



# Start Small and then Grow Big

Blog by:

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Throughout my one day field visit to the Youth in Action (YiA) Program in the Kabarole District of Uganda, I heard facilitators and youth participating in the program repeat this phrase many times. “You start small and then grow big”. This concept forms part of the learning that sticks with youth as they embark on their single or group enterprises, the main pathway chosen by the youth in Uganda.

Kabarole, is one of 112 districts in Uganda. Youth in Action operates in 4 of them. Kabarole in the West part of Uganda is beautiful; Green and lush mountains and fields, with soil rich and ready for all types of agriculture. Cassava, maize, Irish and sweet potatoes, bananas, mangoes, coffee, nuts, tea, all types of beans, including a curious type called cow peas are some of the foods that can be grown on this land.

It is raining and the winding road we are on as we make our way to the highlands to visit a YiA graduate. The road to his home is muddy. Our driver worries that we will be stuck as he manoeuvres the car up the mountain. We finally arrive to RickDan Bakuko’s family home, a modest wood structure of 3 rooms. The family kindly invites us inside their home. The floor is covered with dried banana leaves. It is dark inside. There is an old sofa to the right where his entire family and friends sit and stand. They bring plastic chairs for us to sit in as we talk and try to learn a little bit about RickDan.

RickDan is a graduate of the YIA program. He is 20 years of age and the oldest child in a family of 13 kids. His mother shared with us that Rick was a playful child growing up but that after dropping out of school in 2013 because the family could not afford the fees, Rick had been idle. When Rick heard a about YIA he says, “ I saw it as an opportunity to learn how to read and write as well as a mean to start a business in agriculture, something that I has a passion for”. Since graduating, Rick’s good business sense, his hard work and his discipline of saving have led him to multiply many times over the modest \$90 dollars that he received in cash from the program to start his own business enterprise. He said in the program, “I learned how to read and write and how to use and save money. I learned “you can start small and then grow”.

Upon graduation, RickDan decided that he would focus his enterprise on cultivating what they call cow peas, peas that resemble small white beans. During his first harvest he made a modest profit and quickly realized that onions were more profitable. He diversified and made even more of a profit with onions. In the past year and half he has not looked back. By reinvesting his profits into different initiatives, including the raising of goats, cows and even a fish pond that he dug up using the most basic of tools, where he is growing tilapia, as well as putting aside a portion into a YIA savings group, Rick is on his way to having enough to buy his own plot of land. His success has greatly benefited his family, particularly his brothers and sisters who are now able to go to school because the family can afford the school fees. Surrounded by his parents and grandfather, Rick is clearly respected and admired by his family but also by other youth in the community who look up to him as a role model. Rick’s success therefore has to be understood in light of all of the intended and unintended consequences of what it means to give an opportunity to a young person in a small and remote rural community. Areas where there is no electricity, no internet connectivity, no formal employment and where kids are dropping out of a school system that charges fees they can’t afford and is of such poor quality that even after 7 years Rick did not know how to read or write. In this context, being able to do something productive, having plans and dreaming of a better future for yourself and your family is hugely powerful. Yet no different than what our own youth here in Canada yearn for. Throughout the day I was reminded over and over again of how similar young people are

everywhere. Their energy, their sense of humour, their impatience and their willingness to take risks struck me while visiting learning centres and youth either working individually or in groups in joint enterprises. Like Rick, all the youth are in the midst of testing and trying out different combinations of products or animals, to sell in various market places that take place during the week in their communities. They all keep scrupulous written records of all of their transactions which they proudly shared with me. In fact, I discovered that it was by opening up their books to me that the memories of their business journeys come to life. It is through the numbers, the record of each seed or animal that they have purchased and sold, of the profits, losses and savings, that their memories are triggered.

I finished my day feeling inspired by what YiA does in a country that is home to the second youngest population in the world, with 78% of its population being under 30 years of age and 83% among them are unemployed while 65% of youth people live in rural areas. The program is contributing to making a difference by giving youth a voice and a way to tap into their own energies and talents to develop and be productive members of their society. By learning that through hard work and perseverance, you can grow small ideas into big ideas, these young people are examples of what is possible.