



Interview with Mark Chilongu (Africa Directions)

Erica Edwards

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Erica Edwards: Could you please introduce yourself, your role in your organization and your organization, and the problem you work to address?

Mark Chilongu: My name is Mark Chilongu. I'm executive director for Africa Directions and I'm also a co-founder of the organization. Africa Directions was started in the year 2000 and we started operations in 2001. The organization was formed by a group of young Zambians who wanted to see how they can contribute to the social welfare of fellow young people in the slums where they grew up.

The whole idea was that we all started as artists. At that time, HIV rates were at a high and there were no programs specifically targeting young people and we were doing drama and doing theater around communities to sensitize people on HIV. Then, we had an opportunity to travel for the very first time out of the country to go and perform HIV/AIDS related performances for an exchange program in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

When we came back, we were brainstorming among ourselves what is it that we wanted to do? Through the conversations that we had with my fellow co-founders, Evans Banda, Victor [Mawere] and including Joseph, we decided that we wanted to have a space for young people to explore, to innovate, to play, to have fun, and to learn. No one really believed in such a setup for young people. The Netherlands embassy had some faith in the work that we were doing because they are the ones that actually sponsored us to go to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. They asked us, "What is it that you want to do? You seem to be an energetic team of young people that want to prepare for development." We said we wanted a youth center where young people can come have fun and have a space for learning, a space for capacity building, a space for confidence building, and that's how we were given a chance.

We carried out a baseline survey with youths and parents to gather information about HIV among young people and to get to know what sorts of recreational space they would want. What it should look like. We identified those things that both the parents and the youth had in common and then set up a center. That's how Africa Directions was born in a slum called Mtendere.



In 2002, we were given an opportunity for four months to prove ourselves because they bought everything for us. We were still very young, so there was no evidence that there could be youth programs that can be run by young people and can be sustainable. We proved the point because we took that as an opportunity for us to ensure that our ambition is achieved. In four months, they were excited and we were given a four-year project. From that time, the organization has evolved to a community-based organization, now, a national organization, advancing children and young people's rights in Zambia, and also trying to build the capacity and confidence of Zambian young people.

We focus on four strategic areas: sexual and reproductive health, social entrepreneurship, governance, and recreation. These four things are interrelated. It's been documented that young people who use other forms of recreation such as sex, such as alcohol and drug abuse, are interrelated. If a young person is vulnerable, they don't have a source of income, they'll engage in other illicit activities. How do we empower young people with social entrepreneurial ideas that can help build a resilient community, but at the same time, enable them to make money out of it? Governance looks at how can young people can meaningfully participate in shaping their own future, in shaping their own environments and also, meaningfully participate in the governance system of our country and provide a table where young people can sit and have conversations with the old folks and bring substance to the table that can be addressed by those that are around the table that are policy makers, decision makers.

In a nutshell, that's what Africa Directions is and that's the work that we do. Our focus is to try and contribute to sustainable development goal number three, four and 11. Right now, we are in the process of revising our strategy and what we are seeing is that climate change is also contributing or maybe related to some of the social issues that we're trying to address and hopefully, we can include that as we review our strategy.

Erica Edwards: I know you've touched on this, but I want to ask it again. What makes your approach distinctive?

Mark Chilongu: Our approach is community centered, it's community led, it engages young people to ensure that young people play a part in finding solutions to their own problems. It also provides an opportunity, a space for young people to explore their skills, their talents, and to make sure that their voices are heard. The voices that are heard, all the things that the young people do, are evidence-based. Young people should be able to look at issues that are affecting them so that when they are taking them to decision makers, they're trying to advocate for them, they're actually evidence-based. It's unique because it provides this space for young people to really bring out their potential and ensure that whatever they're doing is held, especially to the decision makers.



Erica Edwards: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Mark Chilongu: Well, like I said, the organization has evolved. It's now 20 years old. The impact shows that youth programs can be managed by young people and can be sustained. All young people need is the capacity to be able to consistently do what they love to do, especially when they're passionate about it. We were young, 19, but you can see that 20 to 22 years of community service, of development work, youth work has taken us through all this. It shows that the work that we do has been impactful to our communities.

We have a number of alumni that have passed through Africa Directions. Right now, the world is hosting the Female World Soccer event and the team that is representing Zambia at the World Cup has two young ladies that have come out of Africa Directions. One of them is Barbara Banda, who is the captain of the Zambia Women's Soccer team. For us, that's an impact especially when soccer, at that time, was seen to be a sport only for boys. We helped build the confidence because we saw that girls also have passion for football and now we are able to have a captain on the national team of our country. For us, that's impact.

As an organization between 2006 and 2010, we were able to produce the first world female boxing champion through the work that we do. That goes to show that the work that we do has an impact and creates spaces for young people to explore their talents and advance meaningful change. The idea of setting up centers was replicated by the Ministry of Youth Sport and Child Development in our country and they're dotted now around the districts of the country. Just replicating the idea by the government for us is an impact and those youth resource centers that the government runs right now were an idea of Africa Directions. We have now seen a number of young people in different districts of the country learning from these centers supported by the government and having different life-saving skills like cookery, fashion and design, carpentry and all that. For us, we call that impact.

We've also seen that where Africa Directions has had a presence, there are resilient communities that are able to meaningfully participate and ensure that they shape their own environments, and there is a high level of social accountability being undertaken in these areas. We have played a bigger role in our advocacy work, especially related to sexual and reproductive health where we were a part of an organization that was advocating for sexual and reproductive health education in schools and that has been taken on by the government. For us, that's impact. We are there to drive advocacy around policy issues and we have seen most of the work that we've done contributing to policy change in our country and making Zambia commit to some of the international treaties on how they can address issues affecting adolescents and young people.



I would say that throughout the 20 years, we've contributed to making an impact in many sectors in our country. The communication sector, we have journalists like yourself that are now representing and contributing to national development in government broadcasting institutions and private institutions. We have actors and actresses in our country that are featured in most of the Zambian local soaps. Statistically, we've done some simple research, and one thing that we've seen is that out of all these soaps that are aired in our country, you'll be able to see at least one young actor or actress that has come through the gates of Africa Directions.

Now we want to have partners who can help us invest in some of these success stories, so we can document them just like what you're doing right now, to get the stories of our alumni – some are in the military, some are in the police, and we have a huge number of our alumni contributing to national development. For us, those are some of the success stories that drive us to continue doing the work that we do.

Erica Edwards: What insights or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that others could learn from?

Mark Chilongu: Young people must be given a platform to explore and try out things. Young people must be given an opportunity in terms of responsibilities, so that they can challenge themselves to do something. Once they're given those opportunities and they're supported, we can see meaningful change. We don't need to think on behalf of young people. Most technocrats think on behalf of young people and we believe that that means that we are trying to push an agenda that is not attainable to the young people.

All the success stories that we are talking about right now as Africa Direction happened because we've been in constant consultation with the young people, the ones we work with. When they give us ideas, we just align an idea towards the results a donor wants, but will not completely discard their idea. We want to make sure that once young people participate, it means that you are sustaining some of these programs even after the donors have gone.

The other aspect that we hope others can also learn from is that when we opened the centers, we saw that more boys were accessing the space than girls. It was for many different reasons. One of the reasons was the cultural setup of our country where girls are mostly expected to do house chores, girls are expected to be home, and boys are left alone, left to do all the naughty things in the streets and all that. Because of that bias, we created what we called the girls club and a space which we called the girls chill out space. A space where girls could come sit, talk about their own issues, talk about issues that are affecting them, use the space to build their confidence. Through that, we realized that once we created a space for girls to do that, and then, when you mix them with masculine guys in a conversation, then they become more confident, they become more



open because they're talking about these issues. If they don't have that kind of a space, they always close up and boys tend to dominate conversations.

All of us have been championing gender equality, gender equity, and we've been trying to ensure that girls are empowered with skills, girls are empowered with knowledge, girls are empowered with the ability to stand up for themselves, which is a good thing. But there is a gap that we've observed, where most programs are aligned to girls and women only and we are leaving out the perpetrators, who are the boys who are the men. That is providing young men's vulnerability in terms of addressing gender-based violence, in terms of addressing sexual gender-based violence, because you can't deal with these issues if you're leaving out the perpetrator. We need to begin to engage and design programs that are in tandem with what we want to achieve. The only way we can do that is by ensuring that we bring the boys and the girls in one space and begin to have these conversations together. That way, we're not leaving out the boys and we are not making boys vulnerable to being perpetrators of these issues.

There are a lot of feminist organizations working to empower women but we're not dealing with the person that poses a threat to women. How do we deal with that? We need to begin to also include them. We need to be able to design programs that are inclusive, programs that are going to look at issues of gender equality and equity in a fair way so that men can also play a role. We need to build champions among men that will be able to talk about issues that affect women. But if we are not going to build that cluster of individuals among men, it is very difficult for us to completely address gender equity and equality.

That's something that we've also seen and are actually working towards because of one other aspect, especially in Africa where women have an opportunity to learn as they transition from childhood to adulthood, or from adolescent to adulthood. As they transition, they have an opportunity to be taught traditionally on how they handle themselves, on how they take care of themselves, on how they can deal with all these things. But our boys don't have that opportunity. Meaning, you're teaching a girl child, even when she's going into marriage, they at least share their know-how of how to take care of the house, but you've not taught the boy child on how to take care of the wife. You've not taught the boy child on how to respect a woman. It's ad hoc learning, they'll only be taught immediately as they're getting married. For example, they'll be taught when they are having a wedding tomorrow. It's not enough. If we are to champion equality and if we are to champion gender equity and equality, there is a need to have an inclusive approach in addressing this issue.

One last part is that, in most of our African contexts, the only recreational space is a playground. If there are recreational spaces, it means that you have to pay to access them. But the majority, 85% of our people in Zambia, live below the poverty line. They live on less than a dollar a day so they



cannot access positive recreation. There is huge urban migration, urbanization where a lot of people are coming to the urban areas from the rural areas, and there's no recreation.

Our experience has shown us that creating a space in such communities, where they can have access to things they love - to do, sport, soccer, scrabble, chess, reading, studying, all those things in that space, - we can then integrate health information, empowerment information within the recreational space so that it's not some form of a conversation within a class. You're going to make them bored if you approach it in that way. What we are saying is that participatory approaches in addressing youth issues have helped advance development and also, build the capacity among the young people that have passed through the gates of Africa Directions.

Erica Edwards: Every social change model has strengths and limitations, what do you see as the main limitations of your work?

Mark Chilongu: The biggest challenge has always been scalability. How do we get to other areas where young people really need this? We've seen that this has been a core goal of many communities, but as Africa Directions we can only do so much. Also, there are issues with resources and financial support, which limit our scalability. That has made us begin to think differently as an organization if we are going to rely on donors to support the ideals and ideas and the innovations that we are thinking about. Donors have their own strategies, their own approaches to things, maybe what we are thinking is workable with our people but the donors will not see it as workable because it's not in line with their strategy.

We are already thinking beyond these challenges about how we bring in partners that can help us invest in some of the social entrepreneurial ideas that we have, so that these ideas can help us make money and that money can help us scale. That's the approach we are trying to take, so that whatever we invest in should be able to give us a bit of money to scale the ideas and the innovations that we think can help build a generation of young people that are going to meaningfully continue contributing to national development and put Zambia at a different level.

That's one aspect. The other aspect is that we've seen a lot of disparities in terms of support of grassroots organizations like ourselves, indigenous organizations like ourselves. There's always been a separation where international organizations have more funding, more resources, and indigenous organizations have limits in terms of resources. We need to find a way of how this collaboration can help prepare development. We believe that addressing problems only from the top down can be a big challenge. We need to combine the two. We need to have a bottom up and a top down approach. If we combine the two, it'll be easier for us to have sustainable development. We've seen where development partners have come and dictated what the



community should be doing, and yet, the communities have answers to the problems that they know within their area. You can't dictate what the community should do.

Those are some of the limitations that stall our progress in some of the development work that we do. We hope that we can bridge some of these gaps and ensure that we move forward together. For me, as much as we can be a little bit frustrated with these kinds of situations, I think platforms like the school helps you to re-energize yourself and tell yourself you're not alone, that there are many other people that are actually contributing in their own way to shaping the world so that everyone can be really happy and love to live in. It's a space for inspiration for me, especially with these limitations that I've mentioned.

Erica Edwards: Every social change effort learns from failure along the way. Can you describe a mistake or a failure that occurred in your work, and most importantly, what lessons you learned from it that others could benefit from hearing about?

Mark Chilongu: It goes without saying that in every successful social change project, there are challenges and mistakes that are made along the way. We're working in this district, which is along the Zambezi River. What happens is that men in the evening would walk away from the village towards the river side and have conversations. There was some defecation in the water and there was an outbreak of diarrhea in the village. One of our partners in the area thought, "Oh, okay. We need to build toilets for these people because they're doing it in the water," and they built the toilets. That's what they wanted. Six months down the line, the toilets were not being used, the diseases were not going down. When they went to check, they found that the toilets were being used as store rooms for their crops, so the problem of diarrhea did not end. It was a problem of not engaging the community to find a solution to that problem.

We realized that the men were not engaged to find out why they defecated there. They came to realize that the men's meetings were near the water, that's when such things happened. Instead of creating a space where they can have meetings, they built toilets for them. It is important to really engage communities when you are addressing problems that are affecting them so that you can get to know where to start from and what to do, because sometimes solutions can be found right in the community. You don't need science, you just need the engagement of the communities.

Another other mistake, for me as a leader of the organization, is that over the years, we have depended so much on donors to support the work that we do. Yes, we've had big projects where projects would come and projects would go. Once projects come and go, there's this phase of frustration where you are looking for more money and you can't find it and some of your programs are not running properly and that is why we advise that it is important to invest in income generating activities for the organization to sustain programs. Because over dependence on



donors can be frustrating. Over dependence on donors can be traumatizing. You know people believe in you, people want you to do the work that you always do, but unfortunately, you can't do it because you don't have donor funding. And not because you've made a mistake, but because the project phases out or maybe because the donors changed their strategy and they're looking at something else.

It is important to really invest in income generating activities and that's what Africa Directions is embarking on moving forward, to ensure that these income generating activities can help scale our programs and can help deal with some of the issues even when donors are not available and even when donors are not there. At least we can help supplement some of the programs that can be ongoing. Those two.

Erica Edwards: How are you catalyzing change or system level change in your field?

Mark Chilongu: In terms of system level change in our field, firstly internally as an organization, what we are trying to do is identify areas of improvement, identify areas of strengthening, and the biggest gaps that we've seen as an organization are in two areas.

One, we need to ensure that we take advantage of the technology space, to share our stories, to share what we have done, and also use it as a platform to engage with like-minded organizations and partners across the globe. That is an area where we think we need to focus in terms of systems strengthening. The other one is internally also, we need to strengthen our business development department because an executive director and two more program officers cannot manage to write proposals, write reports, and do all these other administrative things. We need to create a business development department and we're looking forward to working with partners across the globe to ensure that we can grow the resource basket to try and scale.

Externally, our organization has worked so much on advocacy issues, trying to advocate for policy change and also ensure that we identify parliamentarians as our champions with the work that we do. That is what we've been trying to do to ensure system change at district provincial and national level are addressed. How best do we provide evidence to ensure that even when we are trying to change systems, we have evidence to show why? For example, one thing we observed around issues of sexual and reproductive health, there were a lot of barriers that were hindering young people from having access to services at health facilities. We were asking ourselves as an organization, how can we show our policy makers and decision makers that indeed this is a problem. Because there was debate where health workers would say, "We provide services. It's just that the young people don't want to come," And the young people were saying, "No, there's lack of confidentiality and lack of commodities at the health facility."



But how do we have proof? We created a mobile application that we were piloting as a social accountability tool where young people can raise a ticket from this mobile application and the health facility provider will be able to see the kind of issue that a young person has, allocate that ticket to a specialized health provider and then, give the date for that young person to go to the health facility and access that service. When they get to the health facility, they'll be able to access that service and go back to the platform and report whether they had access to the service and how satisfied they were.

Africa Directions, as an administrator of this platform, will use the issues identified, such as lack of commodities at health facilities, as an advocacy issue. There's evidence because the system in charge, the officers at the health facility are aware of it so we can begin to advocate and ensure that the health facility can stock those commodities that young people are looking for. If they went to the health facility and there was lack of confidentiality, they'll get back to the platform and say, "I went to this health facility but I was surrounded by four nurses and a doctor asking me a lot of questions and I wasn't able to open up." We picked that up as an advocacy issue and said, "There's no confidentiality. When young people come to this space, you're not providing confidentiality so that they can open up." That's a pilot that we've been running in two health facilities within the capital of Lusaka to see how it can help us as a social accountability tool. Those are some of the things that we're trying to do in line with systems strengthening.

Erica Edwards: What do you think is most needed from partners to advance system level change?

Mark Chilongu: We need to strengthen collaboration. We need to stop working in silos. We need to begin to know that meaningful development can only come when we all come together, share our best practices, replicate them if it's possible, and also realize that each one of us in this world has a role to play. There's no one who has a better answer than the other. We must provide a platform for conversation, a platform for partnerships, a platform for being honest with each other when there are issues. We should be able to debate these issues meaningfully because at the end of the day, all of us are trying to contribute to one common thing: humanity. We are all trying to ensure that we have a world that is a better place to live in for all, there is a need for honest conversations and there is a need to reduce emotions on how we address things.

Technology has made the world smaller, where now people are able to have conversations very closely. We are talking right now, you are in New York and I'm in Oxford, but we are able to have this conversation. People are getting exposed every day to different ideas, different innovations. It is important that we begin to have an inclusive approach in the development agenda. It is important to create a space for honest conversations and a space for inclusivity so that we can ensure that each one of us plays a role in the development agenda of this world. Once we are



inclusive, we are assured of a peaceful world, we are assured of a world which is a better place to live in for all. When we exclude others, we are doing it at our own peril.

Erica Edwards: How do you see your work evolving over the next five years?

Mark Chilongu: We have an ambitious dream. I think, as Africa Directions, we have tried to live by the name. Although most of our work has been in Zambia, we have tried to build a solid foundation where young people should know that they can uplift each other, they can create a space where they can develop. As an organization in the next five years, we want to take advantage of technology to try and scale our work. Because if you can't be in Nigeria, if you can't be in Senegal, at least technology can help us to get there.

In terms of social entrepreneurial ideas, what role can we play in the advent of climate change, and how can we support building resilient communities that can have dialogue around issues of climate change? All that depends on us reviewing our strategy so that we can try and reposition ourselves as an organization to ensure that in the next five years, a lot of other innovations or social impacts can be shared with the rest of the world. That's what our mission is and that's what we are looking at. Hopefully, with time the world will be able to come and see that indeed, our passion for a better future, our passion for a better Africa, for a better world, is present and we are slowly contributing towards it.

Erica Edwards: Is there anything that we didn't touch upon that you think we should have or include in this conversation?

Mark Chilongu: For me, something that we never talked about is platforms like Skoll. In 2019, when I attended the Skoll World Forum for the very first time, many thanks to ELMA Foundation for giving me that opportunity and identifying that indeed we were providing meaningful change., when I came here it completely changed the way I looked at life, the way I looked at development, the way I looked at social entrepreneurship and social impact. It provided me with a platform for inspiration.

All of us want to look for money, want to look for resources, but for me, one big thing that has inspired me to be at Skoll is the opportunity to see a lot of amazing great men and women, young people, really shaping the world in their own respect. It's inspiring and it gives me the energy to do more of the work that I do. It also tells me that I am not alone. There are so many other voices around the world that are speaking the same language that we are, but in different sectors. This has been a good opportunity for me and the organization that I represent and hopefully, we can try and connect many more other young Zambians that I know are doing great work also in their own respect, but they need such a platform. We continue having these conversations and we



continue having these networks, but also trying to share these networks with other like-minded individuals that are doing great work.

Erica Edwards: Thank you so much for the time and for all the work that you do.

Erica J. Edwards is a multimedia journalist based in NYC. She has worked at New York Public Radio, WTAE, WMUR, and the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment (MOME). Edwards was a LEDE Fellow within the Solutions Journalism Network. She is deeply passionate about bringing solutions journalism to the forefront of the public's news diet through social media.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*