

2018 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Youth Category – Honorable Mention]

Creating Sustainable Change through Community-Driven Development

(Original)

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(Age 15, U.S.A.)

December 10, 2017, was not a typical school day for students at the Majengo Primary School in Moshi, Tanzania. Excitement pulsed through the air as students eagerly awaited their turn to wash their hands with the water streaming from the faucets of a new hand-washing station. But this project was not the doing of a large aid organization, nor a foreign volunteer; these students were witnessing the culmination of a project which they had created and implemented themselves. They recall waiting in line, just days ago, to use the makeshift 'tippy-tap' to wash their hands. Now, these students have realized their potential to create change.

Many privileged individuals are drawn in by the desire to help solve problems facing marginalized communities around the world. However, a lack of empathy for the beneficiary communities often leads to the assumption that any solution is a good solution. This results in funds being wasted on the implementation of temporary solutions which do not effectively integrate into communities or solve prevalent problems. For example, many water access points stop functioning soon after they are set up, because no community members were involved in setting them up or taught how to maintain them.

I believe a systemic shift is in order: one which will transform this process to become more human-centered, with projects effectively involving beneficiary communities in order to achieve true sustainability. I believe one effective solution is through empowering the next generation of youth leaders in developing countries, allowing them to create innovative, lasting solutions to problems facing them in their own communities. With a desire to create tangible change while testing my idea, I founded AYANA International in 2017. I developed the curriculum for a weeklong program, the Youth Innovation Lab, which teaches youth in developing countries about the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the principles of human-centered design, allowing them to use these as inspiration and guidelines to identify issues they care about and to use their insights to develop empathetic solutions.

For example, a 14-year-old girl in our first Youth Innovation Lab program in Moshi, Tanzania, had seen her classmates forced to stay home from school as a result of diarrheal diseases due to improper hand-washing practices. Empathetically approaching this issue, she came up with a hand-washing station model, a stark improvement from the makeshift 'tippy-tap' currently used at the school. After the project launched, Margret Beda, a school employee who helps with cooking and cleaning said, "This is an amazing project. I have been here for more than 10 years but no one has considered the situation. Students were eating without washing, came from washroom without washing. Now, it won't happen." The reception of this project demonstrates that young people, who have awareness of the most prevalent issues their communities face, are best equipped to identify and address them.

Since then, from a mobile library that has reached over 1,000 students, to a computer science training program for girls who were high-school dropouts, students have emerged from the Youth Innovation Lab program with game-changing ideas to effect change in their communities. Their projects are all informed by their own empathetic connections to their fellow community members and motivated by a drive to tackle issues that are close to home.

Having now run Youth Innovation Lab workshops in six locations through our partnering NGOs in Cameroon, Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa, I am constantly in awe of the incredible ideas which have emerged from the minds of the hundreds of students at these workshops. When we empower youth with the opportunity to analyze the issues their communities face, they come up with incredible solutions. At a more overarching level, as a global community, we must move forward with empathy and the humility to allow the individuals whose lives we are trying to improve to be involved in changes which will impact their communities. In doing so, we can ensure the long-lasting change that we have envisioned.