

Finding the Word for Entrepreneur in Luganda

On March 29, 2010, we watched the birth of our first calf conceived using modern technology. As she entered the world, I was struck by how quickly she managed to stand on her feet. For such a delicate animal—when she lay in the grass her skinny legs looked like a pile of sticks—she was impressively strong.

Our new addition was a breath of fresh air, but more than that, she was the tangible result of the several years I'd spent conducting research on the internet and reading articles about animal husbandry—studies that no one in my family had thought to undertake before that. She represented a progression toward greater self-sufficiency and more dependable revenue for the farm, and thus toward greater stability for those of us who depend on the land.

A year earlier, we had lost my heifer to East Coast fever, a common disease affecting farm animals in my home region of Kayunga, Uganda. It's hard for anyone who did not grow up on a small family farm to understand how much loss and devastation such a death causes in terms of potential income generated from the farm, and all the effort expended in taking care of the animals. Also, it greatly affects the family's ability to pay school fees, which come through the sale of farm animals. We agonized over the details. Which warning signs did we miss? Could we have intervened if we had recognized them?

No doubt this sort of unpredictable stress, a hallmark of farming life, is the reason many of my peers sought paths to more “professional” careers in sectors like technology, government, banking, and business. At 25, I am one of the very few in my age group who want to stay on the farm.

Though my family has managed the farm—troubleshooting and performing daily crisis interventions—for three generations, my grandfather and father still lacked the expertise to respond to East Coast fever. They fit into a wider culture of

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local farmers who fail to see the opportunities offered by agribusiness practices. I don't blame them for this shortsightedness; if I've learned anything about entrepreneurship, it's that not all entrepreneurs are "born entrepreneurs." Entrepreneurial farm owners like myself are a product of the right environment: one that inspires, and that nurtures imaginative interpretations of "what could be." And, in most cases, this current of innovative ideas must be injected into a community.

My father and I beamed over our newborn calf, relieved that our first experiment had succeeded. The farm's newfound vitality wobbled tenuously, as if balanced upon scrawny legs itself, but this first step proved our resilience. And it was an argument, however small, that perhaps I was onto something in believing that my generation could and should pursue innovative, business-savvy farming as a stable livelihood.

NO WORD IN LUGANDA FOR ENTREPRENEUR

It is difficult to translate the word "entrepreneur" into my native tongue, Luganda.

Most of my friends come from farming families, but few of them have any interest in managing their farms for a living. Agribusiness skills aren't taught in local schools, though our population is overwhelmingly agrarian; instead, most young people aspire to an education that will lead to respected professional jobs. This avenue is widely viewed as the best choice for a well-educated young man, as so few people are aware of the economic potential presented by the land.

I was privileged and grateful to be sent to a good local boarding school. This was possible because my dad had established himself in Kampala, the capital, where he could spend a few days each week repairing automobile electrical systems. That extra income meant he could afford to send my siblings and me to boarding school.

The annual cost for us to attend boarding school was 3,000,000 Uganda shillings or approximately \$1,200 US. During vacations from school, I recall biking from my family's home to the farm each morning to milk the cows; this always felt like dull maintenance work, as the indigenous cows we had at that time yielded so little milk. It was just one of the many endless chores our family performed every day to ensure our security, but ultimately they did nothing to improve our fate. At 16, my father enrolled me in supplementary computer lessons, which I would attend in the afternoons after I completed my chores. I looked forward eagerly to the lessons, seeing them as a more productive use of my time.

It was around this time I also began managing the farm, taking over for my father by overseeing all operations. He had dedicated years to preparing me for this transition, patiently passing on his acquired skills in farming, husbandry, and electrical installation. But I continued to think of the farm as a part-time duty that served merely to subsidize my studies and keep my family afloat.

Like so many of my peers, I too would have sought employment in the technology sector after graduation, were it not for the training I received through a

program called STRYDE (Strengthening Rural Youth Development through Enterprise).

STRYDE is a four-year regional youth enterprise development program run by Technoserve, which enables youth aged 18 to 30 to transition more successfully to economically independent adulthood. It begins with a three-month training course containing five training modules: personal effectiveness, personal finance, professional effectiveness, entrepreneurship, and agribusiness. After the training, participants engage in a nine-month aftercare program that involves a mentorship program with a local business, job fairs and expos, finance clinics, and a business plan competition. The objective of the training is to push participants to see past the limiting local status quo—traditional farming methods people have adhered to for decades—and to challenge us to consider how to scale our farming operations, address long-standing problems like East Coast fever, and recognize new opportunities for expansion. It encourages us to think of agribusiness as a potentially powerful use of our educational backgrounds in business and technology, thus increasing our opportunity, ability, and motivation to engage in income-generating activities. For four hours a day, twice a week, I and 24 other participants learned finance, business, and entrepreneurial skills as they applied to the land.

It wasn't until this training that I began to see the land as an expansive blank canvas. After all, what can be made of soil, water, and sunlight? Nearly anything. The course opened my eyes to the potential of the assets I already had at my disposal, and allowed me to acknowledge my strengths and the opportunities that literally existed in my own back yard; in fact, in our own back yard I established a zero grazing unit, keeping some cows under intensive management with restricted movement, unlike the free range on the larger farm I am running as a business. Perhaps more importantly, the course boosted my confidence that I could succeed with such initiatives as sustainable business models.

Ultimately, I chose to bet on the land, abandoning technology for an adventurous future in agribusiness. Small victories have convinced me that this is a viable option not only for myself, but also for other young Ugandans.

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GETTING INTO THE RESEARCH AND SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP WORLD

In 2012 I was one of nine young people aged 19 to 24 invited to join the MasterCard Foundation's Youth Think Tank as a part-time researcher to conduct qualitative research about the employment and enterprise experiences of young people in Uganda. Along with my peers from Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, and Sierra

The Youth Think Tank Report

The most rewarding part of the interview process for me was getting insights about unemployment that are based on views and experiences of ... peers and community helpers. Given the fact that I serve a youth organization, these will be used to design more suitable projects for the youth in my community... The most challenging part of the interview process was translating some words, specifically “an entrepreneur,” to the local dialect that some interviewees could understand.

Leone, I gathered insights to answer this question: How can we increase youth employment (formal, informal, and self-employment) in growth sectors such as agribusiness, green growth, information and communications technology, and financial services? Together we conducted 160 interviews; then, through 10 days of online discussion and a 2-day face-to-face session in Nairobi, we wrote the report.¹

“Experts” who come from a very different reality often try to intuit the needs of youth on the cusp of their productive lives, based on a set of demographics or statistics about youth unemployment, but few have thought to interface directly with them. Perhaps because I am in this phase of life myself—because I have the perspective of a young man from rural Africa—I see great value in programs like the Think Tank. This is my own future in the hands of governments, NGOs, and big business.

As we compiled these personal stories in the Think Tank project, we saw that youth in East Africa consistently said they wanted “increased access to leaders and decision-making processes.” They also wanted to know more about professional options, and “the markets and industries that hold the greatest opportunities for employment,” and said they needed greater access to employment and entrepreneurship training programs. We believe that if these young people are included in decision-making processes, often provided by programs like STRYDE, they will be more likely to succeed.

On a personal level, I have benefitted tremendously from the network I developed through the program. Surrounding myself with creative, solution-oriented individuals has been socially and economically empowering, allowing me to further explore my own farm’s potential. But more importantly, it has inspired me to think about how I could help my own community. The group nurtures a mentality that values entrepreneurial solutions to social problems, and it is this supportive ecosystem that drives my own volunteer work with agribusiness forward.

I had observed that my peers, who had no agribusiness education, were not behaving in economically rational ways. As this was severely affecting the standard of living among youth in my local community, I set about looking for solutions. Armed with new knowledge about the needs of local youth and a new focus on social entrepreneurship, last year I dedicated myself to building on a nonprofit concept I developed three years ago. The organization, Countryside Youth

Foundation (CSYF), allows me to share with others the confidence I gained from programs like STRYDE. CSYF encourages young people to look for existing opportunities that are just waiting to be recognized.

CSYF provides agrarian youth in my home district with increased access to information through publications provided by the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA). Among the topics covered are animal husbandry, crop production, handling harvests and storage, and marketing produce, as well as information technology. I had a theory that if the family farm was framed as a social enterprise, one that addresses social and economic challenges in rural Africa, then more young people would be interested in dedicating themselves to farming. CSYF is testing that theory in action; it is my hope that the organization will allow youth to empower other youth in the community by increasing their knowledge, and therefore their economic potential.

Professional jobs in the tech industry and other sectors are by no means less worthy career paths; the local educational trend that fosters such preferences is valuable in its own right. But continued support for agrarian enterprises and the sustained introduction of innovation are crucial, not only to the individuals who make a living off the land, but also to the survival and growth of the community as a whole. A healthy agribusiness community reduces local vulnerability, but schools are not teaching children how to manage a farm and farming apprenticeships are nearly non-existent. So we must work to evolve a solution.

THE CHANGE IN OUR FARM AND MY ASPIRATIONS

Among other things, my agribusiness training has coached me to address East Coast fever on our farm, preventing the deaths of dozens of our animals. In part, my ability to dedicate my time to the farm, rather than to other economic pursuits, is responsible for this change. A business-minded approach has allowed me to carve out a livelihood for the family from land that previously provided us only with a precarious subsistence.

Artificial insemination was another strategy I introduced to our farm. We also introduced a composting program that saves us money we would normally spend

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on fertilizer and brings in a little extra income, as we've begun selling our compost to other farms in the area.

The programs I participated in did not specifically recommend initiatives like these. Rather, they were valuable because they encouraged us to take a broader perspective on the possibilities each of us had at our disposal. They challenged the participants in the programs to see the opportunities in commercializing and scaling already-existing activities; I was inspired to greatly expand our farm's dairy operations. My family expects we will soon produce roughly 100 liters of milk per day, and I am currently revising the business plan for submission to the competition run by STRYDE.

Mine has been a journey with many legs, accumulating greater security for my family and, hopefully, an opportunity to make a valuable contribution to my community. The CSYF has trained 10 young people in its first three months, but the next step is to establish the foundation as a powerful training and information resource for youth in all nine sub-counties in the district.

My work with CSYF is intended to contribute to a new local tradition of thriving entrepreneurship and solution-oriented thinking. I would not expect my children to choose agribusiness—I hope that they can have the education and training they need to follow their own dreams and pursue their own interests—but CSYF is the brick I can offer to the construction of such an enterprising culture.

If Luganda does not yet have a word for “entrepreneur,” then I figure it's my generation's charge to invent one.

1. Available at <http://www.mastercardfdn.org/wp-content/uploads/Youth-Think-Tank-Final-Report-June-2013.pdf>