

Chapter 8 pathway notes

Changing society from the inside out: Equipping young leaders and mentors

Designing inclusive pathways with young adults: A pathway from the Democratic Republic of Congo

Purpose

These pathway notes support chapter 8 of the book: *Designing inclusive pathways with young adults: Learning and development for a better world*. The chapter profiles the work of The Congo Tree (TCT) - a youth development charity based in the Democrat Republic of Congo (DRC) and the UK. The chapter explains TCT's approach to developing young leaders, beginning with personal change. TCT's action learning process is led by local teams in the DRC and supported by the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL). Locally, the aim is to equip young people through training, mentoring, social action and enterprise projects that are designed and implemented by TCT's participants. Organizations interested in this approach should contact The Congo Tree via its website at www.thecongotree.org.uk

GULL welcomes affiliation with any organization working with marginalized young people and the purpose of these pathway notes is to assist those who are using or developing a similar approach. For more details about how to affiliate with GULL please see: www.gullonline.org/affiliate

Background

DRC's long-running civil war ended in 2003 yet despite numerous peace-building initiatives, violence has not subsided in the east of the country. It is amongst the most poorly ranked countries in the world for peace indicators and even though the DRC has significant mineral wealth (especially in its eastern regions), it remains mired in mass poverty.

TCT's Co-Founders Heidi Bentley and Amy Cummings met in 2012 on an internship programme in the DRC operated by the UK-based charity Tearfund. During a period of insecurity, they were evacuated to Rwanda which is where they discovered they had a shared interest in youth development. A few months later, they were back in Goma, DRC and on a visit to one of Tearfund's partners, observed a training session during which the facilitator explained how HIV/AIDS is transmitted to a group of young people. Heidi and Amy were surprised by their response. These youngsters said: 'Provide us with a minibus and material and we'll go and take this training back to our communities.' After the session, they were reflecting on what they'd seen and heard and decided to establish an agency geared towards youth development in the DRC. TCT aspires to equip young people to address many of the challenges facing the DRC and aims to inspire them to lead and work together at home, in the community and at the national level. This chapter outlines TCT's approach to developing young leaders, beginning with personal change. TCT's action learning process is led by local teams in the DRC and supported by the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL). Locally, the aim is to equip young people through training, mentoring, social action and enterprise projects that are designed and implemented by TCT's participants.

Pathway implementation

TCT's Leadership Development Training Programme (LDTP) uses shared or peer learning to develop skills in:

- Practical life-based problem-solving;
- Strategic future planning;
- Self-directed lifelong learning (especially character development, servant leadership and team-working).

During the LDTP, volunteer Leader Mentors (LMs) are paired with Young Leaders (YLS) for a minimum period of 12 months. TCT facilitates monthly meetings with all LMs and YLS and each monthly meeting focuses on a specific theme to encourage personal development and growth through discussion and peer learning. The LDTP also features a project component and LMs and YLS are asked to develop a creative enterprise or social action project to address a need they have identified in their own community. TCT's affiliation with GULL has helped to strengthen the project component and LMs who opt in to the TCT with GULL pathway to Professional Bachelor degree must participate in all aspects of the on-going programme, assume project leadership and involve their YL mentee in the various phases of project implementation.

As the YLs grow in confidence and reach the age of 18, they too can enrol in the TCT with GULL pathway by accepting a voluntary LM role. After successfully completing 12 months in this role, they can apply to become an Intern. This step-by-step progression means that all TCT's participants are given the opportunity to complete the GULL professional Bachelor (B) pathway level (L) 4 (Associate degree) and those who progress to an internship position continue to BL5, GULL's Bachelor of Professional Studies degree. At both BL4 and BL5, participants are expected to demonstrate sufficiency in specific outcomes. Interns are expected to act as role models and lead the LMs and YLs by organizing and facilitating the on-going development process. They are also expected to assume role specific project co-ordination and management responsibilities.

Extracts from an interview with Heidi Bentley and Amy Cummings, Co-Founders, The Congo Tree

Is the 'Congo Tree' name a symbol of self-directed youth development?

The imagery of a tree signifies for us the seeds of potential. The goal is to help create strong young people (rather like the role of the trunk in bearing the rest of the tree) by mentoring them so that benefits flow (like a flourishing tree). That's our vision in terms of the tree as a metaphor for development. Every time we visit the DRC, we can see progress. Our first training event was in April 2013 and we plan to visit twice a year. During our visit in February 2014 we sat with those who'd been on the pilot programme and explored with the group what is working / what is not working / and how we might make changes to advance and improve. Arising from these conversations, we all felt that there was a need and a role for young interns who could help to develop the local structures. This is a pragmatic response to both need and growth as we don't have the resources to employ full-time staff. It is also an appropriate response given that CT is seeking to develop and release the potential in young people.

At the moment, we have a team leader and a finance manager, both of whom are volunteers, supported by a small number of interns. The team leader has been involved from the inception of the Congo Tree, was already working with young people and has the experience needed to understand and translate our curriculum. While the local team share our vision, the challenge we face is that they have full-time jobs (Congo Tree is their spare time activity) and now that 50 young people have gone through the initial phase of CT training, we need to think about ways of augmenting the support we provide as the work expands.

To what extent is your vision for youth development in the DRC influenced by your own backgrounds?

Heidi: My involvement in youth work began after completing a degree in Theology when I volunteered with the UK Street Pastors movement. This experience helped me to better understand the importance of talking things through with young people and also being available to them. It also gave me some insights on the power of team-working in the community. After that, I began working with young people in inner city areas and particularly with young people who had been expelled or were about to be expelled from school. I ended up working in this sphere of informal education and I managed a team in the North of Birmingham, UK that met with young people on the streets to provide practical educational input. By creating meeting opportunities in various locations, we were able to share learning on a range of topics. We did all that we could to think creatively about ways of engaging with marginalized youth and gradually, I became involved in a broader community development role, including a number of larger scale projects in Birmingham that sought to explore ways in which communities might develop through collaboration. I've also worked with multi faith groups on different ways in which people can respect differences and work together.

Later, I found myself volunteering in the DRC with an interest in and a role that involved facilitating community development and specifically how community participation works in a humanitarian relief context. During this period, I visited a number of agencies in Goma and saw that others were developing youth work though they seemed to have got stuck in a 'meeting together and chatting it through' mode. They were clearly enthusiastic but there didn't seem to be any on-going action! So together with Amy, we developed a project plan - we hadn't intended to do this or to set-up a new agency (now the Congo Tree) but we decided that after completing our internships in the DRC we'd return to establish a youth development initiative. As we were planning, we began to realize that we'd need to register our activity and fund-raise in support of our efforts and so concluded that we'd need to establish an NGO and that became 'the Congo Tree'.

Amy: My journey began in the field of Medical Science though during and after my university years I worked with inner city kids. During my time in Toronto, Canada I lived in a low income, subsidized housing area where I worked with gangs and was involved in tutoring young people on a voluntary basis.

I felt drawn to these particular areas of volunteering and I used my time where I could for this purpose. I also had a strong desire to work in the DRC and I had to decide between that option or an alternative route as a social worker. I felt really torn because I felt very committed to both paths not least because there is great need in both areas. I ended up feeling that the DRC was the right direction for me and it's exciting to be involved in exploring ways of addressing the need via CT. I still have an interest and involvement in humanitarian and development work as that's still my part-time job with Tearfund UK.

Changing society from the inside out

Given the continuing cycles of violence and the scale of humanitarian need, TCT believes the Congolese will need to be their own change agents. Heidi and Amy hope that TCT's young leaders can bring about cultural change and help to re-frame personal development in the DRC in response to the problems caused by cyclical violence: 'It perpetuates anxiety and fear and, given the fluctuations in the cost of living, these and other factors tend to encourage opportunistic behaviour. If the older generation continue with opportunistic behaviour and lifestyles, they will become the cultural norm and will be passed on to young people.'

Heidi and Amy also foresee a strategic role for GULL in TCT's agenda for youth leadership development: 'We believe that GULL can support all our work as it provides recognition of the progress made and incentivizes participants to reach out to the places where there is little or no access to organized educational provision.' TCT's longer-term vision is that Congolese youth will lead the equipping of other Congolese youth, supported by GULL and in so doing, they will learn how to make whatever changes are needed to ensure that TCT with GULL is relevant and accessible to youth in rural communities, using local languages. Heidi and Amy also hope that TCT with GULL can be used as a tool in literacy training and development: 'We want to make it as easy as possible for youth in the DRC to use TCT with GULL as a starting point for a continuing lifelong action learning journey'.