

Making Markets Work for Youth: YouLead Forges Ahead in Nigeria

In November 2014, Cuso International officially launched its groundbreaking initiative in southern Nigeria known as YouLead.

The Youth Leadership, Entrepreneurship, Access and Development project is a five-year, \$15 million project, supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD). YouLead will support 7,000 young entrepreneurs as they work to create and expand small and micro businesses, generating employment and touching the lives of more than 12,000 young women and men in Nigeria. The project's "multiplier effect" will allow tens of thousands more—families, friends and communities—to benefit indirectly, through training, community development and improved livelihoods.

The goal of the project is to create sustainable economic activity that will reduce poverty and inequality over the long term for the population living in Nigeria's resource-rich region of Cross River State (CRS). "Green jobs in a green economy" is a defining tag for YouLead.

While YouLead is of itself an ambitious and well planned sustainable economic development initiative, it also heralds a new era for Cuso International. During the next five years, the intention is to actively move toward project-based development, all the while continuing to send volunteers to work with partners on the ground. The plan with YouLead includes design and implementation of the project, placement of North American volunteers, and also engaging Nigerian youth as in-country or national volunteers. To ensure the success of a project of this magnitude, Cuso International is partnering with MEDA-Canada (Mennonite Economic Development Associates), the CRS government, and Nigerian civil society partners.

"This project responds to the needs and the vision of the communities in Cross River State," explains Kenna Owoh, a Cuso International program development advisor assigned to YouLead. "The government of Cross River State has a clear vision of how it might work to improve youth livelihoods through entrepreneurship and employment. The state has set up technical schools, access to financing and entrepreneurial training," says Kenna. "It has put together a strong structure to make it happen, but it needs partners to support that vision and help to make it happen . . . and that's where YouLead and Cuso International come in."

Located in southeastern Nigeria, Cross River State is home to more than 3.5 million people. The state is also home to a burgeoning population of young people, numbering more than 1 million. And while that demographic should bring with it the energy and potential for a bright future, as it stands, close to 50 per cent of these youth are either unemployed or underemployed.

Cross River State encompasses rich, diverse and environmentally sensitive ecosystems. Mangrove and swamp forests stretch across the southern part of the state, while tropical rain forests characterize the central region, reaching toward the woodland savannas of northern Cross River State. In between these forested areas are rich agricultural lands with plantations of cocoa, rubber and palm oil, as well as food crops for local consumption.

As the population of CRS grows, pressure on the natural environment is increasing. YouLead is founded on supporting entrepreneurship based on sustainable practices. In close coordination with local partners and governments, YouLead is spearheading a comprehensive action plan that will enable youth to identify economic alternatives, build small businesses, create

employment, access training and funding, and pursue markets for new products based on environmentally sound practices.

YouLead is structured to generate jobs by supporting young entrepreneurs in the natural resource sectors found in CRS. In its first year, YouLead will pilot projects in six of the 18 local government areas (LGAs) of Cross River State. Each pilot project will assess and determine which products can be derived from local natural resources and, as improvements are made along the market value chain, will help generate economic activity and create employment.

Once these marketable products have been identified, work with local business leaders, civil society organizations, government departments and technical schools will result in volunteers being trained in the skills they need to benefit from participating in the value chain. Cross River State products and services have their base in agriculture, aquaculture, forestry and ecotourism. Examples identified to date include rice, cassava, cocoa, non-timber forest products such as wild honey, and snail and fish farming, as well as livestock such as cattle, poultry and goats.

“The value chain for each product should allow for fair, equitable, inclusive and gender-neutral employment,” emphasizes Chris Braeuel, Cuso International YouLead Project Director, based in Calabar. “Jobs can be created in each step of the chain: growing and harvesting, cleaning, packaging, labelling, marketing, shipping, etc. The result will be environmental sustainability, employment and improved livelihoods and communities.”

Central to YouLead is the mobilization of youth participants. The Nigerian government has a long-standing, established Nigerian Youth Service Corp. Participation is mandatory for all university students; they are required to volunteer one year of service to the country in order to graduate. Each year, more than 300,000 graduates fan out to the 36 states across Nigeria. It’s estimated that YouLead will mobilize around 50 youth service corp graduates, from disciplines such as agriculture, business, communications and natural resources, among others.

Since August 2014, YouLead has had 46 Nigerian youth volunteers travelling across the municipalities or LGAs to meet young people between the ages of 18 and 35 and to encourage them to take advantage of the opportunities that joining YouLead offers. These students form a vanguard that will disseminate and deliver the project throughout the CRS. They will be deployed to train and mentor other students, and will be supported by local businesses, government and non-governmental organizations, as well as technical schools. Eventually, “train the trainer” sessions will be organized, so that volunteers can teach new volunteers essential skills, thus contributing to the multiplier effect.

A number of volunteers have already formed the first “brigade” of YouLead volunteers. Adio Ruth Temitope is a 22-year-old university student about to graduate with a degree in social studies. Ruth is enthusiastic about volunteering for YouLead in the Mkpani community of Cross River State. “The major challenge in Cross River State,” she explains, “is that most people are farmers and very few young people recognize the importance of formal education. Most of these young people are out of school and do not have jobs, so I’m meeting as many of them as I can and encouraging them to become involved in entrepreneurship and in YouLead.” Ruth’s recruiting efforts take place wherever likely candidates gather—at local cultural festivals, in cafes, walking along the street, or in meetings arranged through friends of friends. Sometimes she contacts young people by text message and includes information about the project. She also organizes workshops. “I tell them that this is an opportunity for them to be empowered and to improve their livelihoods.”

“YouLead is about self-development,” reflects Olaoluwa Adekunle , a 26-year-old graduate in mathematical sciences and YouLead volunteer in Calabar. In order to meet and chat with young people, Kunle, who was raised in the city, will often venture on foot into more remote areas of the municipality. “The biggest challenge is to overcome the lack of trust. But we tell them we are with Cuso International, that there are no school fees, that all they have to do is try it. The only thing they have to do is bring themselves,” says Kunle.

“When you volunteer with any meaningful group you are able to develop yourself almost subconsciously. You discover your acumen and that, I believe, is what I will gain . . . And, of course, putting a smile on the faces of young people is rewarding in itself.”