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Mentoring the Next Generation of Leaders in West Africa



Etienne Kablan Berabely



AUTHOR



**Etienne Kablan
Berabely**

Etienne, Kablan Berabely, is passionate about involving local people into affairs that will lead to the rapid development of their communities. He is an expert on intercultural business management and public relations. Etienne holds a MA (Psychology of Intercultural Communications) from I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University, and a BA (Translation), University of Ghana Legon, Ghana Institute of Languages.

Editorial Team

Jimm Chick Fomunjong – Head, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI

Christian Elongué Nгнаoussi – Programme Officer, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI

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- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.



Mentoring the Next Generation of Leaders in West Africa

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For more information write to:

West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI)
No. 9 Bingo Street, East Legon
P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota
Accra, Ghana

Email : research@wacsi.org
Tel : +233 (0) 302 550 224

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Introduction

“We complain that the younger ones are not competent, but what are we doing to get them to become competent? I want to serve as a model.”

—Margaret Jackson, Managing partner at Rainbow Consult.

The African youth has always been considered as a promising talent. Many, however, struggle to meet these heightened expectations set on them. The youth, full of innovative ideas and high aspirations, have minimal opportunities to unleash those talents and aspirations. Inasmuch as more opportunities are being created in West Africa, the necessary skillsets and support systems required to help empower the youth to grasp these opportunities continue to be limited. Due to that, many of these talents do not achieve their goals in life, many of whom are eventually persuaded to take actions that are far below their worth and ambitions. This piece explores how promoting quality mentoring programmes could help shape the lives of the youths to be more productive and be of significant added value to their communities and countries. Hence, they will become a catalyst for accelerated and sustainable development of West African countries.

1. What is Mentoring?

Within the scope of this article, mentorship is a relationship where an experienced person invests their time and expertise to help a younger person achieve a pre-defined goal. The role of the mentor is drawn from [Homer's](#) Odyssey in Ancient Greek times. The character Alcimus was travelling and entrusted his son, Telemachus, under the care of the character named Mentor, to guide him in his time of difficulty. Thus, Mentor's role was to be a father figure to the mentee (Telemachus) and to give specific advice in terms of growth according to an agreed goal between both.

The kind of relationship that existed between Mentor and Telemachus is what this piece advocates for the youth in West Africa. Here, the potential mentor will be expected to believe in the younger one, support them and stand by them to achieve a set goal. Such a role will require the potential mentor to be humane, sympathetic, and willing to volunteer his/her time and expertise to support the mentee to achieve her/his goals. According to Maxwell (2015: 212), “one of the greatest values of mentors is the ability to see ahead what others cannot see and to help them navigate a course to their destination.”

Mentors play a broader role in the life of youths. The role encompasses both career and psychological functions (see Noe, 1988a; Kram, 1983, 1985, Ehrich et al., 1999). They look at the long-term development of the younger person. This demands some level of commitment to see the mentorship engagement move to a desirable end, with a focus on achieving a pre-defined goal. When matched up with the mentee, the role of the mentor would be to develop, stimulate and challenge the mentee to achieve higher purposes. In the process, the mentor would support and guide the mentee to build her/his competence, network and character.



The mentor would achieve these by sharing knowledge from which the mentee can tap into and sail their way to their set goals.

Among the youths, the term mentorship is often misconceived, or they may not have a mentor. During a focus group¹ discussion, I surveyed young people asking them who their mentor was. A vast majority of them revealed that they never had a formal mentor but were interested in having one.

However, the majority among them confused the role of teachers or coaches and that of a mentor. Given the possible low level of understanding on who a mentor is, their role and the need for any young West African to have one, we explore below who a mentor is, their role and their relevance for the younger generation. This could contribute to enabling West African youth to make informed choices about getting a mentor. Besides, it will help them also appreciate the idea of having one who would be of added value to their social, academic and professional choices, hence, enabling them to reach their full potentials towards contributing to a prosperous West Africa.

1.1 Role models, coaches, and teachers vs. mentors

Role models, teachers, coaches and mentors are four distinct, yet, important actors who can, at different stages in the life of a youth, play valuable roles and make meaningful contributions to shape the academic, social and career paths of youth. However, role models, teachers and coaches can sometimes be mistaken for mentors. This section seeks to clarify the difference that exists between a mentor and these other key players in the life of a youth. Clear definitions and differentiation for role models and coaches emerged from participants' discussions during the two mentorship workshops for women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in Ghana, organised by the Millennium Development Authority (MiDA) and facilitated by Rainbow Consult in Accra. Participants stated that,

A role model is a person whose behaviour, example, or success is or can be emulated by others, especially by younger people. [Unlike mentors], role models are not chosen or necessarily made aware that their actions are closely monitored.

A coach is employed to guide their coachee attain their goals in life; business, career or any other

capacity for which they have been hired. The duration of the coach's engagement with his or her subject is dependent on the contract binding them.

The participants' differentiations highlighted the point that one does not necessarily need to know their role models personally nor meet them physically. This feature of the function of a role model defeats the real essence of mentoring. Mentoring is not just about success; it focuses on the means to achieve success. Getting to know the mentor much better and learning good practices from them by leveraging their experiences are some attributes of a successful mentorship process. Having a distant role model cannot provide such opportunities offered by mentoring.

There is a significant difference between a coach and a mentor. "A coach is employed to guide their coachee attain their goals in life; business, career or any other capacity for which they have been hired", (Rainbow Consult, 2019). Same could be said of teachers. Most often, the teacher's sole priority is to give knowledge. His or her assumed goal is to see students achieve high academic strides. Both coaches and teachers focus their relationship on developing their trainee to gain competence in one specific area of their life. To be qualified as a coach or a teacher, one needs to have credentials (certification or degrees) for the task before assuming the function, whereas credentials are not required for mentoring.

Role models, teachers or coaches have the potential to be mentors. Anyone exercising these functions can also mentor their students or followers. "As long as the role model, the teacher, or coach is willing to be a father figure, who sponsors, guides and instructs the younger individual", (ibid). In this case, additional resources and time on the part of the teacher and coach will be needed, especially when the mentorship process or relationship is on charitable grounds. The teacher will have to set aside some extra time, attention, and resources for the mentee, and expect no rewards or benefits, as a true parent would do for their children in view of pushing them in the right direction.

Mentors, on the other hand, have the potential to function as a role model, a coach and a teacher at any given time in the process, if the role is required to meet the overall development of the mentee. This is supported by Verrier (2019:134) who points out that, "a truly great mentor has the dexterity to switch between the different styles when appropriate."

¹The group included ten younger persons in my circle of influence whom I encourage most often to find a mentor for themselves.

Case in point: Author's experience:

In the pursuit of my first degree at the Ghana Institute of Languages, I met Mrs Elizabeth Rhule, the Head of the English Department. She was not only my lecturer, but she was the only audience to my pieces of writing. Occasionally, I would write opinion pieces which were not going to be published anywhere and which had nothing to do with what I was learning in school. Nevertheless, she would make time to read and review them. At times, she would give her opinion about my thoughts, the way I see things and why she believed it may or may not be beneficial to me. She passionately read and reviewed all my articles even though she was aware that I was only going to keep them in my archive. It was evident that Mrs Rhule would have been more than willing to fully mentor me if I had approached her with that intention. Unfortunately, like some youths today, I did not give it a thought.

I am so appreciative of the role Mrs Rhule has played in my development. I can boldly say those moments have been yielding positive impacts on my career today. If I currently have an audience for this piece, credit goes to Mrs Rhule for that. However, my relationship with her was geared toward developing specific competencies (i.e. writing and public speaking) in me.

2. Benefits of Mentoring

With regards to mentoring in West Africa, there is little comprehensive literature, as well as patterns, to show how mentoring has influenced the lives of many prominent persons in West Africa. However, a close study of the lives of many successful people in the region would reveal that a caring person played a major role in helping them become whom they have become.

2.1 Mentoring contributes to overall positive human development

In countries where mentoring is given much attention to, studies have proven that mentoring has greatly contributed to the improvement of the life of many young people who probably would never have been significantly successful in life. In South Africa, while studying the effects of mentoring on young male teenagers, Steytler and Strydom (2013) found that male teenagers with an active mentor report higher resilience, satisfaction and future perspective. Moreover, these teenagers have better self-perceptions and display better school adjustment. Additionally, they demonstrate superior decision-making abilities in comparison to their peers with no mentors.

A meta-analysis of 73 mentoring programmes aimed at children and adolescents revealed that active mentoring as an intervention helped to improve children's school achievement and helped to counter poor behaviour, drug use, and depression compared to young people who did not receive the help (Dubois et al., 2011). In the USA, in a nationwide survey of young people's perspective on mentoring, Bruce and Bridgeland (2014) found several outcomes of mentoring. They were: higher educational attainment, engagement in productive and beneficial activities, and the ability for these young people to "stay on or return to the successful path when they may falter, and achieve key milestones on the path to adulthood", (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014:2).

When mentoring is done assiduously, its advantages can be more significant. It can produce individuals that will handle the affairs of our countries adequately and accelerate the development of our countries. Moreover, mentoring has the capacity to trigger the moral development of the individual, which can be a key factor in minimising socio-political ills in which the youth in the region are involved.





2.2 Mentoring as a means to alleviate socio-cultural ills in society

Several alarming reports present evidence of West African youth involved in destructive behaviours (Brachet, 2018; Taub, 2017; Grégoire, 1999). They are recorded in the desperate bid to migrate illegally to countries they consider as lands of opportunities. Or worse still, they are manipulated by ill-minded individuals for economic reasons.

The tendency for young people to emigrate from their countries is a growing menace to the West African society. According to the Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration (cited in Haas, 2008), over 13,000 migrants apprehended in Morocco in 2004 were of West Africa origin. With a majority coming from Gambia, Ghana, Mali, and Senegal, respectively. Between 2000 and 2003, close to 15,000 irregular migrants apprehended by Libyan authorities were reported to originate from West Africa. Additionally, 90 per cent of those apprehended in Algeria between 2000 and 2003 were from West Africa (Simon, 2006). The aim for these migrations in the Maghreb region of West Africa is to cross the Mediterranean Sea, or to cross the desert to countries of the European Union; mainly Italy and Spain (UNHCR 2005). Moreover, they do so largely in response to the lack of adequate opportunities or prospects of accessing preferred opportunities in their country. This is depicted by the high unemployment rates, especially youth unemployment, which remains a significant social and economic challenge faced by most West Africa countries (UNECA, 2012).

Prostitution is another phenomenon that is observed among young people with inadequate adult supervision. Literature reports on millions of young West African girls, who are involved in prostitution in the region and beyond (ECPAT International, 2014). These figures involve, primarily, girls below the age of 18 (BEFOR, 2014). These young girls practice prostitution for survival and to support their families. For others, the main leading cause of prostitution is the early introduction to sex or sexual abuse by an older person who threatened them not to denounce the act. Alternative investigations show that some ladies practice prostitution as victims of sex trafficking (Briggs, 2012). The life events that make these youngsters—mostly girls—more vulnerable to the situation of prostitution are, among others, separations with parents, homelessness, increased family responsibilities upon the young person, foster care, forced marriage, poor awareness on commercial sexual exploitation of children (Hounmenou, 2016; ECPAT International, 2014; ILO, 2001).

These recurring patterns of socio-cultural vices, as explained above, may not directly be linked to the lack of mentors in the lives of the youth. However, the underlying dynamics of these ills is the lack of “constructive social incentive” (McIntyre et al. 2002). A vast majority of these youths are endowed with a wealth of talents but lack individuals such as ‘the big brother or sister’ to present to them the opportunities available in the region and how to maximise such opportunities. These experiences of the youth could be improved if mentors

are strategically positioned in their lives to encourage them to make the right decisions concerning their lives. According to Abbink (2005), the “youth interpret their problems through a moral prism: they often suggest that adults have given up on them or have reneged on their social and moral obligations towards them.” Therefore, adequate mentoring programmes for the youth can help them reflect on their approaches to resolving the challenges they face and find suitable context alternatives and appropriate response strategies and actions.

3. Recommended Mentoring Approach

The West Africa region possesses many great individuals, well-regarded people that could be identified and matched up with youths. I was fortunate to have met Margaret Jackson², who helped me sail successfully through many uncertainties, accompanied by the many choices to be made at essential stages of my life. Margaret has voluntarily mentored several young people across the continent. Through the Civil Society Leadership Institute, a leadership programme for middle-level civil society actors championed by the West Africa Civil Society Institute, Margaret has mentored some young west Africans to morph into technically and professionally astute leaders with high moral standards. She has contributed significantly to help them meet their needs and aspirations, whether professional or personal. Margaret provides each of her mentees with a custom-designed mentorship relationship and has a great ability to consider in detail the essential elements of their development process. Moreover, I am fortunate to be one of them.

One of the most striking aspects of our mentoring relationship was to see Margaret, albeit her high socio-professional status, seeing me off after each of our mentoring sessions —she would always walk miles with me. During one of such moments, I wondered:

Me: Margaret, why do you have to walk such a long distance to see me off every day?

Margaret: I have to do that.

Me: We both know that you do not have to.

Margaret: I have to. I believe that how you see your mentee off is as important as how you receive them. We usually smile at people when we receive them and, when they are leaving, quickly we turn to our computers as if they were an interruption on our work.



I had an appointment with you, and the right thing for me to do is to see you off properly. Even though you are my mentee, you are as important as any client who was paying me. I believe that if you decide to do something, you must do it well.

I was astounded by her response, which completely changed my perspective about mentoring. Mentoring means more than I had always perceived it to be. Mentoring requires an individual to go the extra mile to ensure the mentee’s perception and attitude are also influenced positively. Mentoring has the potential to inspire good practices in the behaviour of mentees (especially youths), as the lifestyle of the mentor, including their principles, can be inculcated in the mentee.

Hence, if youths are to create the change we want for our countries; it is indispensable to prepare them for the future through mentoring. When we think about it as such, we will get to the realisation that mentoring is not an option—it is an imperative.

² Margaret serves as the managing partner at Rainbow Consult. She is an accomplished IFC-IPL Master trainer. She is an expert on Human Resources and Adult learning consultant. Margaret also works as a senior manager for several organisations across the region and in Africa at large.



4. Mentorship Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

The daunting challenges with mentoring in West Africa can be in many folds. They may stem from the side of the mentor, the mentee (youth), or the organisation connecting the potential mentors to the youth. We discuss a few of these challenges below.

4.1. Lack of clarity on the mentoring process and content

There have been several instances where attempted mentoring relationships failed. Discussions about challenges undermining mentoring during the MiDa mentoring workshop emphasised lack of commitment on the part of either the mentor, mentee or both as one of the major challenges with mentoring. In the instances cited, the mentors blamed the mentee for not being serious or committed. Whereas, on the side of the mentee, the mentor was not willing to help. However, the critical challenge identified was that many of the youth that needs mentoring have little idea of how the mentorship scheme should work. While the mentors expected to have mentees, who know what they want precisely, mentees seemed not to have a full grasp of the mentoring process and their role therein. The potential mentor should lower their expectations for what they deem essential for the mentee to know prior to seeking a mentoring relationship. It is recommended that the mentee has a clear idea of what they want before seeking a mentor. However, in case

the mentee lacks clarity on his or her goals, it is advisable that the potential mentor helps them get their ideas and expectations well defined and articulated. Alternatively, if necessary, the mentor should lead in the initial stage. This could be done by exposing the mentee to the mentor's personal experiences or other's experiences and approaches. This should be done in a way that motivates the mentee not to give up the process. Most importantly, as a potential mentor, do not assume the mentee knows everything.

Case in Point: Author's experience

When meeting Margaret for the first time, I had no clue how I wanted the mentoring relationship to be. All I knew was that Margaret is a seasoned trainer, and I wanted to be like her. All I had in mind was to get her to agree to take me along when she is going to have training sessions so that I could have on-site knowledge and practice. However, the mentorship took another turn, which I had no idea of before our meeting. First, Margaret ascertained what I needed. She gathered some background information about me without prying—I believe she noticed a knowledge deficiency on my side when it got to my responsibilities as a potential mentee. Then, with some guidelines, she suggested that I should clearly define my objectives. She assisted me to break my goal into specific objectives, with timelines assigned to each of them. It took me several weeks to do this. After that period, we were both clear on my objectives and the role each of us would play to assist me in my career development.

4.2. Economic pressure

The economic pressure on today's youth in West Africa is often so high that their willingness and ability to diligently follow mentorship sessions dwindles. Coupled with the high unemployment rates in West African countries, it makes the situation harder for them. "Things can be so difficult financially that at times I have nothing on me for transportation to meet and talk to my potential mentor", said one member of the group of young people in my circle of influence whom I encourage to find a mentor. The economic challenges faced by the youth in the region often deprive them of certain basic needs. Consequently, they place mentorship far below in their list of priorities as they opt for priorities that can enable them to afford their daily bread.

Supporting these young people financially so that they can be committed to mentoring could add more value to the process and eventually, the outcome. It is not an obligation for mentors to support their mentee financially. Nevertheless, if done, when duly needed, the gains can be significant. Margaret usually pronounces some heart-warming words when it comes to that: "I have to do for you whatever I will do for my children." This demonstrates one aspect where the human factor in mentorship is solicited.

4.3. Lack of trust

Often, mentoring requires that the mentee should reveal personal information to the mentor, believing that the mentor will help them deal with any identified personal challenges, especially if they are crucial to the success of the mentoring relationship. It is usually a challenge for youths to approach their seniors or elderly persons, especially if the latter does not demonstrate a trustworthy character.

Also, the narrative about the career and life experiences of some successful people does not encourage some youth to approach them for mentoring support. Some of the successful persons are corrupt or do not have an excellent moral pedigree. Some are self-centred and do not demonstrate actions that showcase an interest in promoting social good, particularly one that would benefit a youth.

Trust is an integral part of ensuring that the mentoring relationship is positive and productive. In preparing individuals to take mentoring roles, it is important to emphasise a commitment to confidentiality. In ongoing mentoring relationships, the mentors should seek the consent of the mentee before disclosing any information about them to a third party. Additionally, in view to build and maintain a high-level trust, individuals seeking to mentor younger people should do so without any hidden agenda. The tendency is that some individuals could engage in mentoring with an ulterior motive of gaining recognition and rewards in return. In the event of such, particularly when the mentee was not privy to that, it could have an adverse effect on the relationship. Mentors should realise that the success of a mentoring relationship is ascertained from the testimony of the mentee, not in that of the mentor.

4.4 A limited number of organisations dedicated to mentoring the youths

For most organisations attempting to offer programmes in youth development in the region, mentoring is not the priority area or core activity in the organisations. The multifunctional nature of these organisations affects the implementation of quality mentoring programmes. Even though these organisations implement mentoring programmes, their engagement and diligence over the process may decrease over time.

Ensuring that other institutions also run mentoring programmes for the youth should be a focus to help effectively reach out to as many youths as possible. Civil society actors should help engage in sensitising and advocating for other institutions such as churches, schools, associations, and related bodies to incorporate youth mentoring in their activities.

4.5. Funding

The few numbers of structured mentoring programmes across West Africa depend mainly on funding. As the funding dwindles, the mentoring engagements get affected. The organisations in charge of managing the funds usually provide mentoring for a limited period. This limitation could defeat the real essence of mentoring, which should be a long-term relationship between both the mentor and the mentee, in view of helping the latter become a fulfilled person.

A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be to generate funding locally to support mentoring efforts. Mentoring in West Africa stands a chance to yield productive results if West Africans fund mentoring initiatives. Locally funding mentoring programmes will enable a high-level of monitoring, evaluation and accountability. Additionally, it will encourage the participation of West Africans in supporting and ensuring the success of the mentoring programmes.



5. Way Forward: Help Someone Out!

Several programmes are underway to help bridge the mentorship gap in the subregion by providing structured mentoring programmes. In Nigeria, the Strategy for Mentoring Initiative and Leadership Empowerment ([SMILE](#)), through leadership empowerment and mentoring programmes, equips the youth with the right values, knowledge and skills to excel, achieve their dreams, be problem solvers, decision-makers, leaders and agents of change in their society. The organisation provides continuous support, guidance, counsel and shares resources with beneficiaries of their programmes to catalyse the achievement of their life goals.

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), through the Civil Society Leadership Institute (CSLI) programme, grooms the next generation of leaders in civil society. It first equips these young people with the skills and tools they need to create sustainability in their fields and places of work and amplifies the effectiveness of their action. Second, it provides fellows with strong theoretical principles and experiential guidance to put their learning into practice by matching them with civil society practitioners or experts in their field for mentorship. The Gender and Social Inclusion Unit of the Millennium Development Authority ([MiDA](#)) provides the opportunity for young women pursuing science, technology,

engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses from selected tertiary educational institutions in Ghana to be mentored to ensure their possible employment in the power sector. These young women are financially supported during the period. The programme also ensures that the potential mentors are well trained and equipped to make the relationship with the young girls a lifelong one and ensure their holistic development.

[Rainbow-consult](#) takes the latter a step further. The organisation spearheads a wide range of training for mentees and potential mentors and provides platforms for young West Africans to meet potential mentors. These mentors are carefully selected, and they are matched up with young and enthusiastic persons who are willing to make a positive impact in their circle of influence and their communities at large. These young people are selected randomly, and most of the time, do not have a clear objective. Rainbow-consult ensures these young people get their objectives right by exposing them to a range of experiences based on their capabilities and interests. The initiative instils in these young people a sense of purpose, and together with their mentors, they work at achieving them. Additionally, Rainbow-consult ensures the smooth running of the mentorship sessions, intervenes when necessary, and assesses and evaluates the process.

Young West Africans seeking mentors are encouraged to contact these organisations. Experienced professionals who desire to make a positive impact in the lives of others are also invited to partner with these organisations.

6. Further Options to Explore

Although initiatives exist in some countries to mentor West African youths, these are quite limited. Across West Africa, there are very few affirmative action interventions geared towards mentoring West African youths to become ethical leaders and lead successful lives. Furthermore, often, some of the existing mentoring programmes are not very sustainable. Having both the private sector, the public sector, donors, and —most especially— individuals willing to give back to societies through mentoring youths, we will experience considerable strides in filling these gaps. Moreover, less-privileged young people will be ably assisted to navigate their way through life successfully.

There is a growing presence of reputable individuals with outstanding moral and technical skills in religious communities and associations in the subregion. These communities influence, in a way, the growth of the youths. Should these communities embrace the necessity of mentoring and get involved, many of our young people would be impacted.



Another group are the old students' associations. In Ghana, for instance, these associations have a remarkable presence in the country. They contribute significantly to the development of schools in the country. However, little is documented of them in the area of providing mentoring programmes to the students.

For civil society organisations interested in bridging the mentoring gap, they may consider reaching out to prominent individuals in communities and encourage them to mentor at-risk youth in their communities. It promises to be an alternative for the dwindling direct funding for mentoring programmes to be organised for the youths.

Conclusion

Mentoring the youths in west Africa can help create a historical and cultural legacy as it can help re-write the narrative of the region. It has the potential to inspire better practices in youths. These best practices will, in turn, be translated into context-relevant approaches to address critical issues affecting our countries. It will also establish a vast network of West Africans with superior decision-making abilities who can deliver the leadership the region needs to accelerate its growth. The West African region will make great strides if its citizens are at the core of grooming great leaders.

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