

**RCE KANO 2021 ESD PROGRAM AND THE MAKING OF AN
ECOPRENEUR:
A PERSONAL ACCOUNT**

By Abdulkabi Ahmad

I have just been accepted for Chatham House's 2022 Common Futures Conversations (CFC). The program which is organized by the Royal Institute of International Affairs—known otherwise as the Chatham House—basically extends the reach of young change-makers in Europe and Africa from the realm of advocacy to that of policymaking. Young change-makers get to develop policy solutions and pitch them to stakeholders in government whilst also getting connected with experts to explore vital issues. More so—and this is a big perk—the program also lets participants speak directly, online, with presidents, prime ministers and other policy makers of Europe and Africa; hence giving them a sort of one-on-one touch with the execution part of their ideas. I am supposed to be overwhelmed considering the *what* and the crop of people that make up the program. But I am not. It seems normal.

This state of normalcy, I would like to think, is born out of the fact that there have been many 'leaps' of this ilk recently that came my way. Four months earlier, I was selected for LEAP YOUTH fellowship, an Oikos International's 10-month-long leadership development journey that prepares young participants in—and for—'sustainable' leadership. Earlier, I had successfully joined YOUNGO, the official youth constituency of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and had joined the Center for Renewable Energy and Access on Climate Change (CREACC-NG) as a volunteer. I have also been accepted as a Global Youth Ambassador (GYA) of TheirWorld, a global charity committed to ending the global education crisis. To cap it all, I was selected as a talent for the 2022 UNLEASH Nigeria Hack. Much, right? For me, however, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

On March 23rd (of 2022), I would receive an email-cum-letter from a law firm we outsourced for a particular task. The letter was addressed as thus: Abdulkabi Ahmad, Chief Executive Officer, Greeniilde Company LTD, 254 Bawo Road, Hausawa, Kano State. Translation: a green start-up exists legally, in our name. We had successfully incorporated it with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) of Nigeria as a private company limited by shares, a vital step—beyond the established legal existence—towards accessing investments that would help us bring our ideas into the realm of reality. I had always wanted to be an ecopreneur (a term for an eco-friendly entrepreneur). But, to be honest, I did not plan a leap of such magnitude this soon. I did not even foresee it happening this early. It was a moment one notch above disbelief.

Question here is: what is behind these leaps; these bold steps? To understand the genesis of all these, we will have to step back, precisely six months back, to the most life-changing three days of my life.

November, 2021

Everything started with my participation at the Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) program organized by the Regional Center for Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development (RCE) Kano in partnership with Center for Gender Studies (CGS), Bayero University Kano (BUK) with support from United Nations University Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability, Oikos International, and Center for Renewable Energy and Action on Climate Change, amongst others.

The program had a theme of "Promoting Sustainability in Light of Agenda 2063" and it focused intensely on the role of the African youth in driving and achieving this. Dr Fumiko Noguchi of UN University's Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability; Dr Hadiza Hamma of Center for Innovation in Teaching and Research, University of Abuja; and Engr Muhammad Yadudu of Center for Renewable Energy Systems, Loughborough, UK, were few among those who presented rich presentations centered on sustainability and the place of the youth in it. Other presenters and attendees who graced the program were Prof Aliyu Barau of Department of Environmental Management, Bayero University Kano, Amb. Tukur Burutai, Prof Abba Sarki, Abubakar U Karfi and Halima Zawiyya, among others.

It was exactly here that the fabric of these leaps was stitched. It was here that a flame was lit in the minds of tens of youths; a flame that would set most of us ready to take responsibility in the matters that matter. It was here we were shown that our crazy and wildest ideas are for us to chase, to follow and to execute. It was here that thousands of new ideas were born; where thousands of already existing ones were molded into realistic shapes. It was here that our start-up would first metamorphose from the realm of idea to a realm of reality. It was here that I looked at Maryam Dabo and said, 'We can do it.' It was here that she looked back at me and said, 'Yes, we can do it.' It was here, at the ESD program.

Reflecting on the success of the program, one question that I keep asking myself was, and still is, how and, perhaps most importantly, why? After all, I have participated in a number of programs of this ilk, none achieving the impact of the ESD program.

Why the ESD Program was a Success

1. Show-don't-tell approach: Ask every creative writer you might come across for one rule (apart from reading) that will make you a better writer and he probably will tell you 'show don't tell'. As a published poet and multi-award winning essayist, I have

learnt to see this world in a reflection of the saying. One thing which made the ESD program different was how it brought the real 'thing' to the presence of the young sustainability ambassadors. The program was not all about listening to lectures from experts. There was that part. But it was also about seeing barely with one's eyes. Personally, the presence of Halima Zawiyya, young like me, but chasing big and daunting goals was a wake up call for me.

2. The hybridization factor: The word 'hybrid' no longer needs an introduction, thanks (or not) to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hybrid meetings are normal today. As someone attends physically, someone will be attending virtually, perhaps thousands of miles away from the meeting hall. And that's what happened in the ESD program, too. People we couldn't have had their presence fully participated in the program: the Oikos representative(s), the UN University representative(s), and the rest of other presenters and guests who were far away on academic and, for some, national service. But that's not where the hybridization stopped. The program, in its entirety, can be said to be an embodiment of the term. From professional backgrounds to gender and age, the program made sure that many were carried along.

3. Instilling no-amount-is-little mentality in participants: One takeaway from the program for me—and, I wager, for all the attendees—was you don't need to be one demigod, or possess a stash of money to do something that will touch people's lives and, in turn, touch yours. We learnt that we all can start where we are, whether in advocacy, entrepreneurship or any other venture it is. That our most precious possessions are ideas, and that when we have them, everything will follow. This sense of urgency was what kicked many of us into action and, well, here we are!

4. The Sustained Engagement: The organizers, moreover, made sure that the engagement did not end at the ESD program. The program's (WhatsApp) group is active to this day. Opportunities are always shared and help is always rendered to those who are meaning to seize them. The organizers are always ready to chip in and offer their help—and there seems to be no boundary as to the person one can reach out to and the help that these people are ready to render. This, I would like to think, is one factor that makes the program one of its kind.

To sum up, looking at the past six months, I would be right to call them the most productive and life-shaping months of my life. In a period of just three days, my whole thinking process towards life was overhauled. The can-do approach employed and the sheer display of practical examples of how the young can influence the direction of things both on an individual and collective level was a big takeaway for me and the other sustainability ambassadors as well. It was that takeaway and the engagements we had post-ESD that, in part, saw the subsequent birth of Greeniilde and the series of our acceptances into various national and international spaces. This might be an experience in my own words, but its replica in another form is in almost all the participants of the program. It is what is constantly shared in the group. In

fact, one thing discussions with other ESD sustainability ambassadors and empirical evidence left me with is that one cannot participate in the ESD program and remain the same. It is just not possible.

BRIEF BIO

Abdulkali Ahmad is a published poet, multi-award-winning essayist and graduate of Electrical Engineering from Kano University of Science and Technology, Wudil. He was the 2019 first-prize winner of the National Engineering Science and Tech Essay Competition (NESTEC), the 2020 first-prize winner of Voices in STEM Nigeria (VISNG) National Essay Competition, the 2020 first runner-up of Abuja City Journal National Essay Competition, a selected entrant for the 2020 Nigerian Students Poetry Prize (NSPP) and a 2020 shortlist of Libretto Poetry Chapbook Prizes, amongst others. A climate activist and an advocate of quality education for all, Abdulkali is currently a Global Youth Ambassador of TheirWorld, a global children's charity committed to ending the global education crisis; a LEAP YOUTH fellow of Oikos International; a Chatham House's fellow of Common Futures Conversations; and a volunteer at Center for Renewable Energy and Action on Climate Change (CREACC-NG). Abdulkali lives in Jigawa and tweets @elsilaame.