

Diaspora Diaries 12: Participating in the Renaissance

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Last week a young woman I know launched her very own organization called Women's Health Organization International (WHOI). Not only is it admirable to see a young sister make such a big move to positively impact others, it's especially sweet is that she launched WHOI at her 16th birthday party. When I was 16, it was definitely on my heart to help those less fortunate than me but I never thought to start my own organization. That's probably a good thing because after delving into the world of international development learning about the good, the bad, and the ambiguous of development work, I know now what I didn't know then. One of the biggest things I know now is that many of the traditional approaches and structures of international development need to go and new approaches need to come in.

One organization I've taken note of is Project Diaspora (PD). On their website they state, "Africa's development cannot continue to depend on international NGO programs and development powered by global sympathy." As a 16-year-old I strongly believed in the work of these programs and I too was moved by sympathy. Now as an adult, I agree with PD's words. Many organizations have achieved a lot of good but as a whole, things need to change. So as an African-Canadian in the Diaspora and as someone who believes in international cooperation towards development, I've taken note of a few things that I believe make PD's approach one of the ways to go about "participating in the renaissance of the continent".

The first things I've noted about PD is its relationship with the country in which it currently works. PD is based in the United States but one of its founders, TMS Ruge, was born and grew up for some time in Uganda and Kenya. I see the fact that he is Ugandan as an advantage because he can relate to the country in a way that few outsiders, well-intending as they may be can. When I heard Ruge speak at a TEDx conference in Kigali two years ago, he described the dilapidated state of school he had attended as a child. He spoke with disappointment, not sympathy, the way one might speak of a family member from whom he expects more. A family member, you can see where your loved one is standing in his or her own way and can tell them so. You also see and approach them not as beneficiaries of a three-year project but as someone with their own intelligence, goals and incredible potential and someone who you want to see succeed.

This second thing I've noted about PD's approach is that they have high standards in terms of development. In their video "Another Day Without Dignity" (<http://projectdiaspora.org/wp-content/2012/04/10/spring-2012-introducing-another-day-without-dignity/>), they point out that it isn't helpful to send shoe, clothing or even toy donations overseas where people already make a living selling these things. Instead of aiming so low and putting local sellers out of business, we should aim much *much* higher. If I want to participate in the incredible developments happening in Africa, then I must have and support bigger and more creative visions like combining theater with medicine and protecting local forms of knowledge from the continued theft of foreign pharmaceutical companies. "As

Binyavanga Wainaina, author of the satirical essay, "How to write about Africa" says in his video response to that essay,

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3d9qIHW8_3s&feature=BFa&list=FLD6lejDVPwzIVFefz1SfEgA&lf=mh_lolz), "Where will the ability of these people to feed themselves take us?"

My third and final note-to-self about PDs approach as a more effective means of African development has to do with focus. It's likely that PD has plans of working in other countries, I'm not sure, but I see that right now they work in Uganda. When I see this I think, it's a great thing to just be okay with working in one country, or one one or two projects until excellence or something close to it is achieved. Many of my friends in Africa have committed themselves to excellence in their areas of specialization. Some are businessmen and women and they are involved in ICT, fashion, graphic design, journalism, event-planning and more. Focusing on what they do and working hard encourages me not to be all over the place, because I want to do so much, but to focus on one or two things and do them well. These friends are contributing to the intellectual, cultural and economic wealth of their countries and are doing some of the best development work I know of.