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Saving Lives in the Developing World through Sustainable Technology Solutions

Posted by Craig Michael Lie Njie on August 14, 2013 at 04:04 PM EDT

Craig Michael Lie Njie is being honored as a Champion of Change for applying his tech skills for civic good.

It is an incredible honor to be recognized as a White House Champion of Change. I hope that my story inspires others to work to solve the world's hard problems through sustainable technology solutions.

I believe deeply in the idea that technology, even basic technology, can be built and deployed to help with some of the most pressing needs of the developing world. I also believe that for those like myself that have been given incredible opportunities, we also have deep responsibilities to give back to lose less fortunate whenever and wherever possible -- to constantly strive to leave the world a better place than we found it.

However, technology solutions alone are not enough -- those solutions must also be long-term sustainable.

I was given the name Lie Njie as an honorarium for my service as a Peace Corps Volunteer in The Gambia, West Africa, from 2005-2008. When I arrived, those seeking advanced technology education had no options other than to leave the country. Most of those who were lucky enough to leave never came back, a terrible example of "Brain Drain". So I designed, deployed, and taught the first two years of The Gambia's first Bachelor's in Computer Science at the University of The Gambia (UTG).

The success story isn't about my initial efforts -- the real success is that, eight years later, the Bachelor's in CS program is still sustainable—a direct result of the work of The Gambians who took ownership of the program. I was merely the initial catalyst.

It was in The Gambia when I met Amran Gaye -- one of the smartest people I've ever known. He is a brilliant high school graduate who had taught himself programming, networking, and system administration over a brutally slow internet connection. He remains my daily reminder that intelligence and ability are born everywhere, the only geographic differences are in the opportunities available.

I began mentoring Amran and appointed him as the first Teaching Assistant for my new BS in CS major. Amran leveraged that experience to win a CS scholarship to the University of Maryland.

In May of 2013, I told Amran about the Peace Corps Innovation Challenge, and the June 1-2 National Day of Civic Hacking. Amran eagerly offered to help with the hackathon as a way to give back to the Peace Corps, and help solve a problem endemic to developing countries worldwide, including The Gambia, his homeland. We chose a Peace Corps Innovation Challenge posted by Aimee, a Peace Corps Volunteer in South Africa. We call it MedLink.

MedLink is more than just a good innovation challenge: Amran's sister, Jatou, is currently a nurse in a rural area in Gambia who struggles daily with medical inventory control and distribution of supplies and services to the people who need them. Because delivery of medicines to health centers are irregular and unpredictable, people in need currently have to travel daily for many hours just to check if the medicines they need have arrived. Often they are told to come back the next day, or to try another health center that might be hours or days travel away. This puts those in need at risk when they are unable to get the urgent medical supplies they need, when they need them.



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Amran and I linked up with Daniel, Nancy, Suri, and Mikhail at the San Francisco hackathon, where we designed the initial architecture for MedLink, a tool for those in need of medical supplies in rural areas of developing countries, saving time, money, and travel distance - in some cases literally saving lives. MedLink's SMS, Web, and Email tools enable those in need who have nothing more than a simple cellphone to make requests for what they need. SMS -- Simple Messaging Service -- is available on nearly every cellphone in the developing world. In the developing world, SMS-enabled cellphones are nearly everywhere: some developing countries have more active SMS-enabled cellphones than people!

After the San Francisco hackathon, Amran then recruited Latirr, Serign, Rachel, Ala, and Fatou to help further develop MedLink during the June 18-19 Random Hacks of Kindness hackathon event in The Gambia. It was this follow-on step that was the key to MedLink's sustainability: this became more than just a weekend hackathon project, this was now the start of a long-term project from a team of volunteers world-wide to help to connect medical supplies and services to those in need.

We've built the initial version of MedLink with a constant eye towards sustainability and extensibility, and will begin testing in The Gambia and South Africa. However, the real success will come only if we make the system long-term sustainable. This will require more than just technology development skills.

MedLink's success is not my own, it's the combination of efforts from Amran and the rest of the team. My success was in inspiring them to help with the project and in keeping the energy levels up and the focus sharp. The team's success is that the system is built with extensibility in mind, with a world-wide focus, and a strong drive for sustainability built in from the start.

Craig Michael Lie Njie is founder and CEO of Kismet World Wide Consulting

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