The Zambian Chawama Youth Project brings life skills to local youth and women through ICTs

By Mwiika Malindima of the MIND Network, Zambia

Situated in the heart of Lusaka's Chawama Township, the Chawama Youth Project has purposed to change the lives of youth once dormant into viable self-reliant and respectable people. Chawama Township houses many thousands of people of all ages and origins. The biggest sum of Chawama's population is youths, most of which are unemployed and poor. With Zambia's economy in its dull drums, there is little that the government can do for them. The government is equally constrained with so many unfinished programmes. If the youths do not stand up and do something for themselves, no one will come to their rescue. The International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD) of the Netherlands and the Zambian firm Step Out are supporting the Chawama youth to realise their aspirations.

This is a story of youth that have raison d'être to bring change to their lives and therefore to the lives of others in Chawama. It seems they are bringing to life the adage that says "those that bring sunshine to the life of others cannot keep it from themselves."

Introducing life skills

"We realized that there is rampant unemployment among the youth of Chawama Township. This forces a lot of them into avoidable activities such as prostitution for women and crime for men. So we decided to come up with the Skills Training Centre to give them life skills. This would help them get employed and or be self employed and do something with their acquired skills," said Rodgers Mulenga - Chawama Youth project coordinator. Chawama Youth Project and Skills Training center has since its registration in 2001 trained over 300 people in different fields that include *carpentry and joinery, tailoring and design, welding and metal fabrication, auto mechanics, house wiring and power electrical among others*.

The Skills Training Centre has not relented but has become ambitious in exploring new Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). It recently put in place an ICT center that would enable youths and other clients from the local community to access the Internet and other computer-based secretarial services easily.

"After undertaking some training in computers at Microlink and supported by IICD, we felt it necessary to have an Internet café in our premises. We approached an organisation called Step Out, which linked us to IICD's Small Inititaive Fund (SIF) support programme. IICD provided start-up support in the form of two computers, a scanner and a printer, and also helped us to get connected to the Internet" Mulenga added.
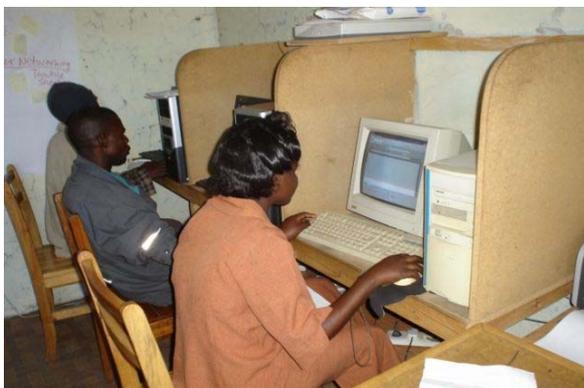
The youth project has become so popular not only to the youth but to all people in the local community and even to people that come from places fetched 15 kilometres away to access the services it provides.

The office of the Chawama Youth Project

Nicolas Bwalya who is the ICT instructor at the Skills Training Centre says the ICT centre has become small to cater for the demand for its services. *"We are being overwhelmed every day by people that want their letters, proposals and other documents to be written and printed for them. We also have a lot of people coming to use the Internet facility and send emails,"* he observed. Bwalya further noted that there was need to furbish the ICT centre with more computers that were connected to the Internet and also to increase the number of printers and scanners so that customers would not have to be turned away due to lack of capacity to serve them.

Director of Chawama Youth Project Justin Somi noted that the projects new and viable section of the ICT centre was a very necessary augmentation to its activities. *"We have started offering lessons in computer skills and how to use the Internet to our trainees. This is important to them because we are in the age of information technologies and most businesses now use IT in one way or other,"* he said.

Trainees are enhancing their capacities.

Somi further added that the local community was also being trained on how to access the Internet and use the information for their benefit. He said they were being trained in using the Internet to communicate with friends and relatives abroad. They were also using it to learn of new business opportunities and of scholarships. He said the trainees are also exposed to such trainings as proposal writing among other skills.

"It was very difficult for many members of the community to access the Internet and send emails conveniently in the past. People needed to travel to town and spent a lot of money in order to send an email or to have their letters and proposals

done. The ICT centre has changed all this by bringing these facilities closer to home," observed Somi.

Training on proposal and report writing formats from the Internet has proved most effective and draws a lot of people to the centre. These skills help the trainees' source funds for the various projects that most of them carry out around their communities.

Interconnecting rural and urban youth

The Youth Project has not relented in its ambitions to expand their horizons even further. They want to become an interconnecting centre for rural and urban youths in cultural and tourism exchanges. These measures are aimed at equipping the youth with skills that would help them for the rest of their lives.

Justin Somi, the Director of the Chawama Youth project, explains: "Our vision is to set up a youth tourism centre here that would expose our activities to the rural areas and also help them have life skills that we offer. We also plan to use the ICT centre to connect us with others and introduce cultural exchange as part of our diversification programmes. These ICTs will really expand our spectrum and expose us to a lot of information that is important to our development, for instance we are also learning new skills such as desktop publishing that show us how to make cards for different occasion like weddings. We sell these cards in order to make some money for the development of our centre".

The coordinator of the project Rodgers Mulenga however noted that they face a number of pullbacks. *"We are currently using dial-up-link to access the Internet, this is proving a bit expensive. We have to pay for the line at ZAMNET and also for the phone lines with ZAMTEL,"* he said.

The ICT centre offers its services at very minimal charges to the local community in order to sustain the equipment and pay the instructor who also looks after the ICT centre. This also helps cushion the service bills from ZAMNET and ZAMTEL..

Sustenance of the project also comes from profits from sales of the furniture and tailoring materials that trainees in other skills produce. *"The ICT centre has also started burning CDs which has become a viable business in Zambia. We receive a lot of requests for these services but we can only do so much because we lack the capacity. We have only one computer that can burn CDs. With a few more such computers and with this high demand for recording, we plan to go into music recording. This will be more profitable and help us sustain the project even better but we need that technology to start with,"* Mulenga observed.

He noted that Zambia has in the past few years seen an increase in the music business with a lot of youth getting into it. *"Most youth from Chawama are interested in recording music albums but they have nowhere to do it within the community. This forces them to go to far places for their recording where the charges are too high,"* he said. The Chawama Youth project wants to ensure that youth from the local community participates and benefits from the booming music industry by providing them with affordable music recording facilities. This measure would bring them some income through proceeds from record sales, which would contribute to the further expansion and sustainability of the project.

Innovations

The ICT centre has innovatively been producing calendars, wedding cards, business cards and others to add to its sustenance. As part of its IICD's support, the Youth Project recently obtained a digital camera that facilitates the provision of such services. The Chawama youth project and Skills Training Center has brought skills and a new lease on life to youths and women of Chawama indeed. But as viable as it is, it could do even better with more technological capacity.

"We are currently looking for people that can support us to have our own wireless link to the Internet because this will save us a lot of costs through line and telephone bills. With a few more computers we can also have more access to the computer and be able to share them with clients because now we do not have that capacity," the project coordinator added. The Chawama youth project is indeed viable because it brings skills to youths and women that help reduce poverty, remove them off the street and from prostitution. It offers them skills that they could use even if they were not in formal employment. This is what sustainable development is all about.

More information

For more information on this Chawama project, please contact the coordinator, Rodgers Mulenga at youth2004project@yahoo.co.uk or IICD at information@iicd.org.

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The skills training center of Chawama has since its registration in 2001 trained over 300 people in different fields, including auto mechanics.

*The **Media and ICT's Network for Development** (MIND) is a non profit making Organisation (NGO) designed to contribute to enhancement of ICT's in Zambia and Internationally through partnering with ICT stakeholders in various ICT activities, sharing ICT developments, and encouraging members to write analytical ICT articles. In Zambia, they work with organisations such as One World Africa, Computer Society of Zambia, E-Brain Forum of Zambia, PANOS Southern Africa and others. Against this background, in their on-going activities of partnering with like-minded organisations, they seek to find more organisations that would like to*

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