

Support Africa's young innovators and entrepreneurs

African innovators and entrepreneurs need to be encouraged, supported and incentivised to reach their optimal potential, says Irene Ochem, founder and CEO of the Africa Women Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum (AWIEF), in an interview with Bizcommunity.Africa.



Irene Ochem, founder and CEO, AWIEF.

■ How do we best describe the current narrative on Africa and how can we amplify the positive stories from the continent to encourage a more positive narrative?

Not too long ago, Africa was generally described as the “hopeless and helpless continent”. But now here i

clear and palpable awareness of a great wind of transformational change sweeping across the continent. Yes, 'Africa is rising', more so as innovative youth in many African countries come to grasp with the notion that the future of the continent is in their hands. But we must be very careful to not be carried away by the joy of the successes achieved so far in the continent, but rather realise that it is only a beginning of the learning process.

A lot still needs to be done to position the continent in her rightful position in the international sphere. It is important that all governments of African countries build on the recorded achievements of notable leaders and continue to provide the enabling environment for the efforts of the youth to thrive and bear further fruit.

African innovators and entrepreneurs, and there are quite many of these, need to be encouraged, supported and incentivised to reach their optimal potential. Importantly, we Africans need to tell our story by ourselves because nobody can know us more, or better, than we know ourselves. Lots of interesting events take place regularly in remote areas of the continent, but these often fail to get reported because they do not attract the attention of the international press or reporter

■ **As a leader on this continent who travels widely and participates in many forums and discussions on Africa, what gives you hope for the future?**

When I travel around this continent and speak with the youth, I feel these young people have come to terms (or are doing so) with the need to develop homegrown remedies for the challenges of the continent. I refer to the famous watch phrase: "African solutions for Africa's problems". Many young women have approached me to tell stories of diversified initiatives a multiple ideas of things they try to do. This is quite impressive and promising because according to a famous proverb which states that "constant practice makes perfect", one may only hope to succeed in any given endeavour by trying.

In the same light, it is quite encouraging to see numerous activities, even in rural areas on the continent, that focus on devising solutions to the local problems relevant in the peculiar environment, especially in the agricultural and energy sectors. Realising and accepting that "imported remedies" may not always match or solve the needs of the local people is the primary and essential step towards finding the effective, safe and sustainable solutions to those problems.



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■ **What are some of the challenges we need to urgently address to provide jobs for our largest population demographic, the youth, in Africa?**

I will continue to emphasise that the best way forward for the youth of Africa is to cultivate and develop the entrepreneurial spirit, passing from the mindset of job seekers to that of employers of labour or job creators. Obviously not everyone who tries will succeed, but it is important to develop and grow the mindset of risk-taking. And one should not be discouraged by a failure in a first attempt as this is only a lesson on how not to do the same thing a second time.

In fact, the greatest danger and obstacle to success is the fear of starting, for fear of failure. Governments in African countries need to revolutionise the education system to educate today's youth, who will be the leaders of tomorrow, to develop the merit of problem solvers, innovative thinkers and risk takers. This should start from the very first years of primary school education

■ **What inspires you the most about our beautiful continent?**

I am constantly inspired by the women leaders, young and old, that I get to meet and the role women are playing in the economic and social transformation of this continent. Additionally, the warmth of the people of Africa is energising. Wherever I go, I receive a cordial welcome, and people express much appreciation for the impact AWIEF programmes have made in their lives and businesses. This is indeed very rewarding and encouraging.

■ **Since AWIEF launched five years ago as a non-profit organisation dedicated to the empowerment of women in business on the continent, what positive changes have you observed?**

Thank you very much for this very important question. My heart literally glows with immense joy when I look over the activities of AWIEF in the past five years, from the first launch in Lagos in 2015. I have difficulty keeping up with responses to testimonials arriving from women across the continent and from every sector of the business ecosystem on the impact of AWIEF on their businesses: what they have learned and how they have modified their *modus operandi* after gainfully participating in AWIEF events.

But I make it my pleasurable duty to reply to all these women and try to keep in constant contact with them. When in 2017

AWIEF launched the Growth Accelerator Programme and effectively started mentoring entrepreneurs to get their businesses investment-ready, the impact became further amplified and enhanced. In fact, many more young entrepreneurs realised the immense opportunities and benefits offered by our programmes in scaling-up their businesses. Now we have difficulty selecting participants for our programmes from the hundreds that apply for participation. We are very thankful to our dedicated sponsors with whose support AWIEF has been able to achieve these impressive milestones.

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