community will be better served if we liaise or partner with others to organize and implement programmes. I believe in partnership and collaboration. With them one can bring a lot of people to benefit from a project.

My advise to other young people else where in the world is that they should look at the needs of their environment and community first. They should not adopt any programme from else where hook, line and sinker. This might not benefit their community. My experiences might not work in other communities. It is working in

my community because that is what we need to do. Nevertheless, I will advise that our approach can be adopted. The quality of leadership and confidence we have as young people. When these traits are adopted, the rest can take care of themselves.

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