

Interview with

Rossette Kyakyo

Founder of SYRADO

Slum Youth Rehabilitation and Development Organisation
Uganda

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Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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IICBA: Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

My name is Rossette Kyakyo. I am the founder of a youth- and women-led NGO and Team Leader for Slum Youth Rehabilitation and Development Organization (SYRADO). I have a postgraduate diploma in Monitoring and Evaluation from the Uganda Management Institute, a degree in social sciences from Makerere University (majoring in social work and social administration), a diploma in social media marketing from SHAW Academy, a diploma in Guidance and Counselling from YMCA, a certificate in Home and community HIV/AIDS care, and a certificate in Digital marketing.

I am listing these diplomas and certificates because they have provided me with skills to become a champion and activist for adolescent girls and young women who are marginalized in the slums of Uganda. I have experience in youth advocacy and social enterprise. I continue to learn a lot and conduct research on how to effectively empower youth and women, including teenage girls who are marginalized. This includes the chronic poor, sex workers, young people living with HIV, refugees, and drug addicts living in the slums in Uganda. I have so far trained over 400 youth with entrepreneurship skills, 100 of whom are now business owners. Recycling trash into treasure has created businesses for HIV+ teenage girls living in the slums, among others through making briquettes, decorative bottles, straw doormats, and paper beads, all of which also helps with environmental protection and climate change mitigation.

Background: This series of interviews was prepared for Africa Youth Day celebrated on November 1 each year. Youth are defined by the African Union as the population from 15 to 35 years of age. The African Union Commission through the Women, Gender, and Youth Directorate (WGYP) is commemorating African Youth Day 2023 through month-long activities under the theme “1 Million Next Level is Knocking: Youth-led Movement that Transcends Borders.” The theme is a call to all youth development stakeholders, member states, and partners to mobilize, implement and support the 1 Million Next Level Initiative through creating and accelerating opportunities for youth in the 4Es +H (Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Engagement + Health and wellbeing). The youth featured in this series of interviews are exemplary in their work in service to others in the areas covered by 4Es+H.



IICBA: You created SYRADO in Uganda? What is the history of the organization and how did you go about creating it?

SYRADO Uganda is a young women-led not for profit that works with youth in slum communities to improve their livelihood. We integrate actions in economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health rights, the prevention of gender-based violence, climate change mitigation and environmental protection, and mental health and emergency relief to support adolescent girls, young mothers, and other vulnerable youth in the slum communities in Kampala. SYRADO mainstreams gender, leadership, and advocacy through its programs. We empower youth to form groups through which they learn and participate in development processes.

SYRADO was born out of the need to change slum communities into cities. Growing up as an orphan I had the drive to study. I paid for my studies myself since high school up to where I am now. There are divine helpers that helped me along the way. So I wanted to do the same for unfortunate youth like me at the time. Most youth in slums live in absolute poverty not because of their own making but because of unfortunate circumstances like the death of their parents, chronic poverty, gender-based violence, discrimination, and stagnation among others. Instead of helping them, politicians were taking advantage of the situation by promising slum youth money to riot, and they would end up in prison. I knew the only way they can be fully empowered would be equipping them with employable skills that would solve their community problems like poor living conditions, stigma, and lack of information while earning a living. I know it was a calling and my life's purpose to support slum youth to reach their full potential.

All those ideas were in my head, but I did not know how to implement them until I attended the African Youth Summit in 2018 that was held in Nairobi, Kenya. During the conference I interacted with many youths who were doing an amazing job in their respective African countries. I learned a lot from the interactions. They opened my eyes to many possibilities and how to implement different initiatives. SYRADO was born in October 2018.

IICBA: What are some of the initiatives that you are currently leading?

I am currently leading several initiatives. The first is about menstrual hygiene management to end period poverty in slums and UPE (universal primary education) schools. This is done through advocacy for better health and WASH





(Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities for girls in the schools, movement building, and information sharing. We also train girls on how to make re-usable pads by using available materials in the community. A second initiative is recycling trash into treasure. This is aimed at climate change mitigation and environmental protection while earning income for youths and especially young women. This is done through making beautiful artifacts using recycled materials like bottles, straws, and kavera. The slum has a problem of drainage blockages and flooding due to poor waste management, so we aim to solve that problem while earning income. I am also part of the Girls not Brides Uganda network with the aim to end child marriage and we are working on the concept to celebrate the African girl's day as partners.

IICBA: What are some of the obstacles that you encounter in your work and how do you overcome them?

This social development work that we do has many challenges, but most of them are financial, political, and cultural. Financially, we depend on donations and grants which are not stable and sometimes it can be so hard when it comes to sustainability. The way we deal with it is to have various income sources like member contributions and local fundraising. Politically, the climate is somehow limiting as we have to stay conscious of what we do or say as civil society. The way we have managed this is to work alongside the government when implementing our projects. Culturally, the ghetto culture is hard to penetrate. The youth in slums are so used to being given handouts that they don't like working or studying. We have overcome this with a lot of mindsets change training before we begin the skilling.

IICBA: What are some of the opportunities that you see available for your work and the youth you serve?

We have skilling opportunities in ITC, photography, hair dressing, tailoring, and reusable pads making. We also have art for health where we are using visual art to curb mental health and use it for rehabilitation. We create and organize youth into groups and make them ready for funding support through training.

IICBA: What could authorities and various organizations do to improve opportunities for youth in Uganda?

There is a need to work together as organizations through networks to attract funding so that projects that support youth can increase and be improved. We also need to promote accountability, transparency, sustainability, and learning so that the intended beneficiaries can indeed benefit.

IICBA: Did any specific person inspire you in doing this type of work? If so, who was it and how did that person inspire you?

Many people inspired me. Let me mention Dr. Victoria Kisaakye Kanobe at UNESCO IICBA who does an amazing job on the African Continent as an educator and mentor. I would also like to mention youth from the Africa Youth Summit of 2018 in Nairobi. They taught me that starting small is better than not doing anything at all. I also would like to mention Mrs. Josephine Kanabo who works with women who have been raped by taking them through a healing process, counselling and skilling them. She taught me about the community development model that I



IICBA: Looking back, is there something you would do differently?

I wouldn't change a thing because I believe that every experience is an opportunity to learn. That said, I could have begun SYRADO in 2015 when I completed university. I feel I wasted a lot of time, and many youths went to prison or died on overdose because there was no one to support them and all the people just wanted to use them.

IICBA: Finally, could you please share a personal anecdote about yourself?

I am an Ambivert who can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.



started with and am still using to-date. This community development model helps to keep moving even when finances are not available. The model relies on community resources where community members are rallied to the cause of their own development, using what they have.

IICBA: What advice do you have for other youth in Uganda, and more generally in Africa?

Africa's largest population are youth. In Uganda 78 percent of the population are youth and children, which means that there is a high dependence burden. This also means that there is high unemployment. Despite all the stated and other challenges, youth have what it takes to change their narrative. Don't despise jobs, seek opportunities, and take them with two hands and work hard. Your dreams are valid but remember to turn those dreams into reality by working hard on them. Lastly be the change you want to see: your community depends on you. Change makers never quit or retire. As the majority population in Africa, as youth we have the ability to write our own story for the Africa we want.

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