

6 ENTREPRENEURS WITH A MISSION

'My first interaction with a mission-driven company was Andela, and it was there I fully understood what it means to serve people and change their lives, because I saw it happen every day: some middle-class kid or poor kid, turning their life around in an incredible way by us giving them the skills of software development and the opportunity to build a very viable global skill that would get them where they wanted to go.' Iyinoluwa, 31

'Education is important in Nigeria. My generation, those born in the 1990s, we know that if we want to make it, we have to be educated. The problem is that even people with a Master's degree have no connection to the real world. They don't know the difference between an invoice and a receipt. We launched Competence Africa in 2017. We offer courses across a blend of skills such as accounting technology and soft skills like teamwork and leadership. We also focus on tech-enabled skills that can really give people a hand up.' Davies, 30

'If you look at how we live in Nigeria, we don't have a credit system. Because there is no credit system, when you want to buy something, like a car, you are dropping the bulk sum. If you want to rent a house you are paying a year or two years in advance. If you want to go to school, you are paying up-front. And when you look at that system, young people were at a disadvantage. The idea for us was how about we give you a place where you are putting some money for a particular purpose: cars, houses, school. You can access it every 90 days, so we are forcing you to save in 90-day bursts and we are

paying you interest that is above inflation rate and we are not charging you.’ Odunayo, 28

‘There are so many needs here that it is easy to become a hero. You just have to step forward and address them. I founded Headstart Africa as a Facebook group to answer questions around business. Anyone could come and learn about business, personal development and how to succeed in Nigeria and Africa. Anyone could ask a question and I would try to answer or find someone who could.’ John, 34



Figure 24 Oyindamola Shoola, 24, leader of SpringNG, a ‘literary movement’ for Nigerian young writers
Credit: Oyindamola Shoola

Oyindamola Shoola is sitting in a high-backed black leather office chair that looks a bit like a modern-day throne. It's a fitting seat for a woman who, at just 24, is already a published writer, mentor to a host of other young writers and the founder and leader of SprinNG, an organisation that is beginning to build the foundations of a literary industry in Nigeria.

Shoola and her high school friend Kanyinsola Olorunisola co-founded SprinNG in 2016, when they were still teenagers. The organisation bills itself as 'a literary movement for the promotion, revitalization, and improvement of new Nigerian generations in writing and literature'.¹ It promotes the biographies of 350 young writers and publishes their work on its website. SprinNG also runs a poetry prize, offers an annual women author's prize and a series of free writing fellowships, where aspiring writers are connected to mentors to help develop their work. There's a well-structured manual to support the process and other free resources, including learning materials and mobile phone minutes to enable mentees to connect with their mentors. More than 160 writers had been mentored by the end of 2021. To date the organisation has been self-funded. 'For the first five years SprinNG has been funded by our own money. We work as volunteers, we still have day jobs', says Shoola.

Despite the international success of Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, young writers in Nigeria lack both cultural and structural support. 'In Nigeria, there aren't the structural resources to help young people who have these awesome stories to tell', says Shoola. 'There is no Master's in Creative Writing programme for example, so if anyone wants to study they have to travel abroad. And most publishers in Nigeria are simply printers. They print the book and then hand it back to the author to distribute and sell. Literary agents are also usually abroad so most of our books

are published overseas. An American wouldn't send their work to a Nigerian publisher for publication, so why don't we have the resources in Nigeria to host our voices and promote them? The audience for Nigerian books is mostly here in Nigeria but people struggle to access books; they are expensive because they are published abroad. It irks me. I want to start a book publishing company in Nigeria that provides full holistic support to writers and takes the audience of Nigerian readers very seriously, instead of just wanting to ship our authors' work outward.'

Shoola's vision, drive and wider social focus are not unusual in the Soro Soke generation. Nigeria is one of the world's most innovative nations: the *Harvard Business Review* highlights its 'powerful entrepreneurial climate', and points to the success of world-leading Nigerian businesses such as Jumia, Interswitch, Kobo360 and Andela, across sectors including education, fintech, agriculture, health-care, logistics and travel.² And much of the country's entrepreneurial growth is being driven by its young people. The International Youth Foundation's 2017 Global Youth Index surveyed young people in 29 countries. It found that Nigeria ranks first in the world for commercial energy, with 40 per cent of young Nigerians engaged in early-stage entrepreneurial activity.³

'Money and success have been de-tabooed and 95 per cent of Gen Z across Africa aspire to financial success', says Ndeye Diagne, who heads up the Kantar Africa Life survey. 'Young people are also very confident in their ability to set up and materialise a business, especially in Nigeria, where more than 76 per cent of our 2019 respondents said they intend to set up a business. This compares to around 40 per cent for the same age in the US. Young people here are purpose driven, action oriented and very entrepreneurial.'

The beating heart of the country's entrepreneurial energy is in Lagos, where a hustle or side hustle are almost ubiquitous. In part this is driven by financial need – according

to Nigeria's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), youth unemployment and underemployment stood at 42.5 per cent in Q4 2020.⁴ With jobs scarce and often badly paid, a business on the side helps make ends meet. But it's also a cultural attitude. Entrepreneurial nous flows through this generation's veins.

'In Lagos you sometimes get the feeling that your life is incomplete if you're not an entrepreneur or you don't at least have a side hustle or two', says Tamara Ojeaga, 39, who knows of what she speaks – alongside her day job in marketing, she runs a sportswear business on the side.

'My activewear line is called Rude Activewear', says Ojeaga. 'We want to be the Nike or lululemon for Africa. We use our knowledge of local wants and needs to fill gaps. We consider local sizing – we have thicker thighs and bottoms – and we know that people here want to look cool and sexy even when we are working out. In our first collection we infused Ankara patterns into the designs to offer something we can relate to.'

Ojeaga's business highlights a growing trend – entrepreneurship focused on local and pan-African consumers. A growing proportion of Nigeria's large youth population has money to spend and are seeking out products that cater to their tastes. The pan-African market, long hindered by red tape and lack of infrastructure, just got more accessible, too. On 1 January 2021, the 54 African countries opened their markets to each other and duty-free trading of goods and services across borders began. The new market, created under the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement, is estimated to be as large as 1.3 billion people, with a combined GDP of US\$3.4 trillion, making it the largest free trade area in the world.⁵

Ojeaga's business is hosted on Instagram, reflecting another trend: young entrepreneurs are using virtual spaces, in particular social media, as a business tool. Diagne says: 'Social commerce has really taken off in Nigeria.

Entrepreneurship for this generation is fuelled by social media. Instagram is basically a place to sell. WhatsApp and Facebook, too. Gen Z in particular use these tools to sell physical products and services.'

John Obidi, 34, is a Nigerian influencer and entrepreneur and his business-focused Facebook group has 167,000 followers across Africa. 'Social media is a way to reach a really large audience', he says. 'Females in Nigeria is a group that has more than one million members, all women, discussing issues relevant to females. YouTube is another important outlet. A friend of mine launched Money Africa, teaching people how to save and invest and she now has 100,000 followers.'

But being a young entrepreneur on the continent still poses significant challenges. As with anywhere in the world, starting a business requires a willingness to hustle and hustle some more. It requires entrepreneurial skills, ambition and a lot of hard work. In Nigeria, especially, starting a business is not easy. Funding is hard to secure, infrastructure is unreliable and government regulations are not supportive: in its inaugural African Tech Ecosystems of the Future report in 2021, FDI, a specialist division of the *Financial Times*, found that Nigeria had the highest volume of start-ups on the African continent, over 750, but that it missed out on all the top 10 rankings for categories that are critical to helping a business thrive.⁶ And alongside the usual challenges there are some that are particular to the region.

Odunayo Eweniyi, who co-founded and heads up financial services brand PiggyVest, says: 'Nigeria is an emerging economy; Africa is an emerging economy. That means businesses face unique challenges, like the non-existence of credit infrastructure. Or non-existence of several kinds of infrastructure. The regulatory environment is very unstable and there are security problems. As a founder, you need to build your team and find an office, but you also

need to generate your own power because power is not reliable, and you are responsible for security because security is iffy as well. It's like running a mini country. We are responsible for things that a founder in the US doesn't have to think about.'

These issues cut across sectors. Chef Michael Elégbèdé, 32, opened *Itàn Test Kitchen*, a fine dining restaurant in Lagos, in 2017. 'Chefs and critics outside Nigeria don't understand the realities that we have to overcome', he says. 'I have to be the one to supply my water, my electricity. To make sure staff are safe, we have lodging for them. In most other parts of the world, there are culinary schools. I don't have that luxury; we don't have a culinary school that is of standard. For the level of excellence that I want to provide, I literally do a paid training of every member of staff because I also understand that we are not in a reality where I can have people come and train for free. They can't afford to. I'm fine with it, I like the fact that I am able to do this here and to do it in a way that is good, but these are the realities that we face compared to other places, especially if you want to do it in a way that shows humanity.'

Acting with humanity is a growing consideration – the typical Soro Soke generation entrepreneur is a creative disruptor, using their business to deliver solutions to the larger problems the continent faces. As Adesuwa Omorede and Sara Thorgren point out in their paper 'Passionate Leaders in Social Entrepreneurship: Exploring an African Context', non-state actors are increasingly influential in addressing pressing social needs in sub-Saharan Africa, across everything from health to illiteracy, agriculture and finance.⁷ These social enterprises are not only solving problems. A Siemens Stiftung analysis of 12 African countries estimates that by 2030, one million new jobs can be created by local social enterprises.⁸

For Elégbèdé, showing humanity goes beyond his immediate staff. When he struggled to find produce and supplies

at the quality he needs, he set up a foundation to incentivise, train and support his rural suppliers: ‘We work with people in the perceived lower tier of society to help them bring up their businesses’, he says. ‘For example, all the plates we use in the restaurant are made by local women living in villages. Their traditional plates are regular thick, clay plates and we asked them to make refined version for us. It takes more work for them but there’s also a lot more money in it. Because we are asking for a certain value and certain quality, we are willing to pay for it. What we are doing is creating avenues that educate people to be able to stand on their own two feet.’

Omobolanle Banwo, 28, runs her own design agency, Geneza Brands, and a training business, the Geneza School of Design, which offers online courses for students in 14 countries across Africa. In 2018 she noticed a dearth of women in the Nigerian design industry and launched the Female Designer Movement, which offers a free training programme for women who want to build a career in design.



Figure 25 Omobolanle Banwo, 28, founder of the Female Designer Movement
Credit: Fati Abubakar

‘I asked myself why we don’t have more women designers and I did a bit of research and realised that women have this preconceived notion that design is just for men. I wanted to change that narrative. In 2018, I put out a post saying I would train women for free. In my mind I was expecting about 10 or 15 women to take up the opportunity but almost 300 women applied. So, we ran another course and another and we just kept on training women, training women. So far, I’ve trained over 3,000 women for free’, she says.

‘We take a percentage of what we earn from our online school to sponsor women in the Female Designer Movement. In this way we have a sustainable system and we don’t have to rely on other organisations for money or sponsorship. I’m really happy that we have all these systems in place to prove that we are serious about what we are doing because it’s not just about having a passion, it’s also about creating structure around it and being accountable’, says Banwo.

She sums up the way many young entrepreneurs think when she says: ‘My values are about empowering people. I’m the kind of person who likes to create opportunities for others. I don’t like to win alone. I want other people to win with me.’

Banwo has the ambition to offer her free training programme to women outside Nigeria, too. ‘I have a goal and desire to train many African women and we are currently trying to collaborate with other African countries’, she says. And she points to technology as the great enabling factor. Whether it is her design business or her pan-African training offer, it is access to the Internet that is facilitating her success. ‘With Geneza Brands we’ve worked with more international organisations than Nigerian organisations’, she says. ‘They want to give a global brand an African feel, so they reach out to us. I’ve had the opportunity to work with established organisations in Gabon, the UK and the US on different branding projects.’

‘When I check my email in the morning, I’m receiving emails from people asking me to do what I love to do and offering me a lot of money to do it’, says Banwo. ‘This is the life! I wish I could express what I feel on the inside. Imagine: I am able to train women all over Africa, all over Nigeria, from my computer, right here in my house. Imagine such an opportunity!’