DEL-YORK VIEW
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Africa's NGOs are addicted to beneficiary counts and it's killing real impact

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WHY DOES THE ADDICTION PERSIST?

It would be easy to blame NGOs alone. That would be unfair and wrong.

Funding is a matter of supply and demand. Africa's population is growing, and the number of actors in the space is growing with it, but the supply of funds is limited. Funders have watched capital go in and have not seen the scale of change come out. So they ask harder questions, and the proposals that win are the ones promising scale.

Funders are also driven by numbers. At year end they must report to their own boards and backers how many people were trained and how many funds were disbursed. NGOs promise big numbers because funders reward big numbers, and funders ask for them because they are accountable to people who want them. It is one connected system, and it runs on the wrong measure.

WHAT EMPOWERMENT ACTUALLY LOOKS LIKE

At LIFE Africa, empowerment is in our name, and we try to hold ourselves to it. Let me tell you about one young woman whose name I'll keep private.

She finished secondary school like millions of young Nigerians, around 17 or 18, with no idea what came next. She saw a flyer on social media and joined our vocational outreach. She learned baking. Within a year, her earnings had grown many times over. She now employs three other people. She owns a brand and has equity in it, which means she can attract investment from banks and investors. She can take care of herself and her family.

None of that appears in a headcount. She would have been one tally mark among thousands. But if you compare her baseline on the day she joined with her life a year later, you are looking at what an intervention is supposed to do.

MEASURE WHAT MATTERS

So what should we be measuring? I would start with three questions about any programme that claims to empower people.

First, did income move? Take the average earnings of the women in the community you are working in. In Lagos, that may be around minimum wage. If your women's empowerment programme cannot lift people beyond that and give them stability, it has not worked, whatever the attendance sheet says.

Second, did mindset move? You can raise someone's income without changing how they see themselves. Are they more confident? Can they communicate, take ownership, and lead? Do they have the work and life skills to hold what they've gained? These can be measured, and they should be.

Third, did they join the wider economy? Before the intervention, she was outside the financial system. Now she has an account; she saves, she invests, and she can access funding. Does she speak up in rooms where she would once have been overlooked? Is she making her own decisions? The Sustainable Development Goals already give us global benchmarks to test against.

THREE CHANGES I WOULD MAKE TOMORROW

If I could redesign how African NGOs and their funders define success, I would start here.

One: return on impact. Business has a return on investment. Development needs return on impact. Give one partner ₦1,000,000 and see 1,000 people trained, but only ten are truly empowered. Give another ₦10,000 and watch a woman selling akara by a busy roadside, near offices full of hungry workers, turn it into ₦100,000 in a week. That is a tenfold return, and the second partner has done more. For every dollar invested, we should expect at least ten times that in impact.

Two: economic progression. Track how many people move from the aspirational stage to the intermediate stage, where they apply skills and begin to earn. Then track how many reach the expert stage, running a business of their own. Progress is a journey, and we should count the steps.

Three: collaboration, with one connected metric. Most of this work happens in silos. That is why we champion Impact Nexus, an initiative to put the whole space under one lens, measure what is working, and spotlight the innovations with the highest return on impact so they can be backed and scaled.

START WITH DEMAND

To any NGO leader who has reached 10,000 people but can't say what has changed in their lives, my advice is simple: change your model, and start with demand.

Say you want to empower 10,000 young people in furniture-making. Don't start with a classroom. Ask whether there is a daily market for that furniture. If there is, find the enterprises that can produce it at scale and place young people inside them. They learn on the production floor how to cut and finish and identify wood and paint, with feedback from experienced supervisors. You certify each micro-competency as they master it. When a customer pays for a finished piece, the market rewards the young person who made it. Income comes first. The certificate is a record of it.

The business that took them in earns too, and so does the community, because the system sustains itself. Compare that with two months of classroom training, a certificate, and a send-off into an economy that doesn't know they exist.

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THE TEST

The question every NGO should be able to answer is the one airport answers every day: how many people did we move safely from where they were to where they needed to be?

If we can't answer that, we haven't earned the applause. The reach numbers that fill our annual reports are the beginning of a story. Impact is the ending, and it's the only part the people we serve will ever remember.