Catalysing Female Social Entrepreneurs to Lead from Within

Conscious Social Change: a holistic approach that uses inner work, as a vehicle and design tool for sustainably solving complex social issues | Rwanda

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"Change begins from within." This is the guiding principle of Global Grassroots, a mindfulness-based social venture incubator for women in East Africa. By focusing on the inner transformation of local leaders, particularly women, Global Grassroots empowers them to lead systemic changes within their own communities.

BACKGROUND

Global Grassroots operates in post-conflict East Africa, specifically in regions where access to clean water is severely limited. The organization invests in local women-led teams, equipping them with the skills and tools necessary to drive sustainable community improvements. The core of their work is built on a unique methodology called Conscious Social Change, which integrates mindfulness, social-emotional learning, trauma healing, resilience, and agency-building into the process of social entrepreneurship.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH

The objective of Global Grassroots is to empower women-led teams to design, construct, and implement social-purpose water enterprises that benefit their communities. This project is implemented over an 18-month period, during which the teams undergo a four-phase curriculum. In the first phase, participants engage in an intensive, experiential 40-hour training that covers the principles of Conscious Social Change. This includes mindfulness-based leadership, trauma healing, project management, budgeting, and creative resourcing to prepare them for venture leadership. The second phase involves 3-6 months of hands-on coaching as the teams design comprehensive plans for their ventures. In the third phase, teams receive seed funding and 1-4 months of support during the construction of their water access points. Finally, in the fourth phase, the water ventures become operational, with profits reinvested into community projects.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The personal transformation of team members is a key focus. Throughout the venture incubator and accelerator, significant improvements have been observed in mindfulness, self-management, confidence, agency, wellbeing, resilience, leadership skills, and a sense of belonging. These changes are meticulously tracked through a Team Member Survey (TMS), administered at the start of the incubator training. Over 12 years of data collection reveals marked increases in confidence and agency among participants. When problems arise, rather than solving for the women, staff leverage their own mindful leadership skills to facilitate discussion. This includes honouring women's wisdom and leadership instincts and using "inquiry without imposition" to help teams generate solutions of their own. When a situation persists, staff may provide additional training, co-facilitate problem-solving sessions, or support team leaders as they work with key stakeholders.

On a broader community level, the impact of these ventures is profound. Between 2008 and 2021, 26 women's water ventures provided clean water to over 82,000 individuals in Rwanda and Uganda, with 96% of these ventures still operational. On average, within one year of operation, these ventures have provided access to fresh, clean water for 3,000 individuals, reduced the distance to water sources by 50%, decreased the cost of a jerry can of water by 86%, and ensured that 94% of households boil water for drinking. Additionally, 95% of households now wash their hands before eating, 30% fewer children report frequent illnesses, there has been a fivefold increase in men fetching water for their households, and 50% fewer households report daughters missing school due to water collection. A consistently reported decrease in sexual violence related to water collection further highlights the positive community impact.

Throughout implementation, Global Grassroots's staff work with teams to document community-level outcomes. Prior to launching their water access point, teams work with staff to collect baseline data using a Community Impact Survey (CIS) that has both standard and customizable questions. These include items about the household; income level and sources; gender roles; access to water; time and money spent on water; school attendance; children's health and more. The survey is repeated after 12 months of venture operations.

The sample for the CIS is small and purpositive but provides a helpful snapshot of how the team's efforts are impacting their community.

Through this multi-levelled and mixed method approach to monitoring and evaluation, Global Grassroots is building a base of data and insights to help illuminate the linkages between inner work, personal transformation, and sustainable community development.

The journey has not been without challenges. The main difficulties faced by Global Grassroots include ensuring the long-term sustainability of ventures and addressing cultural barriers to women's leadership. However, these challenges have also provided valuable lessons. The importance of continuous support and coaching has become clear, as has the value of empowering teams to solve problems on their own using mindful leadership and inquiry without imposition.

Looking ahead, the success of Global Grassroots' model presents significant opportunities for scaling up. By expanding their approach to other regions and adapting it to address different social issues, Global Grassroots can continue to empower women and transform communities across East Africa and beyond.