

Developing Soil & Solutions: How a University Student Club turned into an International Nonprofit

Introduction

“They’re entrepreneurs, right? [The farmers are] starting businesses like black soldier fly farming, market linkages, [and] value addition. They’re doing massive things in their communities and that’s the story of Roots.”

These words from University of Maryland graduate and agricultural advocate Kerrin Maasarueh depict the core values behind the impact and organizational model of student club-turned-nonprofit Roots Africa. The group’s mission to empower university students and farmers in African agricultural communities is centered on sharing knowledge of diverse farming practices – a method commonly referred to as agricultural extension. But how exactly was this seed of a social impact idea sown, grown, and developed into a fully operational venture serving over 12,000 farmers in Uganda and Liberia?

The conceptualization of Roots Africa began with one of its foundational leaders, Cedric Nwafor, who grew up in Bamenda, Cameroon and worked on a local farm with his family. During his years growing beans, yams, and legumes alongside his family, Nwafor observed firsthand how long it took to gain profit from produce and the role food insecurity played into hunger issues. These being essential insights into the role local farms played in the economy of his village and the difficulties associated with agricultural work. More importantly though, he identified the potential for farmers in villages like his to establish economic independence if given the means to do so. A desire to combat these issues, paired with Nwafor’s passion to expand on his own agricultural knowledge, would eventually act as the foundation for his people-centered approach towards social impact.

The seeds of this social impact idea soon developed into tangible strategies when Nwafor immigrated to the United States and met a group of Idaho potato farmers. The farmers invited him to accompany them on a typical workday, as Nwafor was planning to study agriculture in university and wanted to see their techniques up close. On the trip, he saw a tractor complete the same amount of work in five minutes that would take his entire family a week to do on their farm, and knew he had to share this agricultural knowledge and technology with his community. Nwafor recognized that creating an organization dedicated to providing agricultural extension services to African farming communities was a calling he could not ignore.

Do Good Case Study

Establishing an Organizational Foundation

This calling began to take shape once Nwafor began his agricultural studies at the University of Maryland (UMD). He officially founded Roots Africa as a student-run club in 2017, partnering with other university students within Africa for cross-cultural agricultural exchanges. In this initial structure, volunteer UMD students from various majors and faculty from the College of Agriculture would partner with agriculture students in Uganda and Liberia, collaborating to create solutions to agricultural challenges the student farmers were experiencing in their community. These Ugandan and Liberian college students, called “changemakers” by Roots, not only led the ideation phase of the projects by talking through the farming needs of their community with the UMD team, but would establish themselves as a key pillar in Roots’ impact model.

Building the foundation of Roots Africa within an institution like UMD not only allowed for increased flexibility in the organization’s structure, but also acted as an initial launch pad upon which to establish credibility. In Nwafor’s words, “saying we are a student club at the University of Maryland allows us to raise funds as technically a nonprofit, [and] it gives you credibility, right?” Further, establishing Roots at a university provided access to unique resources that helped advance the project past what Nwafor could do on his own. This was largely through support from groups like the Do Good Institute, an academic center focused on social impact, and the Dingman Center, the university’s entrepreneurship hub, to solidify the organization’s presence on campus.

As the organization expanded and began partnering with more universities and student farmers around Africa, the management of the UMD club became difficult. Retaining the volunteer student population year-over-year was challenging given the competing on-campus priorities of students and the amount of volunteers that graduated each year. Even Nwafor himself was a byproduct of this system; once he graduated UMD in 2018, he had to pass the club management off to another student, Delina Peter. These challenges, coupled with the continued expansion of Roots, soon made it clear that Roots’ growth was outpacing its capacities as a student organization. As Peter stated, “[Roots Africa] started to function like a nonprofit, which was challenging since its demands grew past the capabilities of full-time undergraduate students.” In addition, the impact of the time these students spent with the organization versus the time Nwafor was putting in was beginning to become unbalanced. Nwafor noted this, saying, “The results that I achieved spending one hour with a changemaker in Africa is 10 times more than spending that same 1 hour with [the UMD] club in the U.S.” It was clear it was time for a change.

Ultimately, Nwafor decided to close the UMD student club and redirect Roots Africa’s focus towards strategically investing directly into the changemakers’ initiatives, as their ideas and impact on farming communities was the core of Roots’ organizational model.

The Onset of Early Modeling Challenges

Removing the UMD club as an intermediary party in the agricultural exchange process

meant Roots Africa could recenter changemakers as the main drivers of impact in their model. Developing Soil & Solutions: International Nonprofit

To do this, though, would require the organization to identify and back individuals with strong relationship building skills whom Nwafor called the “real deals of activism and mobilization.” Elly Kasirye, a country coordinator for the nonprofit, was one of these integral individuals. Kasirye had led Roots’ relationship building and networking initiatives with key figures in the communities, universities, and government of Uganda since 2019. Kasirye’s strength as an on the ground mobilizer aided in the expansion of Roots from two to eight university partnerships in Uganda and from 10 to 150 changemakers across the organization. However, Kasirye notes how the African cultural perception on volunteering made engagement difficult. In Kasirye’s experience, many people he tried to recruit in Uganda met his requests for volunteer participation with inquiries of how they would be compensated or the immediate results to be expected from their support. Rather than invest in long-term community impact projects, such as volunteering their own land to experiment with new agricultural techniques or spend unpaid time contributing to a community garden, the immediate pressures of food and economic insecurity made volunteering appear illogical. Reorienting this mindset proved strenuous and meant some early Roots volunteer prospects would not join the organization when their expectations were not met. However, Kasirye highlights that, “the people who have continuously been there, gradually moved with Roots Africa, have at least created a sustainable impact in their communities.”

The challenge to push back against this mentality persisted when changemakers themselves were also operating under the pressure of wanting to enact change immediately and at times turning to their U.S. mentors for financial help. Convincing people to focus on long-term impact through knowledge sharing in place of short-term resource provision had become a forefront issue of the organization. Roots Africa leader Kerrin Massarueh, having had first hand experience, discussed the pervasive impacts of the white savior complex in Africa, in terms of how local individuals perceive the donor-recipient relationship when working with western individuals. She notes, “You’re not as independent and you’re more thinking of Westerners as pocketbooks. And so one of the things that we talked about as a team was how do we basically drill that out of our communities? How do we drill that out of the mindset of our change makers?” Thus, concretely addressing the negative impacts and expectations of western saviorism would need to become a core piece of Roots’ mission given that they worked closely with American stakeholders.

Establishing a Structure of Ethical Service

Historically, western saviorism, also known as the white savior complex (WSC), has operated on the belief that westernized individuals hold responsibility to give aid to non-westernized nations. This is under the dual assumption that these nations do not have the ability to support their own economies and that western values should be adopted globally.¹ The concept

¹ Chazal, Nerida and Adam Pocrnic. 2016. “Kony 2012: Intervention Narratives and the Saviour Subject.” International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy 5(1):98–112.

of providing financial aid within this saviorist mindset not only centers western values, but disguises itself as an altruistic form of aid, when it really is a form of colonialism and power imbalance. This has been seen countless times throughout history, such as with a 2012 donation by the Canadian government of 135 million Canadian dollars to the Ghanaian government's Department of Agriculture, whose management of the donation was determined to be ineffective. The donation's attempt to center financial provision in providing aid in turn led to continued poor agricultural technology deployment and raised the costs of agricultural inputs across Ghana while decreasing the amount of usable food crops from that season.² Outside of the tangible impacts of the fund mismanagement, the scenario exemplifies the global narrative of western saviorism that individuals are socialized into – believing that money can act as the main solution to issues faced in global majority countries.

In acknowledging the potential influence of the savior narrative on the changemakers program, Roots Africa aimed to deconstruct its role in the dynamic of pairing changemakers with western mentors. The first step in this process was redefining the onboarding process for mentors and mentees. To decenter the saviorist mentality, the onboarding process focused intentionally on reminding the mentors and mentees of the purpose of the organization being knowledge sharing and exchange, and discouraged both parties from engaging in any financial transfers.

Further, changemakers were then guaranteed ownership over the implementation of their projects. Maasarueh remarks on this choice saying, “our vision is not at all to come in and own any of the solutions. Our community transformation model is [that the changemaker's] own [their] own solutions to [their] problems.” Their ownership of these solutions is what allows changemakers to grow as entrepreneurs. For example, changemaker Martin, based in Liberia, developed his community building skills by being a pioneer of his own project – staying involved with the organization for 4 years and now acting as one of the country's coordinators for the changemaker program. So not only does the ownership build a strong network of individuals in Roots that understand the mission, but allows changemakers to have autonomy and transition into true thought leadership roles in the agricultural extension sector.

In addition to empowering the changemakers themselves to own their solutions, Roots also focused on engaging stakeholders in the broader communities in which changemakers lived and worked. Much of this relied on gaining the trust of elders, as these individuals are often the thought leaders on the “proper” farming practices within the community. Thus, to convey the reliability of their projects to these elders and other community members, changemakers leverage the practice of plot demonstration. Plot demonstrating is an agricultural method where a portion of land is used to test the efficacy of a novel farming technique or idea which is then compared to the traditional technique for that specific crop or produce.³ Adopting this approach ensures that changemakers do not force community members to conform to their innovative projects, but allows other farmers to decide for themselves whether or not to implement the

² Dzakaklo, T. K., Hlovor, I. K., & Tandoh-Offin, P. (2024). Effectiveness of foreign aid in agricultural development in the adaklu district of Ghana: A case study of the modernizing agriculture in Ghana (Mag) fund. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 2333083. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2333083>

³ Sseguya, H., Robinson, D. S., Mwango, H. R., Flock, J. A., Manda, J., Abed, R., & Mruma, S. O. (2021). The impact of demonstration plots on improved agricultural input purchase in Tanzania: Implications for policy and practice. *PLOS ONE*, 16(1), e0243896. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0243896>

changemakers' solution after comparing the results. This not only helped build trust in Roots Africa as an organization and established the changemakers' credibility, but also reaffirmed Roots' mission of empowerment through knowledge sharing.

Evolving the Organizational Mission

Now, in the current stage of Roots Africa's model, the organization is looking at how they can expand beyond agricultural extension to support villages with established and successful changemaker projects. These changemakers have moved beyond the need for the rigorous agricultural exchange they required when they first partnered with Roots; they now need support to sustain their proven initiatives. The next step in aiding these communities in becoming self-sustaining largely involves providing guidance to changemakers and farmers on how to decrease their reliance on third-party vendors to sell their produce.

These third party vendors essentially act as intermediaries for the changemakers' produce: they'll buy what the farmers can provide, and then resell them to larger organizations and distribute the profits amongst the farmers. The profit distribution process often takes months at a time, leaving farmers once again in limbo in an insecure financial situation. Considering this, Roots has begun exploring the implementation of market linkage strategies for farmers to connect them directly to vendors without an intermediate party. Ultimately this empowers them to be the vendors of their own produce and eliminates the need for third-party vendors altogether. This way, farmers could see their profits sooner and more efficiently reinvest their profits back into their farms.

On top of developing market linkage strategies, the organization continues to expand upon the support it provides to changemakers and community farmers. Currently, they are exploring ways to measure their impact to better capture not just the success of the organization, but also to garner more funding support to supplement the physical needs of farmers, such as gas for produce transportation or seeds. However, what remains at the core of the organization's impact is the hard work and intelligence of the changemakers.

It is clear that intentionally curating a flexible organizational model has allowed Roots to meet the needs of its changemakers throughout the organization's history. From piloting initial agricultural interventions to equipping changemakers with the knowledge and physical resources to implement locally-driven solutions, Roots Africa has been able to drive agricultural impact pioneered by empowered student farmer entrepreneurs.

Case Study Lesson Guide

Synopsis

This case study observes the founding and development of the agricultural extension organization Roots Africa, highlighting their experiences with organization modeling and ethical service. Roots, beginning as a student club at the University of Maryland in 2017, rapidly evolved into an international, nonprofit organization which challenged leadership to make integral decisions on how to evolve their organizational model to best serve the African agricultural communities they partnered with. Among these decisions, Roots decided to close their founding club at UMD, readapt their approach to support farmers from implementing agricultural solutions to expanding on them, all the while developing their plans for impact measurement.

At the core of this case is a story on the value behind relationship building and knowledge sharing with the goal of empowering young entrepreneurs. Through the study and accompanied discussion, students should become more knowledgeable about organizational model development, specifically in its relation to providing ethical service to Global Majority populations, and the role relationship building in the process of enacting community change.

Guiding Question

How has Roots Africa strategically designed its organizational model to ethically serve changemakers and African agricultural communities?

Learning Objectives

By the end of the case study

1. Students will gain an understanding of how their lived experiences influence their perspectives on social impact
2. Students will become more knowledgeable of the role relationship building has in the field of social impact
3. Students will expand upon their concept of the White Savior Complex and Western Savior narrative to strategically determine ethical models of service
4. Students will develop a preliminary understanding of organizational model development for social impact ventures

Discussion Questions

Lived Experiences & Impact on Social Impact Planning

- How did the lived experiences of the various members of Roots Africa impact their approach to social impact? How do your personal lived experiences influence your participation in social impact?
- In what ways does the Western Savior narrative and White Savior Complex restrict our understanding of social impact as being an action reliant on money? Similar to how Roots Africa centered their organization on knowledge sharing, what are other means of executing social impact ventures without financial provision being the focus?
- Looking at the following tweets analyzing the White Savior Complex, what strikes you as being relevant to differentiating between service and saviorism? Why?
 - “The white savior supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening.”
 - “This world exists simply to satisfy the needs—including, importantly, the sentimental needs—of white people and Oprah.”
 - “I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly.”

Organizational Modeling

- In the early stages of Roots Africa its club at UMD eventually closed, would you have made the same decision? Was there any way to keep the UMD organization growing while sustaining with the organization’s growth as a nonprofit? Why or why not?
- Given that Roots Africa still has substantial influence from Western farmers and mentors, would you determine their current model to be an ethical form of service?
- As the organization begins aiding farmers in the process of directly linking them to markets, they are working against an agricultural system that has aimed to minimize and delay the profits of African agricultural communities. How can an organization go about combatting the effects of a systemic issue such as this to affect change in an entire sector?

Introductory Activity

[To be done before reading case study] You have been given a \$5,000 grant from UMD to execute a project with the goal of increasing wifi access to a rural community. Working with your assigned team, put together a plan for how you would use these funds to fulfill the grant’s goal. This plan should include a budget and description of your project’s implementation.

Activity Debrief Questions

- What aspects of your plan involved getting to know and building relationships with the community's residents?
- Did your team's plan focus more on providing resources, sharing knowledge, or an alternative method of change?

Case Study Debrief Questions

- How would you change your team's plan after reading about Roots' approach to enacting change through knowledge sharing?
- The leaders of Roots centered changemakers and community residents as the main drivers of change in their solution, could this emphasis on relationship and trust building be incorporated into your team plan?

Additional Resources

- Service or Saviorism: Deconstructing Benevolent Racism in the Helping Professions
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>
- Cultural Values and Volunteering: A Cross-cultural Comparison of Students' Motivation to Volunteer in 13 Countries
- Effectiveness of foreign aid in agricultural development in the Adaklu District of Ghana: a case study of the Modernizing Agriculture in Ghana (MAG) Fund