

Things That Never Were

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*“We need men who can dream of things that never were, and ask why not.”
— George B. Shaw*

Introduction

I come from Africa’s most populous country. Nigeria needs no introduction to most people of the world. We are among the world’s largest producers of crude oil, Africa’s third largest economy and the biggest democracy on the continent.

But in the annual ranking of universities on my continent, we seldom make the top 30 while in the world, making the top 1000 remains a pipe dream.

As an economic student I was taught that economic growths (those favourable figures usually released by international agencies et al) are not the best indicators of development. I was taught that the best indicators are Poverty, Unemployment and Inequality.

One day, I sat down in an attempt to understand all these contradictions. I couldn’t arrive at any resolve until I came across the statistics that Nigeria is more than 50% rural! Subsequent research then revealed that our stunted educational growth, the poverty, unemployment and inequality that have stunted our national development are directly domiciled in or emanated out of our neglect of rural communities.

Think, I told myself, the same kind of thought that led you to found Growth and Empowerment for Nigerian Youths (GENY), a foundation through which many student entrepreneurs in my university and community have been mentored and empowered since inception in 2009. The world keeps changing every day. In every facet of our society, we face exponential challenges. To meet these challenges, we need to think of exponential solutions. To arrive at exponential solutions, we must think of things that never were. We must innovate.

Many countries in South America face the same challenges in rural underdevelopment. The solutions I present below are the results of my daring to think up things that never were, at least, in my community.

Let us tackle rural underdevelopment. Urban centres are facing exponential increase in rural migrants as a result of gross neglect of the rural areas. Here are my solutions. I call them Seven Pillars for Rapid Rural Development.

1. Rural Youth Banking

Introduction

This is a quick win initiative that can be reproduced in any country of the world. The search for work and a better quality of life by rural youths necessitates the need for financial backbone to support such search within their local community.

Modalities

- Loans to rural youths and returnees between 15 and 35 years of age at low or no interest.
- At least one year of verifiable permanent residency in the rural area. This is necessary to forestall the onslaught of urban youths seeing free money in the rural areas. Though they are welcomed, but they must first settle into the community and research the opportunities in it for at least a year before qualifying for the loan.
- Ventures that will qualify for the loans must be those domiciled in the particular town or village.
- A Governing board comprising of eminent local personalities and outstanding rural youths..
- A distribution chain in collaboration with relevant authorities for onward export of surplus production to needy towns and cities.
- Cooperation of major commercial banks through a Remittances Gateway by which money can be transferred or donated to the Youth Bank from anywhere at lowest cost.

Areas of focus

What ventures will the Youth Bank focus on?

- Mechanised farming is one. One reason most rural youths in developing countries migrate is the gruelling labour associated with crude farming. If the youths have access to fertilizers and modern farming equipment, many will forgo the pursuit of menial jobs in the cities.

- Another area of focus will be on small scale industries. One of my cousins is a talented shoemaker. He migrated to the capital of my state to source for capital and be exposed to a wider market. Today, things are not that bright. With a Youth Bank willing to support him with capital and connect him to a wider market elsewhere, i know he wouldn't even hesitate before returning home.

Funding

- Government.

- International mandate to Governments: Recently the World Bank awarded my state a grant of \$20 million for some capacity development projects. These grants can be specifically allocated to supporting rural financial sustenance by international agencies.

- Fundraiser: The youths in conjunction with stakeholders like the traditional council and peer groups can also collaborate to host an elaborate fundraiser for a Village Youth Development Fund.

Implementation

Creating a separate autonomous bank is desirable. But such desirability is outweighed by the necessity for urgent action on the issue. As a result, collaboration with previously existing banks to run a subsidiary Rural Youth Bank in rural communities or operate a dedicated account to be administered by the Governing Board proposed above, are viable alternatives.

2. Health Volunteers Scheme

In the area of health, rural communities do boast of many sons and daughters abroad who will be willing to come home once in a while to offer free health service to the people, if they are asked. I believe the local government in collaboration with rural communities can float monthly free health programmes involving indigent health professionals home and in diaspora. Non indigenous volunteers and international volunteers will also be welcomed. Rural youths who have health challenges will be able to benefit from the programme instead of having to migrate to urban centres to access qualitative health care.

3. Enterprise competitions for rural ventures

I was invited to attend a youth enterprise programme in Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, on March 29th.. I was invited in my capacity as the coordinator of GENY, my youth empowerment foundation. I won a brand new laptop and internet modem at the event. Such programmes are seldom organised for rural communities.

With collaborations between my foundation, similar youth empowerment foundations, organized private sectors, NGOs and government, I believe my native village will host her first village-wide enterprise competition for her industrious youth. Youth and non-governmental organizations from South America, Africa, Asia and other countries in the developing axis must pursue similar programs.

4. Annual Returnees Award

A deliberate attempt to change the psychology of rural out-migrants and the community they left behind is necessary. Migrants must know that they will be welcomed back into their community without apathy, but with drums and fanfare.

One such strategy is to organize an Annual Returnees Award to celebrate migrants, especially youths, who return to contribute to the development of their rural area.

5. Rural internet and mobile penetration

This is a proposed collaboration between telecommunications companies, the Youth Bank (or other banks) and rural entrepreneurs, especially the youth. The advent of the internet and mobile technology has changed the way we live, but the rural communities have been left behind. People, especially youths who

desire to live in the information age will have no option than to migrate to urban centres.

To discourage this, telecoms companies will, as part of their CSR initiatives, be encouraged to run at least a six months free internet promo in rural communities for individual phone users and entrepreneurs motivated to open small cybercafés. They will also offer simple internet-enabled mobile phones at low cost. Funds for the youth entrepreneurs will be provided by the banks. The entrepreneurs will be trained on how to mobilize rural youths to take advantage of the programme. They will function as internet and mobile technology instructors, educating rural youth on the new possibilities of the information age.

6. Testing Ground for Government's Renewable Energy Drive

Many developing countries are combating with adequate power generation on one hand and protecting the environment on the other. Rural economies with their low energy consumption are a veritable platform for the take-off of power projects aimed to improve power supply and also conserve the environment at the same time. Solar and wind energies in particular are conducive for the rural areas. Focusing such quick-win energy projects in rural communities will entice rural youths to stay back and harness the opportunities such new frontiers provide.

7. Qualitative and Competitive Education

I am the founder and coordinator of Growth and Empowerment for Nigerian youths (GENY). I founded GENY in 2009 (officially launched on January 31st 2010) to expose students in Nigerian universities to opportunities around them.

On February 12 this year, we launched the maiden edition of our student empowerment magazine. As the publisher and facilitator-in-chief, I learnt a lot from the great amount of energy expended on soliciting support for the magazine project. I know much about soliciting support for nongovernmental projects. Launched jointly with the magazine was our Potentials Tap Initiative, an initiative aiming to enlighten secondary school students on different career choices.

Presently, programmes and initiatives aimed at improving the quality and competitiveness of education in schools are almost entirely focused on urban centres.

GENY's goals extend far more than the magazine project. From my experience, convincing organizations and corporate bodies to extend their laudable educational projects like quiz competitions, debates and adopt-a-school projects to my model village of Irun and other rural communities is something GENY and I can do. Our Potentials Tap Initiative is also being geared towards such direction, with funding the main hurdle we are working to scale.

NGOs and inspired youths like me must take the same bold steps to help rural communities tackle the exponential challenges facing them.

Rural dwellers cannot make the best of opportunities around them without qualitative education.

Conclusion

South America and Africa have many challenges in common. In the lines of my outlined thoughts above, are things that never were but must be, in our exponential world.