

Empowerment Starts One Community at a Time!

A conversation with Philomena Amoako, former World Bank employee, driving positive change and development in Ghana

As a former World Bank employee, Philomena Amoako's retirement has been far from typical. In fact, it reads of a person passionate about giving back to her country and furthering literacy and economic development in Ghana. Founding and beginning operations for the non-profit organization Rural Communities Empowerment Center (RCEC) from the garage of her then Fairfax, Virginia home; the organization has grown to serve over 12,000 school children and teachers in communities in eastern Ghana. We recently caught up with Philomena to discuss what inspired her to give back in this way and why it has become her life's work to spread literacy to marginalized communities.

Q: Philomena, congratulations on such a fantastic effort in support of rural communities in Ghana. What inspired you to take on such an important challenge?

Philomena: Thank you, this work has been so rewarding for me. The inspiration to start RCEC came over a period of time. Each time I visited my home town (Apirede) in Ghana, there was visible deterioration of education standards, lack of teaching resources and decaying infrastructure. This town once had access to educational infrastructure such as libraries. On those visits, the teachers, school children and parents stated the urgency of having books, information, teachers' resource materials and what they considered the modern way of getting information – Information Communication and Technology (ICT).

The visible need of the people in the community was further reinforced by conversations I would have with my parents. They would always talk about the needs of the children and our conversations would always end with, *“never loose sight of where you come from.”*

When I would return to the U.S from Ghana after annual visits, I had several conversations with family and friends about my deep concern on educating the next generation and helping to support a community that had given me a solid beginning. This is where the idea of setting up a library came up.

Q: How did you work with the Apirede community to ensure that your goals matched what they had envisioned for themselves?

Philomena: It was very important to me to make sure that my plans fit the community's needs. I spent a lot of time listening to the ideas and needs of the community members. After some initial probing I realized that a library didn't quite capture all their dreams. They needed a community resource center (CRC) that would provide activities that could benefit the entire community. ICT would be an integral part of this more broad-based solution.

Q: What services do RCEC provides to the communities?

Philomena: We establish one-stop-shop community resource centers (CRCs) in rural communities. Currently we have two CRCs providing four core services: libraries, ICT programs, children's facilities, and programs for women and adolescent girls' empowerment. We form partnerships with local schools and have local champions.

We primarily target school children, adolescent girls and those who have dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out (ages 13-17). Outside of this target group, all community members have access to the facilities to organize and coordinate activities which further learning and sharing for all. Mentoring

programs are also provided in reading, writing, math and science for 13 -17 year olds. The goal is to help the children return or stay in school and/or to obtain admission to better public schools. Most importantly, the CRCs are managed by communities where they are established, in turn, promoting self sufficiency and community empowerment.

The CRCs are sustained mostly from grants from our partners, individual generous contributions, income from sewing activities, and rentals of our multi- purpose spaces and equipment for social events.

Q: In your view, what impact have you had thus far?

Philomena: I continue to be humbled by the progress we have made. In less than five years in the two communities and the surrounding areas our impact can best be summarized in the words of a young mother who said, “I didn’t have such opportunities. Now my children can better themselves.”

More specifically:

- Over 3,000 school children and teachers have taken introduction classes in ICT and the Internet.
- Gender equality is on the rise. Women are now better articulating their needs and those of their children. Adolescent school girl drop-outs are receiving training in tailoring.
- Interest in reading has increased sharply with over 7,000 people, mostly school children and teachers using the library facilities.

Q: Hearing that you began this organization from the garage of your home, truly drives home the concept of “grassroots” engagement. Tell us how you went about building this organization – literally one book at a time.

Philomena: I started building this organization with two young people from Maryland who raised their hands to get involved. They began by collecting books as school projects at their elementary and high schools. If you can image we began with a modest beginning of 300 books and soon grew to thousands – which literally took over my entire garage. I also received free books from The Book Thing in Baltimore, publishers and schools. So, I suppose my story began similar to the founder of Amazon.com!

Q: It must have been so gratifying to see the fruits of your labor become a reality when the organization was officially inaugurated in Ghana? I also understand that the Apirede CRC is located next to your family home.

Philomena: Yes, it was extremely gratifying. In 2001, RCEC obtained NGO status in Ghana and US registered charity 501(c) (3) status in 2002. In 2004 the first CRC was inaugurated in Apirede, followed by the second in Jumapo. At the opening, the Chief of Apirede said, “We are proud to say that our citizens now have all the tools needed for self help, development, and to catch the 21st century train.”

As I stood in front of the CRC cutting the ribbon, flanked by my father, and members of the community with whom I had grown up with, I felt an enormous sense of humility and pride. Even more incredible was seeing the family house in the shadow of the CRC, a true testament to the idea that it is possible to make a true impact in the community in which you come from.

Q: You have had some great success. Along the way, what have been some of your greatest challenges?

Philomena: As with any venture, success was not immediate. Like most rural projects, the CRCs still have some personnel problems. It was a slow and uneven process of growth over the years, changing leadership, hand-holding, evolving rules and policies, dedication, communication and the hard work it takes to keep the CRCs running well.

We also continuously face the growing demand on the CRCs as more and more families become aware of the potential for their children. For example, since we started the mentoring programs for the 13-17 year olds there have been complaints from the staff of the CRCs that there is simply too much demand for the activities! I suppose this is a wonderful “high quality” problem to have.

Q: Looking ahead, what would you say has been the biggest lesson you have learned?

Philomena: Seven years of working on this project has taken me on an adventure that, in many ways has changed and reinforced some of my views on economic development. The biggest lesson I have learned is that empowering communities with the strength to foster and manage their own development is the greatest gift you can give and that *“empowerment starts one community at a time.”* Also, providing children and youth a chance to dream is equally powerful.

Q: For those of us who may have similar goals but have reservations about being able to succeed, what advice would you have for them and what finally gave you the courage to move forward?

Philomena: It needs commitment, hard work, and perseverance and “can do attitude”. The impetus for me to embark on this journey came in 2001, after I met a former Ghana Ambassador to India. After discussing my ideas with him, he told me bluntly “don’t allow fear to stop you, you can do it, get on with it.”

I also received encouragement and support from a number of individuals who became champions for my cause. For example, a senior officer at UNICEF wrote when he read my first grant proposal, “The community resource project provides a model for making the power of ICT available to children, adolescents, individuals and communities that might otherwise be left behind in the digital revolution. As such, we are pleased to give this project our endorsement.” I was emboldened and from then on started my operations in the garage of my Fairfax home.

Q: For our readers who would like to contribute and find out how they can they get involved, how can they do so?

Philomena: We have not gotten where we are alone and very much appreciate the support of all our donors and partners. We will need champions and funding for:

- Construction of more CRCs
- Continuous ICT connectivity/access fees and computers
- Organizing training for adolescents in data entry, software and other ICT programs
- Training more women and at risk adolescence girls to enhance their skills

Every amount counts and can help us further our goals. It is my hope that the reader of this article will embrace this project, as I have.

To make a donation visit us at www.rcempowerment.org or UniversalGiving.org

Author: Philomena Amoako, Founder and President, Rural Communities Empowerment Center