Women in Africa's Development:
Pushing for Progress through Entrepreneurship Education Complimented
by On-Going Coaching Sessions
A Case Study Paper

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A.   INTRODUCTION

In a fast-paced global economy, building a strong financial and economic Africa is inevitable. Africans have to be committed to concerted efforts from north to south of the continent. The fact remains that the continent cannot grow outside her human resources. The continent with a history of development problems that include lagging primary school enrolments, high child mortality and endemic diseases – including malaria and HIV/AIDS needs her own blue-print , a strategic plan conceived and owned by Africans and supported by partnerships, not donors! The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) is a pledge by African leaders, based on a common vision and a firm and shared conviction, that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and to place their countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development, and at the same time to participate actively in the world economy (NEPAD, 2001). What a very powerful statement that warrants thinking more deeply about how this lofty initiative can be realized?

Every society is made up of families either nuclear or extended. Women are given the natural rights by the Supreme to conceive. This natural role on its own is a pointer to the strategic role women play in every society, Africa inclusive. For our continent to be vibrant as NEPAD has highlighted from the statement above, there is the need to individually and collectively participate actively in the world economy, *irrespective of the gender differentiation*. This *case study paper* takes its cue from the important and strategic roles women play in the Africa society. Premised on the notion that, Africa's growth and development lies in helping Africans to develop, this paper lay emphasis on the role of women and their contribution to realizing the continent's potential. Excellence in human capability, an entrepreneurial spirit and belief in self-determination are the keys to the socio-economic and political advancement of people. This paper is a succinct report of a pilot project in 2007 undertaken by the authors over a period of eight weeks. It focused on helping a group of African women in Johannesburg, South Africa realize their entrepreneurial goals using an Open Learning platform as an enabler of learning for entrepreneurial education and development.

B.   SIGNIFICANCE

African women's fundamental contributions in their households, food production systems and national economies are increasingly acknowledged, within Africa and by the international community (Manuh, 1998). NEPAD as an initiative recognized this. So, African leaders have vouched to take joint responsibility for promoting the role of women in social and economic development by reinforcing their capacity in the domains of education and training; by the development of revenue-generating activities through facilitating access to credit; and by assuring their participation in the political and economic life (NEPAD, 2001). By improving women own positions as social and economic agents, they would concurrently strengthen African society. Invariably, the continent's broader development prospects will be enhanced (Manuh, 1998). Africa will not be able to sustain rapid growth without investing in its people. Women are one of Africa's hidden growth reserves, providing most of the region's labor, but their productivity is hampered by widespread inequality in education and access.

This case study was conceived on the basis that, women are very disadvantaged in Africa. Based on various discussions and interactions with three women who are passionate about starting their business, a team was built. As African men conscious of the strategic role women can contribute to the mainstream of Africa's economy, the study empowered women through gender equality, access to entrepreneurship education and mentoring as a potent force for accelerated poverty reduction. It gives credence to women in helping them become active economic agents in Africa.

C.   WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN GLOBAL CONTEXT

Jalbert (2000) cited Julie R. Weeks, Director of Research National Foundation for Women Business Owners, as follows: "entrepreneurship offers tremendous opportunities for women across the world by opening doors to greater self-sufficiency, self-esteem, education, and growth – not only for the women themselves, but also for their families and their employees. And women are changing the face of business ownership internationally; between one-quarter and one-third of the world's businesses are owned by women. As their numbers grow and as their businesses prosper, they will change the way the world does business." Understanding the different goals that women have for entrepreneurship in the global context, and the relationship between these goals and the structural factors that influence women's entrepreneurship, will be of great help to researchers, planners, as well as practitioners working to promote women entrepreneurs in developing countries, especially on the African continent. This understanding can lead to the development of an "African paradigm", more finely tuned policies and programmes of support for women entrepreneurs (*the dti*, 2005).

Most of the available literature on women's business ownership concentrated on entrepreneurial development in industrialized countries at the national level and within the less developed informal sector (Jalbert, 2000). Very few literature exits on the role of women entrepreneurs in a global economy especially in Africa. Even where it exists a proper gender analysis is missing (OSSREA, 2002). The available literature fell into four broad categories: (1) women business owners—demographics, characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses; (2) women business owners active in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their networking activities; (3) women's participation in developing and transitional economies; and (4) general literature on poverty alleviation; microenterprises; small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); microcredit; barriers to entering business; feminist perspectives; and women's business management issues, styles, and techniques (Jalbert, 2000). OSSREA (2002) also reported that, the available literature can, especially from the perspective of Africa be categorised under two broad themes: (i) factors, that enhance or constrain women's entry into business and those that affect their survival once they are in business and (ii) strategies to overcome barriers for women's participation and effectiveness in entrepreneurship.

Considering the situation in South Africa, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) reported that, women entrepreneurs in South Africa remain on the periphery of the national economy (*the dti*, 2005:10).It further reported that, the concentration of activities of women in business is located in the areas of crafts, hawking, personal services and the retail sector. There are low participation levels of women entrepreneurs in value-adding business opportunities. Some of the chief barriers to promoting women in business include cultural and societal problems, the psychological impact of cultural norms, employment legislation and policy, lack of information, training, finance, markets, technology and business infrastructure, absence of vehicles for skills development and capacity building, fragmented approaches to identifying issues and developing strategy to influence policy affecting business and government interventions (*the dti*, 2005:10). Accordingly, more and more women are taking the route to informal sector entrepreneurship (*the dti*, 2005 *citing* Bolas and Valle, 2003; Erwee, 1987; Mahadea, 2001). For government in South Africa and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), women are a critical component for alleviating poverty as a national priority and for the promotion of South Africa's policy of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) - a pragmatic growth strategy that aims to realise the country's full economic potential.

D.   METHODOLOGY

A form of qualitative descriptive research, the case study looks intensely at a small participant pool, drawing conclusions only about the group- involving a team of three women and two men (the authors). As a pilot project which took place over a period of eight weeks, it aimed at helping three black women in Johannesburg, South Africa lead and monitor their efforts in conceiving business ideas, developing these into business plans and seeks the finance needed to execute the business ideas. These three women from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds decided to come together based on their personal motivation to be successful business owners. As key participants in the discussions and mentoring process by the authors, the first phase of study exposed the women to a one-week, in-person

seminar on entrepreneurship at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The second phase which this study reports involved e-meetings using SKYPE (free Voice-Over-IP), as a platform for follow-up, coaching and mentoring the women across two countries and time-zones (Canada and South Africa). Two major outcomes (deliverables) which were emphasized for the team to work on were getting a business plan and to explore access and opportunities for 'business start-up'.

It is worth reporting that, the team members also have in common a social conscience and a passion to be change agents in communities in Africa. In a nutshell therefore, the underlying principle of this team as well is *Ubuntu*- a sub-Saharan African ethic or humanist ideology focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other. The word has its origin in the Bantu languages of Southern Africa. Ubuntu is seen as a traditional African concept. Two well-renowned South Africans, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former President Nelson Mandela, attempted definitions of this concept. Archbishop Desmond Tutu defined the concept as "a person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed." Nelson Mandela explained Ubuntu as follows: "A traveller through our country would stop at a village, and he didn't have to ask for food or for water. Once he stops, the people give him food, entertain him. That is one aspect of Ubuntu but it'll have various aspects. Ubuntu does not mean that people should not enrich themselves. The question therefore is: Are you going to do so in order to enable the community around you to improve?"

E.   RESULTS AND KEY LESSONS FROM THE STUDY

The eight-week period over which the case study took place produced three business plans by the three women. Ms. A conceived a business idea titled, "Leading Edge Skills" which was aimed at educating rural school teachers in Johannesburg, South Africa on how to use computers for effective teaching-learning process in their communities. Ms. B's business idea titled, "Ithute Skills` Empowerment, IT Training & Development" was a Community Learning Project in Soweto aimed at helping rural women in Soweto manage their businesses using ICT skills. The last lady, Ms. C, conceived her business idea as "E &T Time Merchant (ETM)". In her words, "I developed this idea to help corporate business women with household chores which would otherwise be neglected because of their busy time schedule at work. My plan is to help them shop for their monthly groceries and basic household chores charging them an affordable fee per month to manage their daily lives". An interesting result from teaming up with these three women was how all their business ideas centered on helping other fellow women become successful entrepreneurs and home-managers. Over a period of two weeks, each of the ladies using the skills acquired at the one-week seminar at Wits University developed a business plan with budget estimates. What was more fascinating was the cooperative, joint-work the women did in reading one another's business plan and giving possibly suggestions during the online e-meetings.

Of all the women, only one of them had used SKYPE before and the two others had to learn hands-on with the authors guiding them through online. It's worth reporting that the motivation each of the women had in participating in this case study was overwhelming. And much more overwhelming was how they helped one another and adopted one business plan (that of Ms. B on helping rural women in Soweto manage their businesses using ICT skills for which the business license was obtained). Some of their comments about on the entire process as well as the lessons learnt in the process are as follows:

"For me, I would call the entire process "pushing us to the limit with love". The intense training and coaching with some mentoring gave us excellent opportunities for thinking outside of the box. I perceive this to be effective leadership. I wish this case study could be further researched and developed into a bigger project to help African women. I have been able to see new possibilities especially with using IT skills in holding business meetings. I just couldn't have believed it was possibly before now".

"I never knew I could be taught to use the computer online without physical contact by the trainer. I had always seen myself as a novice and could not have learned anything IT. But after spending the weekly period in the SKYPE meetings with the authors' gentle guidance, I have discovered remarkable things about myself. I have grown more to accept myself and developed great faith in myself. I had thought my

business idea was stupid. But the team did remarkable well in helping me develop the business idea into a business plan".

"Through constructive feedback from the authors, I have gained new insights into working in teams online, in real-time. Though not alien to SKYPE, I have discovered a new, cost-effective way to engage in business meetings across continents and also discovered that, impossibility is only the vocabulary of indolent persons who cannot think. I am glad that I was encouraged to join this team. I see possibilities even in the business plan we adopted, which is Ms. B's".

F.   CONCLUSION

That women have a significant role in Africa's socio-economic development is beyond question. The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) is committed to the cause of strengthening and encouraging women entrepreneurs. Women need to acquire the right skills and be mentored in harnessing their abilities to contribute to Africa's development. Based on the passion of the team members, this case study identified that an open learning platform like SKYPE could be used to cluster women into teams for entrepreneurial education and development. The authors discovered that, women when rightly motivated irrespective of their socio-economic and educational background could learn new skills and use them to their benefits and the community. Though a small pilot project, the authors are convinced that, this could be a potent prototype to develop women entrepreneurship in Africa. In conclusion, Africa's sustainable growth and development is only assured when women are enabled to participate actively in the economy.

G.   REFERENCES

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