Generation Connect Podcast

Episode 9: Leadership in Action: Young Changemakers Making a Difference

With Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin, Shradha Pandey, Sophiyat Sadiq

Hosted by Tong Niu

Transcript

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Intro: Hi everyone! Welcome to the Generation Connect podcast, co-designed with youth, for youth. The ITU Generation Connect initiative aims to engage global youth alongside the leaders of today's digital change by empowering youth voices in the digital development dialogue. Tune in every month to listen to inspiring stories of youth, all across the world on the power of technology for sustainable development. Get involved by joining our global community of future leaders shaping the world of tomorrow.

Tong Niu: Hello everyone and welcome to the 9th episode of the Generation Connect podcast, co-design with youth and for youth. I'm Tong Niu, part of the generation connect team at ITU and I will be your host for today. In this episode, we will talk about young voices and perspectives in the world of digital development, aligning with the Generation Connect initiative and Kofi Annan's vision of promoting youth leadership.

Today I'm joined by three incredible guests, Abdul, Sophiyat and Shradha. They are all both the Kofi Annan Changemakers and Generation Connect Youth Envoys. Welcome everyone and thank you for joining me today. We would love to hear stories as young leaders contributing to UN sustainable development goals. Your personal experiences and advice could be of great help and support to all the young people tuning in today to listen to our stories.

So, to start off, please introduce yourself for all of our listeners and tell us about the project you're leading.

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Hi Tong. Thank you very much for the invitation. My name is Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin. I double as the Kofi Annan Changemaker and a Generation Connect Africa Youth Envoy. Currently I work with rural women in Ghana who are into shea butter production. And what we do is to assist them to find sustainable ways and better ways to elevate their income and more economical ways. And we are also looking at ways to kind of digitalize some aspects of the shea butter process.

Tong Niu: Thank you. And Sophiyat.

Sophiyat Sadiq: Hi everyone. My name is Sophiyat Sadiq. I'm based out of Lagos, Nigeria and originally from Nigeria. Just like Abdul, I also double as a Kofi Annan Changemaker as well as a Generation Connect Youth Envoy for the Africa region. For me, I work with girls and women from low-income communities all across the African continent to provide them with digital skills training as a way to bridge the current digital skills gap and then to also bridge the gender gap in the tech sector. So, basically what I do is to create spaces for girls and women to be able to join the tech workforce.

Tong Niu: Thank you and Shradha.

Shradha Pandey: Thank you so much Tong Niu. Hi everybody. I'm Shradha and I'm currently the board member of the Youth Special Interest Group of the Internet Society. And we primarily work towards bringing in the voice of youth and what youth community has to offer to the field of internet governance and make sure that our opinions and our views are included in these discussions to take the policy and the governance of internet forward.

Tong Niu: Thank you. Welcome everyone. The first thing I'm wondering is when you are leading the project, does it incorporate digital tools. Abdul?

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Yes, Tong, it does incorporate digital tools. Right now we live in an environment where digitalization and all of it tools has become very important and societies leverage on them, such as the power of social media, online collaborative tools and even data analytics to amplify the works they do.

As I speak to you now, currently I'm a co-founder of my startup. I'm also a professional worker. I'm not on ground. I have other co-founders who are on ground and I work in Accra. Almost every day. We collaborate online. We use digital tools to channel communications. When we are entering new communities, we use digital tools to conduct research, kind of like finding needs of communities, tailor their needs to do what we are implementing in their communities. And social media, I think it's a very powerful tool when it comes to kind of like marketing yourself as an institution, kind of like marketing yourself to the world about the work you do.

And this is something we try to encompass these rural women, even though they're not too tech

savvy, we just teach them the basic things that they could do. And one thing they've all become very confident with at this point is the use of WhatsApp, particularly to boost their local enterprises. And this is very impactful and has been a boost in the work they do in their communities.

Tong Niu: Thank you. And Sophiyat, are you using digital tools the same way Abdul does?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Very similarly to Abdul. Yes. So we currently run two programs. We have an online boot camp and of course we need to show to be able to reach all the girls and women that we currently train. So, when we're taking them on the web development course, we need to be able to reach them via different platforms, Zoom, Slack, WhatsApp for communication. And then when we do in-person trainings, we also teach young girls how to use a laptop, how to learn about the SDGs online, how to also program with the laptop. We go from things like scratch programming and MIT App Inventor to Python programming, HTML, CSS, JavaScript and all of these things are digital tools. And for the girls that we train online, we communicate with them via all of this digital technology. The advent of platforms like Zoom, like Webex, like Skype is the reason why we can be able to communicate with any girl anywhere at any time and be able to provide with the lessons that they have.

And also very similarly to Abdul, apart from running my organization I also work professionally, providing consultation services to non-profits in the area of digital inclusion. And one of the key things I'm working on this year is to gather 3000 young people for a Summit. And in order to be able to do that we need to find platforms that can comfortably host 3000 young people across the globe to come together to collaborate, to learn about Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics. So, definitely, digital tools are a very big part of what I do.

Tong Niu: Wow, it's really hard to imagine even 10 years ago, any platform can hold 3000 people in one time. Then Shradha, how do you engage digital tools in your work?

Shradha Pandey: So, with access to internet, what we primarily do is making sure that anyone who wants to bring the change, who wants to be a part of the policy process, who wants to make their opinion heard on any particular topic in the field of internet governance is not stopped merely because of their age. Or because of the idea that prevails that youth community has less to offer because of their lack of experience. So, we try to bridge that gap and make it as intergenerational as possible by bringing youth to the table and giving them these avenues for leading.

Tong Niu: Thank you, Shradha. And here's a question for you, regarding your project compared to the past, how has technology changed the way solving local issues in achieving Sustainable Development Goals?

Shradha Pandey: Thank you so much. So, I also have a project called the Grassroots Energy Management Support, which is an inclusive energy transition initiative for the local communities and rural communities in India. And the use of technology in furthering Sustainable Development Goal

no. 7. That is on energy transition, that is the one that I focus on. So, the role of the project and the role of technology in that field has been through the initiation and completion of surveys to understand what the grassroots communities actually want. Mostly we see that the policy initiatives and the policies that are framed by the government are more often that not extremely top-down, without realizing the needs the communities at the grassroots' level. So, my project aims to make sure that bridge is passed and that is done through technology by ensuring that we collect information from the rural communities, from the grassroots communities about what their energetic transition needs are. And we try to make sure that we fulfill that gap instead of initiating a top-down approach that has been going on in the past.

Tong Niu: Thank you, Shradha, for giving us great examples of digital leadership. And here comes a question for Sophiyat. According to your own experience with girls and digital inclusion, what is your understanding or definition of digital leadership and why do you think digital voice is important?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Of course. Thank you so much. One of the key things that I've Learned this year was while I was taking the internet governance course from the internet society. And I Learned the leadership structure that currently exists in the internet governance space and how it is not very accepting or accessible to young people.

I appreciate the efforts of what is like the ICANN and ISOC and the programs and initiatives that they have to include young people like us in these spaces. But the internet largely has a very high percentage, a very high number of young people like ourselves online. So, when we're talking about digital leadership, it's very important that we are very much equally represented in spaces like this.

So many times, people do not trust in the ability for young people to make great decisions, but I would say they need to trust in our lived experiences and in the fact that we are bringing the real life problems and real life angles to these decision-making spaces and this decision-making tables.

Tong Niu: Thank you, Sophiyat. I do agree that inclusion and representation are the two key things. However, in many parts of the world, for example, youth from LDCs or in marginalized communities face unique challenges in accessing digital technology. So Abdul, in your opinion, who are the marginalized or disadvantaged groups in the digital age?

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Thank you very much, Tong, for that question. And I think when we talk about marginalization of people in the digital age. We talk about it in terms of policy. We look at it from the angle of infrastructure. We look at it from the angle of access, and we look at it from the angle of inclusion. And when you look at all these factors, you see that different structures of societies in the different aspects of the developing world are more disadvantaged. When you look at communities in Ghana, for instance, you come to the more urban communities in Ghana, you see that they have the best infrastructure, you see that they have the best resources. The policies favor them. But then you move to the rural part of Ghana, and they do not even have the infrastructure that even if good policies are being made to support them, those infrastructures would help them bolster

in this digital age. But then you come to other aspects when it comes to inclusion, minority groups such as LGBTQI groups, such as religious minorities, such as ethnic minorities, all these people are to some extent excluded from the digital age because, you see that policies do not directly satisfy their needs. Policies are made general. They're not tailored to the needs of the communities to which those policies are made. And these are one of the major things that causes these lapses in especially LDCs and the developing world in the Global South.

Tong Niu: Thank you, Abdul. And apart from the challenges Abdul mentioned, Sophiyat, do you have anything to add regarding those challenges those groups may face?

Sophiyat Sadiq: I definitely echo everything Abdul has said. As the internet continues to grow and to develop, as we're branching into things like the AI and the deepfake, new challenges and problems keep arising and especially for girls and women. We continue to be in marginalized group in spaces like this. I remember just scrolling through Twitter and a girl being very upset because someone had used her image to create pornographic films and images using AI. And I just wonder how much more do we have to go in order to protect girls and women in spaces like this and not just in real life. Now as we think of our digital development and how girls and women are represented, we also have to think about our safety, you know, as we're rapidly developing and going into an AI world. How are we protecting these groups that are already misrepresented, marginalized or sidelined?

Tong Niu: Thank you, Sophiyat. That's a very good point and we will talk about AI later. Regarding those challenges, does anyone have idea on what resources can be used to deal with them?

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: When you talk about resources, I most of the time link it to the empowerment of young people using digital resources. And Sophiyat mentioned in an earlier presentation that majority of the internet users in the world are people aged from 15 to 24. And I was just going through a statistic on the ITU website and I realized it's about 71% of young people of the world's population aged 15 to 24 are the users of internet.

So, I believe to start addressing these challenges holistically, we need to start by empowering young people and relevant actors through resources that are crucial for their personal growth and development. We have initiatives like code.org and Girls Who Code to offer coding courses and resources to young people. This will bridge the gender gap Sophiyat mentioned in technology and also kind of like encourage girls to pursue careers in STEM fields. Additionally, organizations such as One Laptop per Child would also help provide affordable laptops and digital devices to children in underserved communities, therefore enabling access to educational resources and develop digital skills.

We all know that Covid-19 came and disrupted educational sector. For about two years, Some countries did not sit in classrooms or they are learning where online. In a case like Ghana and I know for the most parts of Nigeria, that would be totally impossible and that would be totally unfair because a lot of people would be left out of the chain, because they do not even have the mobile phone, they

do not even have the laptop. Forget those things, they do not even have this table internet access. So, I believe these challenges would be addressed if we empower young people, make sure that we include young people in policing, we make sure that we provide necessary infrastructure. And this would have to rely on governments and private sector to the achievement of this goal.

Tong Niu: Thank you, Abdul. I'm even taking notes of the websites you just mentioned. Actually, in our last episode about AI and education, our guest, Philipp Hacker, left all of you with a thought-provoking question. Let's hear his voice:

Philipp Hacker: "My question would be, how can young digital leaders prepare themselves technically and organizationally and intellectually to lead and to generate change while including and building upon GPT4 and other generative AI models?"

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Thank you very much for that lovely question and a very interesting one at that. And I think the world is developing rapidly and we see that generative AI, even though has become something very exciting, it's also that is raising a lot of concern when it comes to security-wise, when it comes to privacy issues and even the educational sector feels threatened by the development of AI these days, especially with the emergence of ChatGPT and so many other generative AI tools that help young people achieve certain aims. And you see that even though there are several advancements on these horizons, advancements especially in the virtual reality and augmented reality have the potential to revolutionize industries such as tourism, training and entertainment. So I believe we can transport these technologies into other aspects of our environment. Whilst these security issues still persist, we need to find ways to reregulate it. When you look at the World Intellectual Property Organization, intellectual property of digital tools to some extent do not include the aspects of growth that we have right now. So, a lot of organizations come up with research that are not actually very well patented, that are not actually very well protected and approved for use by young people. And when we don't cap situations like this, you see that there's abuse in those cases.

Tong Niu: Thank you. Sophiyat?

Sophiyat Sadiq: When we're thinking about how we want to improve generative AI, ChatGPT, the AI space in general, machine learning, who are the people who are developing all of this technology? And how much context about the human race do they have? How diverse is the teams that are building this? And I'd love to echo what Abdul said in terms of this is why it's important that marginalized group and girls and women can be included, can be able to learn about coding, can learn about technology, can learn about machine learning as well, so that they can be a part of the teams that are building the future of our technology so that they can give their own lived experiences, so that they can give content, so then they can give an angle that may not be perceived by another member of the team.

So for me, once I think about inclusion and how we can make the future of AI more inclusive, I think

about the representation that we currently have in AI and our diversities.

Tong Niu: Thank you. And Shradha, do you have anything to add?

Shradha Pandey: One small key factor that I wanted to add with respect to the use of AI is that we have been and have become the first movers and have used AI unlike any of the generation, which makes the youth communities perspective on the usage of AI very important. So with respect to making it more inclusive using it and policy and governance, etc. It has been unheard of and the way in which you've been utilizing it for example the Youth Special Interest Group of the, of ISOC has sort of utilized it by making sure that we make the fullest use of AI by running through all the ideas that we can think of and then we run it through ChatGPT, we see the reaction and then we run the other information that we receive to give a mirror to see how it affects us, etc. So something of that sort and a furthermore one key factor that I realized when Sophiyat was talking about inclusion was using AI in the form of creating surveys, in the form of making sure that we hear the youth perspective on what they want as the key factors to be focused on for the future. So the youth skills for the future job market is one of the key factors that runs through the mind of all the youth community members and that is something that comes up over and over again when we're talking about ISOC. One of the key factor of inclusion I think was bringing in Generation Connect youth members from across jurisdictions across the worlds together to see what ideas they have on AI and on governance. And we're doing that through several meetings through AI for Good, etc initiatives like that which are going a long way furthering this inclusion but there's still a lot more that can be done.

Tong Niu: Thank you. And here comes a session where everyone can ask a question to other changemakers. Abdul, would you like to go first?

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Thank you so much for this. I do have a question. My question is if they could share a little bit about their future plans as a youth leader and the utilization of digital technology in their leadership journey.

Sophiyat Sadiq: Wow. To be fair, when people ask me oh, what is your five-year plan? What is your five-year strategy? I just always say look, I just want to wake up tomorrow. I have nothing in my head.

But for me I would say that I'm honestly, I'm at a very exciting point right now, especially with my organization because we're doing some very transformational work and some transformational change into the way that we interact with not just our digital tools and technology, but how we take it to rural communities. And in the coming months, we're set to launch a new project that is gonna be at using artificial intelligence to understand the learning rates of kids in rural communities, as a way for us to really learn how we can accelerate their growth. And I'm so excited about this project actually. And also just in my professional life, consulting for a couple of very exciting NGOs and we are set to launch August 12th the International Youth Day. And what we're going to do is accelerating the youth revolution for good, giving opportunities to young people who want to do anything to change the word and as well as just helping youth than 2030 connects more and more young people on the digital

space as a way for us to explore the STEM field and how we can use that to achieve, the UN Sustainable Goals as well as create better communities for ourselves.

So, I am really excited for my future and my future in the digital space, in the digital leadership because I know that the transformative work that I would get to do alongside some very amazing young people would really set the tone for digital youth leadership as well as the future of an inclusive digital space. So over to you, Shradha.

Shradha Pandey: Thank you so much. And it's so wonderful to hear about your upcoming projects, Sophiyat. It's really great to see when a fellow changemaker is doing so much, it motivates you and inspires you to work and to do something that actually being changed at the grassroots level.

So, one thing that I think Abdul's question was amazing and the future plans as a youth leader by making sure that we're working on our project and achieving the Sustainable Development Goal that I'm currently focusing on with respect to technology and energy.

So, energy transition for rural communities is something I'm excited about. We're trying to work through and bridge how to scale up the project further, how to take it to the next level because we completed the pre-pilot in the previous month in June, and it was a massive success that approximately 75% of the households said that it was really positive for them.

So now we're trying to see how we can scale up and how we can get the youth community to focus on and have these initiatives taken forward. And what we're also trying to see is how to empower the youth communities to become change makers in their own rights, to make sure that they can take up these plans, these leadership goals all on their own and take them further in the direction that they really want to.

Then second thing is for my future goals in terms of my study has been in law and policy. So one thing that I'm sort of focusing on at the moment is trying to make sure that the idea and points that I've learned about legal analysis, about policy analysis through my studies, I try to make sure that I implement them. So putting sure that your ideas are put forward, making sure that you're heard, your opinion and your ideas about freedom of speech, about the future governance of internet, about the future of technology policy as a whole, is shaped by our opinion and ideas. So thank you so much for that question, Abdul. And I would be very interested to know your answer as well.

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Oh Shradha. To my own question back at me, I think that's very interesting and I like the perspectives each of you are coming from. Everybody seems to know where they are heading, even though, even if it's not clear, you have an idea where you want to be. And myself as a youth leader, I do have a path where I want to be. And there's always a saying that if you plan to fail, then you should fail to plan. I think I got it right.

My future plans involve the harnessing of digital technologies to address some of the challenges I

currently face with my rural women in the shea butter production services and some of the things I'm looking at achieving is kind of like getting people, web app developers to kind of collaborate and create educational materials for them because throughout my work with these women, I realize most of the challenges they face and most of the reasons why they did not and as much as they are supposed to, is because of the lack of education on the process. So nobody has educated them on the right processes. They just get up, oh, my grandma used to do it this way. I would do it that way. But when it gets to it being shipped out of Ghana, it's red flagged as something that is not appropriate for the international market. So they end up getting poultry sums in the local markets without actually making anything out of it.

I look at collaborating with young people. In fact, I've actually started speaking with some people who are really interested in helping me come up with mobile apps or even USSD codes, that these women could kind of like just dial or log onto these apps and access educational materials in the local languages in Ghana, in their communities that we operate such that you do not have to struggle with the English, since most of them do not really even know how to speak English unless the local dialect. We are looking at ways we could incorporate that in the work we do here. And that's something I'm really excited about.

Tong Niu: Thank you. And still one question left for Sophiyat to ask.

Sophiyat Sadiq: To ask a question. Okay, so I would love to find out from Abdul and Shradha. I think this is often overlooked, but as young people who were creating change and creating an inclusive digital space for all, what are the challenges that you face? And I guess Shradha you can go first.

Shradha Pandey: Thank you so much, Sophiyat. That is a very loaded and a very important question. So one thing is before even we can start discussing about our ideas, what people notice about us is our age. And then they tend to write it off very easily, thinking that you're really young, you don't know what you're doing, and you don't really get to express your opinions with the passion and with the force that you're expressing them. Furthermore, one thing that you also notice is in the patriarchal setup, to prove yourself more and more as a woman, it's a little harder and it takes a lot of guts and courage to continue working forward, even when some someone's trying to put you down. So it creates a little bit of mental health issues, it makes sure that all these issues are coming to the forefront, your emotional health sort of takes a backseat because you're working on a project that is that important for you and for your entire group. And you're trying to make sure that the grassroots level, these, these issues do not impact your project itself.

But what I've lately come to realize that it's okay to take a day to yourself for your mental and emotional health. And you can talk to others, make sure that you find out how you can make it better for others. One thing that I've realized over the past few years is talking to other fellow changemakers, regardless of which country they're in, trying to talk to people like Sophiyat, trying to talk like Abdul over distance also helps because at some point or the other, you have gone through similar challenges and you've dealt with them in same or different ways. So it gives you a whole new

perspective and a whole new idea. And most importantly, it makes us feel like we are altogether, even though we're separated by such long distances, so many oceans, so many continents, we feel like we're together in this journey and we can always support each other and come to rely on each other for help and for emotional support when we need it. And it can be like a breath of fresh air when you're feeling a little suffocated. Over to you Abdul?

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: Wow, Shradha, those were really powerful words. I think for me other than what Shradha have said is how we are able to balance these change-making activities with our professional careers. You see that, you cannot just focus on your change-making project and build yourself up there. You need to work professionally. You need to earn an income to use part of that income to support your activities in these communities. And sometimes it becomes super challenging.

And another thing which Shradha did highlight a bit is that when you are in spaces like we are, you see that people begin to see you someone who is actualized, someone who is strong, someone who doesn't struggle, someone who has everything since you are able to juggle between roles, but and it becomes very challenging because it gets to a point where your immediate society do not even see the struggles you are going through because they feel like oh, he's strong he's able to handle this and that.

So, I've had friends who started change-making journey. We're making amazing strides even better than I have ever done. But they stopped at some point because they just found it to be so stressful and the society in which they work do not necessarily support them because they see them to be strong and to be the shoulder they lean on.

And lastly, I would like to highlight on the networking and learning from colleagues that Shradha did mention before I joined the Kofi Annan Changemakers program and even Generation Connect, yes, I had other young people that I could contact to share ideas, to share our struggles but you see that it gets to a point where people start becoming protective of their ideas because they feel, oh, if I share this idea, Abdul will steal it and incorporated in his project and then it becomes frustrating because you begin not to trust yourselves within the same space. But then I join these two amazing communities where I can just get up and check my time zone, I see it's morning in India, I can call Shradha, hey Shradha, how are you doing? How's your project? You work with rural women. I'm facing this challenge. How are you solving it? There, Sophiyat would call me. Hey, Abdo. So, I know I need help with this. I know you cannot do it for me yourself, but within your network you can. Yes, I can. And this makes it more beautiful.

So, I think the world and society right now, especially the changemaker community in the Kofi Annan Changemakers program and the Generation Connect has made me believe that we've come to a point where we are open to sharing our fears, our struggles and even our successes.

Tong Niu: Thank you, Abdul. And to end this episode, here's a one last question. I'd like you to give in one sentence, advice for future youth leaders.

Sophiyat Sadiq: One sentence. I would say, let us continue to believe in our ability to get things done. And let's get things done.

Shradha Pandey: One sentence I would like to leave everyone with is, use your information for transformation.

Abdul Gafaru Dasana Amin: My sentence is that every network matters and how you leverage on it matters. Make use of them.

Outro: Thank you for listening to our podcast! You can find all the podcast episodes on the ITU Generation Connect website. And if you don't want to miss an episode, subscribe to us on Soundcloud, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. Thanks again and see you next month for a brand-new episode of the Generation Connect Podcast.