

Conversation #3

Changing the Game: Building Mindsets of Hope and Possibilities in Africa's Future Leaders — One Game at a Time

Anne Githuku-Shongwe of Afroes



Anne Githuku-Shongwe was recently appointed the UN Women Representative in South Africa for multiple countries in the region. At heart, Anne is a social entrepreneur, a digital innovator, and has been a thought leader and pioneer on the future of digital learning and digital work for Africa's youth. She founded Afroes in 2010 to create innovative ways to help equip African youth for more promising futures. She and

Afroes have received multiple awards, including the prestigious Schwab Foundation World Economic Forum Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2013 Award and the National Award: Order of the Grand Warrior from the President of Kenya. Other awards include the PEACEApp award of the United Nations (UN), Meffys Award in London, and Netexplo Award in Paris. Before starting Afroes, she was an international development professional for 20 years, including 15 years with the United Nations Development Programme on the African continent and with management consulting firms in the USA.

What is the story behind Afroes?

Afroes (the name comes from a play on “African heroes and heroines”) was inspired by conversations with my own children. I worried that they were not being exposed to any positive African media content and that their ideas and aspirations for Africa were being influenced by the Western media’s pervasively negative messages about the continent. I got tired of complaining about it and decided to do something to change that.

My vision was to revolutionize social skills learning in Africa through edutainment platforms that would embed values and shape new mindsets of hope and possibility in the youth market across the continent. Watching my own children playing computer games gave me the inspiration I needed. I realized that kids were captivated by computer games and had the opportunity to learn complex skills in a fun yet subtle way—and I knew that there had to be a way to harness computer games to inspire the change to African children that I desired.

The business challenge for Afroes was recognizing that to reach mass numbers of children in Africa, mobile phones were the only viable medium to deliver computer games en masse. Today, with reach of over 450,000 users, Afroes has created a series of mobile games designed to shape new choices and stimulate challenging conversations for children and young people in Africa.

Our Moraba is an award-winning mobile game addressing difficult questions about gender-based violence and challenging the user to

contemplate what she or he believes about sexual relations and sexual violence. The game provides valuable information to the user, empowering them to make informed choices. Another powerful game, Haki: Chaguo Ni Lako (“Justice: The Choice is Yours”) was designed to inform, inspire, and empower Kenyan youth, helping them make considered choices as they went to the polls in 2013.

Afroes has developed a design approach that engages young mobile-game users in the co-creation of the mobile application, with social enterprise partners including the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund and Child Rights partner organizations; UN Women and Gender-Based Violence stakeholders; the Tuvuke Initiative for a Peaceful, Inclusive, and Just Society; the Ford Foundation, as well as the Rockefeller Foundation, Microsoft, Intel, Nokia, and Vodacom.

What is the underlying motivator, the driver behind your life trajectory and the various projects you are engaged in?

I have always been driven by the belief in an Africa of great promise as defined by Africans and not dictated by the West. In all my years working in the development and multi-lateral sector, I noticed that we were stuck! We focused obliviously on copying the Western or even Eastern models without recognizing that we were actually selling out our continent’s destiny.

One of the real turning points for me was a moment as we (United Nations Development Programme colleagues and African governments) were working with colleagues from the government of Singapore. One of them, a woman from the government of Singapore, turned to us as we were debating what lessons to take back to Africa from our trip, and she asks candidly, “Why are you Africans always so willing to give up your destiny for others to define it for you?” And she was right. For too long, this had been the play in Africa. I sat there and felt a combination of insult and paralysis. I felt challenged, and then I realized that yes, she was right. That is the core of it all. The public servants from my delegation who were very senior and smart were really only interested in a quick, simple fix that would somehow bypass the 40 years of Lee Kuan Yew’s work that had resulted in today’s Singapore. It bothered me

that these smart public servants never once asked about the transformational investments in the mindsets of Singaporeans that had begun when they were six years old. So deeply embedded was the mindset of possibility, excellence, and patriotism that every Singaporean from street sweeper to cabinet minister spoke the same language and understood the vision of the nation. I have hardly seen this anywhere else in the world.

I mean, Singapore was no different from us in the 60s! They did not develop suddenly and dramatically. No! They went through struggles similar to ours in Africa so that in the 60s, for example, they had high levels of corruption in the public sector. Under the astute leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, they made a dramatic and transformational decision that Singapore would never be great unless they started by investing in a new generation that would emerge with the right values and mindsets to shape a different future. The results that we see today are the result of 40 to 50 years of investment in the right mindsets and values that have shaped their nation.

I am dreaming of a future when youth of my village will not run in hope at the sight of a Land Cruiser with a foreign agency logo on the car door—only to turn away dejected by yet another broken promise of their finally being saved by the Land Cruiser guy. Instead, I have dreamed that the youth of my village will be so invested in ensuring that they not only define and shape their own destiny but also will build their own Land Cruisers! But I knew this was not going to be easy, given that the mindsets were already distorted, and therefore there was urgent need to invest boldly in those young ones who were not yet a lost cause.

That triggered my thinking, and I embarked on asking one important question: How do we begin to invest in the mindsets of young Africans? How do we create mindsets that are built on the foundations of hope, possibility, and integrity? And how do we do this en masse? Afroes was my response to this, given that mobile today is the most powerful educational platform on our African continent.

Where do you think that mindset is coming from?

This is a complex set of theories that we cannot do justice to here. However, there are two that I feel are inarguable and that, to me, have really shaped our mindsets. One is what I would call a “village chief” mental model. The village chief mental model is built on a convoluted mesh of cultures that took the African traditional leader and superimposed the poll tax administrator from colonial administrations. This resulted in a perverted leadership model that vested all power in the hands of a chief who at a whim could determine the fate or fortune of his “subjects” and direct the resource flow as he chose. It is a model that I believe we have never been able to break out of. It reveres authority and promotes strong patron–client relationships that determine the flow of resources and one’s economic or political destiny. We see these patterns perpetuated in the way we choose our political leaders and how our leaders conduct themselves once in office.

The “development savior” mindset in all its forms—whether external or internal—has also perverted the mindsets of many in our countries who have given up their power to investments that have often highly distorted our political and economic landscape. One of the greatest ills of the development savior has been its perverse intentions and external value system. Rather than invest in the core agenda of a nation, it is mostly designed to serve external agendas that create islands of pilots and projects—some even excellent at times. But rarely does it invest in building the mindsets and value system of the potential leaders of the future in any meaningful way that could result in real long-term nation building. One of its biggest problems, just to mention an example, is its absurd impatience, its short-term goal orientation, and the fact that the objective, even if well intended, is ultimately defined by the aid giver. I worked for the UN previously and have since returned to lead the work of UN Women in Southern Africa. The UN is less about aid. The UN is more about normative principles signed by member states, working alongside a government and enabling governments to implement these normative standards. In practice, however, the less developed a country is, the more the UN and development partners are tempted to define, almost take

over, the role of its government. At the end of the day, the mindsets that have been shaped by the development industry include dependency and distorted priorities. It reminds me of this famous adage: He who pays the piper, calls the tune.

What is your approach to changing that?

During my work with united nations development programme (UNDP), we worked with a team that invested in mental models as the catalytic capacity required for public service and development. We learned so much from our partnership with the Singaporeans, particularly how they owned their own vision and agenda. They would never allow another government to influence how they shape their own policy. Never! Their mindsets were steeped in excellence, integrity, possibility, and growth.

In Kenya, and I dare say in many of our African countries, our mindsets are our weakest link! Mindsets of “scarcity” rather than abundance; mindsets of “eat now” rather than invest and preserve our future; and mindsets of “homogeneity” that perpetuate inequality across gender, ethnicity, and class—mindsets that hold us back from our destiny. The sad truth is that these mindsets have been transferred to our youth, who argue that their choices and posturings are in line with their survival! In Kenya, people talk about the hustle. It is always my hustle. It can be read positively: “I am hustling to do my thing,” or I am just struggling and surviving. It frustrates me when I see someone who cannot see the massive opportunities in front of them. Many public servants epitomize this mindset and were just marking time, just surviving. It is about the paycheck, never about the citizens. Too few exhibit the heart of public service. Service, for me, is another aspect of the mindset that is very important.

For us, the core of who we are as Africans—and we demonstrate it when the chips are down—is that we are an engaged collective. When the chips are down, somehow in Kenya, we are able to bring it up. When there was drought four to five years ago and the Kenyans4Kenya initiative came through, now, that was incredible! The way people responded when the Westgate shopping mall attack happened, where the very Somalis who were being implicated were out there feeding each other. That is the

core of what we have to go for. And I fear that because of the impact of the media, this notion of the collective is getting rapidly eroded.

How do you build the mindset that has a collective response rather than an individual one at its core? It starts by looking for assets where you are. It starts with the insight that we ourselves are our own resource. We have lost some of that. The thinking was that our assets and resources come from somewhere else. So as a logical consequence, I will have my own asset and resource, you will have your own asset and resource, and we will end up not sharing any of that.

Can we invest in a generation that will emerge with some of these values embedded in them? You have to think about this as a 30-year journey so that a new generation comes to fruition that can make the real transformation happen. I searched for a platform that could deliver these values in a simple, covert, and fun way. It was here that I got motivated by my own son, who was playing computer games for hours on end. As we argued about his “addiction” to games, I had the opportunity to observe him play—“Come see what I’m doing!” That is when I recognized that there was a bigger picture to games and the power that it brings along. I started doing research and found out that there was a global network called GamesforChange. This network filled me with confidence to go out and build Afroes—using games as a tool to deliver complex but important messages to our youth.

Now I know it is much tougher than I thought. The process of investing and figuring out how to build games, how to make them work well enough, and how to penetrate existing structures is much harder than imagined.

What are some of the difficulties when it comes to profoundly affecting and shaping mindsets?

I thought the school system would be the natural partner with Afroes, but despite their expression of excitement, the Ministries of Education were really not very open to change. In my experience, schools are very traditional and very conservative, and so change is slow. The school that we work with is the African Leadership Academy, which invests heavily in mindset

change. In their model, the academy invests two to three years in an individual. That is obviously the best model! However, I truly believe that there is a place for mass pop culture-based learning built on simple mobile phones. I am now concerned with how we can create these kinds of experiences for every African child, even if it is just for a few days, so they can start seeing the real possibilities rather than the problems. The idea was to create that content and place it in the hands of young people who individually or as a group would learn new values and skills via this mobile platform.

How do you reach youth? And why does gaming have such importance?

First, gaming is a platform. It is not the end. If we want to have any legitimacy in what we do, then we need to talk with the youth on their own terms. At Afroes, we spend a lot of time doing facilitated conversations with young people. We use the games to enter into a conversation. Play a game on gender-based violence, and then all of a sudden, it gives you an inroad to really start having conversations about things like “So how do you feel about gender-based violence? Where are you on this issue? What is your value system? How do you feel about relationships between you and young women? Do you value women? How do you value yourself as a woman?” And you start having conversations that you would never be able to have. For example, in one of our games, we have focused a lot on young peoples’ understanding of rape, gender-based violence, and the abuse of young women and men. We realized that young men in particular abuse young women without realizing it. They think that this is just how relationships work, because this is what their role models taught them.

We started a campaign for 12 months. Young people who played the game created conversations and shared comments on their own experience. One young man pointed out in the comments section, “I did not know until I played this game that I am a rapist.” He said, every time a young girl said “No,” he thought that what she actually meant was “Yes,” because that is what his socialization had taught him. For him, a “No” simply called for more persuasion from him, and he believed that crying was part of the “game” between men and women. This man was suddenly shocked to learn with our game that girls who say “No” mean “No.” It spurred a whole lot of new thoughts in him, and he realized that

he lost his girlfriend because of the way he treated her. It was incredible to see the realization process and the way his mind opened. This is a beginning, but it is an example that shows the power of games in shifting mindsets.

How can the minds of Africans be affected at scale?

For scale, we have to go through the public school system. The president talked about ethics and corruption classes in school. That is exactly what will make the difference. The tools we use can be manifold. However, we have to confront ourselves with the behavior change in a communal context. What does a new behavior look like collectively, not individually? Circles of dialogue that leverage technology, inside schools and outside of schools, can become a fruitful way to bring about a mindset shift at scale. Not all of us have the privilege of attending a college or academy for two years. If we use the opportunities of mobile learning and gamification and embed them in the public school system, then we can imagine a new way. We need a large cohort of leaders, particularly young and women leaders, equipped with new mindsets of possibility, abundance and hope—who can get us even sooner to Kenya’s vision 2030.

Having said all this, especially in the eight years since I left the UN, remarkable developments have taken place. What is striking is that the African narrative has changed dramatically for the better, with many young ones who have had global and African exposure plus a new breed of heads of state and business leaders defining a new, hope-filled, and African-led agenda. We need to continue that journey.

Thank you, Anne!



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