

[#YALIHonors Nelson Mandela](#)

YALI Network members share messages in memory of the one year anniversary of Nelson Mandela's passing.

[[View the story "#YALIHonors Nelson Mandela" on Storify](#)]

Building skills in technology

"By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential."

- Regina Agyare

A Tech Needs Girls volunteer conducts a  lesson in writing computer code with girls in Accra. Credit: R. Agyare

Software developer Regina Agyare believes Information Technology (IT) can drive significant social change. A 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, Agyare helped launch the U.N.-related project Tech Needs Girls in Ghana. Her own company, Soronko Solutions, uses information technology to develop solutions allowing clients to reach their potential.

YALI Network Question: How does IT promote human potential?

Agyare: Technology is a tool and an enabler to help people take an idea or solution from inception to execution. IT can help your idea leapfrog infrastructure gaps and impact a large number of people. By building skills in technology creation, people can develop innovative solutions to community and economic problems and empower themselves to explore their full potential.

Question: Describe Soronko's efforts to pursue those goals with girls in Ghana.

Agyare: Ghanaian women and girls are lagging behind in developing IT skills. At Soronko we run a project called Tech Needs Girls, which is a mentorship program where we teach girls between the ages of 6 and 18 years old how to code and create with IT tools. The girls are trained by young female mentors who study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in the university. They use a unique curriculum, which makes coding fun and allows for creativity and problem solving.

Some of the girls in these programs are from slum communities and could be forced into early marriage. By teaching them coding skills, we hope to help them empower themselves economically

and continue their education.

Q: Have the newly trained girls been able to move into jobs?

Agyare: Tech Needs Girls alumnae are currently doing internships at the biggest software company in Ghana, called Rancard Solutions.

Q: What has Soronko Solutions accomplished in helping Ghanaian businesses better use technology to expand?

Agyare: At Soronko Solutions, we believe in using technology to help Ghanaian businesses grow and gain visibility. We have built services to help a wide range of clients automate processes to make business operations more efficient, increase turnover and bring their services to the customer's doorstep.

Q: How does someone begin to work with or for Soronko?

Agyare: It is very accessible to work with Soronko. We are always looking for young individuals who are passionate about using technology to drive small businesses or promote social change. We also offer internships and sponsor clubs in the university where we train young women in STEM fields and prepare them for the job market or starting their own business.

Q: Soronko is working like some corporate and nonprofit hubs in the larger IT community that launch further waves of innovation in the communities surrounding them. How does that work?

Agyare: Innovation hubs are very important because they provide the space, training, skills development and inspiration to unlock the creative potential in our youth. They also allow for collaboration and for individuals with different skills and abilities to integrate their talents to solve community problems and develop themselves.

Q: What can YALI Network members do to start a hub in a community?

Agyare: The first thing would be to get a space to house hub activities. If one does not have access to a space, the next best thing is to create a virtual hub. That's an online community of people where knowledge is shared, innovation is encouraged and interactivity is expected. Hub members can meet regularly in open spaces or use community resources and spaces.

Q: Can their facilities also be meeting and networking spaces?

Agyare: Definitely, hub facilities can be meeting and networking spaces. It is actually important for the ecosystem and the success of hubs that meetings and networking among the members is encouraged.

Q: Are innovation hubs emerging in more places in Africa?

Agyare: Yes, and they are needed to address issues like Africa's huge unemployment problem and to engage young people to become innovative change-makers and problem solvers.

Lukonga Lindunda, a Mandela Washington Fellowship alumnus, provided [this interactive map](#) of innovation hubs around Africa. Read more about [Lindunda](#) and [BongoHive](#), the innovation hub he co-

founded in Zambia.

[Building a Culture of Production](#)

[<img class="size-medium wp-image-1843 " alt="Nigerian engineer stands with c](#)

[Lessons for Aspiring Young Entrepreneurs](#)

Photo Courtesy 
Sheena Lindahl

By: Sheena Lindahl, co-founder and CEO of [Empact](#)

Join Sheena Lindahl for a Facebook #YALICHAT starting Tuesday, November 18. You can submit your questions until Thursday, November 20. Post your questions on Facebook or tweet your questions to @YALINetwork and include #YALICHAT. Tuesday-Thursday, November 18-20.

Most entrepreneurs have few resources when they begin. They do not have a lot of money, experience, education or networks but they launch and grow their businesses anyway. I saw this firsthand in September when I met young entrepreneurs in Ghana. The challenges and experiences they described to me were not all the same as those faced by other entrepreneurs. I have learned that it no matter where you live, it is how people react to their challenges that makes all the difference in their success.

Sheena Lindahl with group of young 
entrepreneurs during her visit to the
U.S. Embassy in Ghana. Photo courtesy
Sheena Lindahl.

These are some tips I shared with aspiring Ghanaians:

Break a big idea into a smaller idea to start. Most people launching their first company do not have the funding or skills to start the next WhatsApp. I met an inspiring young entrepreneur in

Tamale, Ghana, who was running a clothing store. He started with a single pair of sneakers — no store, no inventory, no funding — just one lone pair of sneakers. He sold those and used his profit to buy two more pairs. Then he branched out and included other products. He kept reinvesting his profits until he had enough to fund inventory, space and people to work for him. Starting small is often far less risky and a more certain path to success than waiting for an investor.

Tomorrow will not be a better day to start. Many entrepreneurs wait for what they think are perfect conditions to start their businesses. Very rarely will the perfect time arrive. Instead, entrepreneurs get their businesses off the ground by taking action today to move forward. By taking even small actions they take control and make their own favorable conditions.

Identify your assets and start from there. Focus on what you do have and not what you don't. We worry about our assets, our ideas or what the critics might say. You cannot control someone else's actions or thoughts. You cannot control what challenges you're starting with.

Focus your efforts on what you can control. Entrepreneurs focus on what they can control. If you don't have money to launch, maybe you have a network of friends and family who will be your first customers. You may have an uncle who understands the process of exporting or a financially savvy aunt who can help you think through your plan. Your own skill set — whether it includes photography or carpentry — will also benefit your business. Networks and skills are assets as valuable as investment dollars. By focusing on what you do have and where you have control, you have all you need to take your first steps.

Sheena is president and co-founder of Empact, an organization that has held events bringing top young entrepreneurs to college campuses, including the [Empact Showcase](#), a celebration of young entrepreneurs with recognition events held at the White House, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the United Nations.

The views and opinions expressed here belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the YALI Network or the U.S. government.

[‘Finish. Finish. Finish.’ Fellowship Alumnus Urges Applicants](#)

Helawi Sewnet in front of the White 

House, the presidential mansion, while visiting Washington. Photo Courtesy Helawi Sewnet.

With only days remaining until a November 5 application deadline, Helawi Sewnet advises applicants for the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders that pushing through the process, completing and submitting the application is imperative.

Sewnet, a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow, said he was motivated to apply because the program presented “an intense, well-designed package. It offered me an opportunity to make progress in my community in Africa. And it was a wonderful opportunity to meet President Obama.”

The application process gave Sewnet a new understanding of the concept of leadership. “I used to associate leadership with a position or level of recognition — about the ability to influence,” he said.

“Then it came to me it was about how to communicate and demonstrate what was inside of me.”

He encourages applicants to “be bold and expressive. Choose [to describe] the right experiences among all the things you have done. ... What is that special thing you would like to communicate or would like the reviewer to know [about] you?”

In his own successful application, Sewnet wrote of his experience co-founding the first urban architectural journal in Ethiopia.

Sewnet tells potential applicants to make sure they get the application done by the deadline.

“At this point it is not decided who will be a Mandela Washington Fellow. So every second [that passes] from this point on — through the application and interview — has the power to determine whether you will be a Mandela Washington Fellow or somebody else,” Sewnet emphasizes.

As a Fellow, the Ethiopian studied public management at the University of Minnesota with 24 other Fellows from sub-Saharan Africa during June and July 2014. Sewnet’s group of “confident, energetic, experienced Fellows” enjoyed a “well-designed curriculum and opportunities to learn through various organizations about the U.S. culture,” he said.

Since returning to Ethiopia, Sewnet communicates regularly with other Fellows in his Minnesota group. He keeps in touch with contacts he made in the United States and advises potential applicants in Ethiopia about the application process.

“I feel energized. What I think is possible now is different than what I thought was possible before.”

To learn more about the application for the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship Program, visit:

[Frequently asked questions about the application](#)

[Answers to your questions about the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship](#)

[More information about the Mandela Washington Fellowship](#)

Watch the full interview with Helawi Sewnet:

Answers to Your Questions About the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship

During a live video chat on October 16, 2014, YALI Network members had the opportunity to ask questions about applying for the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders. The fellowship is an intensive six-week program in the United States for aspiring leaders from throughout Africa.

Todd Haskell and Britta Bjornlund from the U.S. State Department provided answers to the following questions:

1. What are the selection criteria?

Applicants need to be between the ages of 25 and 35, able to speak English and citizens of Africa living in Africa. We're looking for leaders — people who are going to make a difference in the future of Africa.

2. Can I submit more than one application for the Mandela Washington Fellowship?

No, you may submit only one application. Submitting additional applications will not increase your chances of getting in. If you do apply more than once, your applications will be disqualified.

3. Do Africans who have had substantial exposure to the United States through visits qualify?

The program targets young sub-Saharan Africans who have had less exposure to the United States. But no one is disqualified. We encourage you to apply.

4. Does submission of an application automatically qualify a person for U.S. citizenship?

No. We're looking for people who will go back to Africa and make a tremendous difference in their home countries.

5. What role does formal education play in the selection process?

We will consider your formal education, but you will not be disqualified if you do not have a formal diploma or degree. We are looking for leaders in communities in rural areas, in cities, in countries. We look at your whole package.

6. What is the required commitment to return to Africa?

The program is for people who plan to go back to Africa and apply the skills they've learned in the United States.

7. Last year I applied and was chosen as an alternate. Am I eligible to apply this year?

Absolutely. We encourage you to reapply.

8. Do I have to be rich to apply?

No. We welcome applicants who have modest backgrounds. We are looking for the best people regardless of their religion, gender, socio-economic standing, race or creed. We're looking for a diverse group of applicants.

9. What are the plans to ensure that young persons with disabilities are equally represented in the 2015 fellowship program?

All State Department exchange programs embrace diversity. In 2014, we made sure that fellows with disabilities could participate as easily as all other fellows. We are hoping to have people with disabilities in 2015.

10. If I do not have a passport when I apply, will it affect my chances of being selected?

No. If someone is selected, they will have enough time to get a passport and visa before they leave for the United States.

11. What costs does the Fellowship cover?

The U.S. State Department covers all costs involved in participating in the Mandela Washington Fellowship. That includes the costs of applying for a visa, round-trip airfare for travel between the United States and your home country, and living and travel costs during the fellowship.

12. What types of documents should a person attach to the application? Should they include their best reports or letters of recommendation?

It is up to you. We suggest you pick the documents that best reflect your professional expertise or your leadership capacity.

For more information about applying for the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders, go to yali.state.gov/apply.

For Frequently Asked Questions, see the [2015 Application FAQs](#) or watch these clips:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/52E0FFa-KwQ?list=PLEWYDE6Ehtrl48hhL3GkdN1Rox5YK7GHw>

[Sharing My Experience: Mandela Washington Fellow Setshswano Ngope](#)

“Come prepared to offer solutions to the problems.”

Setshswano Ngope heard U.S. first lady Michelle Obama say that when she was a youngster, her parents continually told her that she was smart and could do anything she wanted to do. 

“That resonated with me,” Ngope recalled. “A lot of people don’t have that support and then end up making the wrong decisions. They don’t believe in themselves.” Ngope said, in particular, lack of confidence results in people making poor decisions about their finances.

The 31-year-old from Botswana said she had an upbringing similar to Mrs. Obama’s. If she got good grades in school, her father advised, she would have a “passport to be anything” she wanted to be. That encouragement inspired her to go into business and to help others.

A professional financial planner, Ngope teaches women and youth how to manage their money. While studying at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, during her Fellowship in July 2014, she learned how to cope with an expanding workload. “I started to rethink my approach to my business,” she said. “Now I know how I can reach more people” (with her financial literacy classes).

“Already, I am facilitating collaboration with my government, my company and U.S. organizations around this cause of financial literacy and financial inclusion.”

In what she describes as a “priceless” Fellowship experience, Ngope also learned about managing a business. “There is a big difference in the way you manage a startup as opposed to the way you manage a company that has existed for a long time,” said the active YALI Network member, who interned at Standard Chartered Bank in New York as part of the Fellowship.

Ngope is able to share what she learned during her time as a Mandela Washington Fellow with her community in Botswana:

“I am telling my co-workers that this has been a valuable experience that will have benefits years into the future. I share with them all the books we have read during the Fellowship, and the [names of] various organizations that are doing impact investing and development work across the globe.”

To YALI Network members who are interested in applying for the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship, she said: “I would encourage the 2015 applicants to be very thorough in articulating their community engagements. They must also apply well on time, as the questions can be quite engaging.”

“The interviews are very rigorous, so they must come prepared to offer solutions to the problems they see in their communities. Lastly, if selected, they must come to the U.S. with an open mind and be ready to learn all they can about how to uplift their communities post-Fellowship.”

[Signing On, Linking In](#)

The YALI Network can be a powerful tool for African development. It can be a powerful tool for your development, too.

People in the YALI Network are business owners, social entrepreneurs and professionals. All  these smart, energetic people can achieve much more if they share their ideas and resources and work together. They can help each other build their careers while they build 21st-century Africa.

The YALI Network group on LinkedIn makes it easy to network across the continent without having to travel. LinkedIn allows a virtual gathering of like-minded individuals who describe what they do, how they achieved success and their visions and goals for the future.

The YALI Network group on LinkedIn is a directory of professionals, whose credentials are verified by their contacts. Among the YALI Network LinkedIn group's 1,600 members, more than half are senior executives, managers, business owners or directors. They run nonprofits but also information technology companies, financial institutions, management consultancies and marketing firms. And they come from all over Africa.

Join the [YALI Network group](#) on [LinkedIn](#) to:

- Access knowledge and opportunities in careers that are of interest to you;
- Build your professional network;
- Share your experiences, ideas and vision with other young leaders;
- Find the information you need to grow your career, business or organization;
- Establish regular contact with people who share your interests and goals.

Engaging with others on LinkedIn can build your foundation and your reputation. Your network can help you identify resources and support for the interests you are pursuing.

For more guidance on LinkedIn, you can try this video from the site itself, [The Value of LinkedIn](#).

It all starts with the simple act of joining.

[Meetup Promotes Collaboration and Partnership](#)

YALI Network members in Takoradi, 
Ghana, discuss shared interests. Photo
courtesy Renee Smith.

The YALI Network Meetup platform has become a [YALI Network face2face Facebook Group!](#)

In Abuja, Bujumbura, Kampala and many other cities across Africa, members of the YALI Network are building new relationships and networking with other young leaders in their communities. They're coming together to share ideas, collaborate on new ventures, offer training and pass on knowledge.

Young leaders in these cities are using [Meetup](#), an online platform that supports networking and collaboration. It is a tool for empowerment, a mechanism that allows like-minded individuals to find each other, arrange meetings and convene discussions to further their shared goals.

More than 400 members of the YALI Network are now using the tool, making arrangements for over 100 different gatherings.

Members of the YALI Network gathered 
in a park in Abuja. Photo courtesy Amina
Oshiokpekhai.

Olusegun helped bring together a group in Abuja for its first meeting in a centrally-located park. For future meetings, he thinks an improved meeting space will help make the group's gatherings "more interesting, relaxing and ultimately impactful."

Amina attended the Abuja Meetup, too, and described to the group her experience in the United States as a 2014 Mandela Washington Fellow. She and another Fellow are planning another Meetup to coincide with the opening of the 2015 Mandela Washington Fellowship application process. Amina promises that her group will share "tips on how our application process went and, of course, how our lives have changed because of the Mandela Washington Fellowship."

Olusegun is also thinking about future meetings in Abuja. He wants to involve more women and people from outside the federal capital.

Thierry described the Meetup he arranged in Bujumbura. He says the group is discussing and working with resources available at yali.state.gov. They're also brainstorming ideas about how to develop stronger leadership skills.

Several like-minded business owners came together in Douala, Cameroon, through Meetup. Oliver says the group "shared our experiences and challenges facing young entrepreneurs." People who missed the first meeting are showing further interest, and the Douala group plans regular gatherings in the future.

At the [YALI Network Meetup page](#), you can see where someone is organizing a Meetup near you. If there isn't an event, take the initiative and create a new group. You set the agenda for your Meetup group, and you can use the resources available on yali.state.gov as the basis for a discussion. Some ideas include:

- Invite speakers who are knowledgeable about topics of interest;
- Plan a community project together;
- [Take a YALI Network course together](#) and discuss what you've learned;
- Discuss and share the skills of the group to see what you might teach each other.

At a Meetup people get acquainted, find common interests and identify ways they might work together to promote their interests or improve their communities.

Meetup has a lot of potential. All it really needs now is you.

[Is an Open Internet Important to You?](#)

The Internet gets credit for a wide range of social, economic and cultural advancements despite the huge differences that exist between Internet accessibility in countries around the world.

Almost 20 percent of Africans have Internet access through broadband connections on mobile phones, according to the International Telecommunications Union ([ITU](#)).

For Internet expansion to continue in Africa, experts say users themselves must help ensure access remains free and open.

Watch LaJeunesse's clip on YouTube 

"It's only the free and open Internet that allows for the creativity, the innovation and the entrepreneurship," says Google's Ross LaJeunesse, "that, in turn, allows for economic development, social advancement and connection."

LaJeunesse is the head of Global Free Expression and International Relations for Google, one of the Internet's most prominent corporate entities. He meets with government leaders around the world promoting policies that will allow people with good ideas to use the Internet to pursue, develop and promote them.

Some governments don't want open policies because they prefer to control information media providing information to their publics. But the Internet allows citizens to convene their on public policy discussions online without government interventions.

Click here to watch this clip on YouTube 

An independent study shows that countries where that online discussion takes place freely- such as South Africa and Kenya — are experiencing stronger growth in the IT sector. "We're seeing evidence

that there is a correlation here,” LaJeunesse said when speaking to Mandela Washington Fellows during a July appearance.

Web users who have developed relationships and opportunities have done so in online spaces that are frequently free to use with no charge, said Suzanne Phillion, a public relations specialist representing Yahoo on the Washington panel. That gives users a personal stake in ensuring their networks remain free of government control on into the future.

“We think about [activism for a free Internet] as civic engagement,” Phillion said, “and issues that you should really be invested in for your professional, personal lives going forward.”

A free and open Internet is a priority issue for the Obama administration, with the president warning policymakers everywhere that action to restrict Internet access, availability or content will ultimately be “self-defeating.”

Internet constraints are “going to inhibit the growth of the country generally, because closed societies that are not open to new ideas, eventually they fall behind,” [Obama said](#). “They miss out on the future because they’re so locked into trying to maintain the past.”

U.S. Under Secretary Catherine Novelli is boosting the Obama administration’s efforts to maintain a free and open Internet. In a recent speech at the [Internet Governance Forum](#), she emphasized how the Internet allows people with talent and good ideas to make their own opportunities.

“For example, three Nigerian university students have already helped tens of thousands of Africans secure jobs by creating a job search website called ‘Jobberman.com,’” Novelli said. “As West Africa’s most popular online career resource, Jobberman connects talented individuals with job opportunities.”

Help keep the Internet open so that you can pursue your ideas. Express your support for a free and open Internet and learn more about the issues here: openinternet.state.gov

Learn more:

“The Power of a Free and Open Internet and How Citizens Can Be Involved”

A Free and Open Internet

Internet Governance
