SAYDS

SYSTEMS ACUMEN FOR YOUTH-LED DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS

SAYDS
Fellowship Prospectus

Contents

Background

As a result of the increasing complexities of the 21st century, African countries are dealing with challenging sustainable development issues and so youth - who constitute the majority of the population - need to be effectively equipped to tackle the complexities. Currently, 60% of Africa's population is under the age of 25 and it is estimated that by 2030 young Africans are expected to constitute 42% of global youth (Akorede, 2023). This large youth population is a highly valuable human resource for addressing the sustainable development challenges because they can lead their communities in navigating the increasing complexities. In order for youth to do so effectively, they need to be equipped with complexity and systems thinking skills, as well as systems leadership experiences. Unexpected complex phenomena that have had global effects - such as COVID and the Ukraine war - have clearly highlighted the necessity of such skills. Such phenomena occur at all levels - from local communities to the continental level - and make it difficult to consistently achieve progress in improving individuals' wellbeing. These complexities have shown that there is an urgent need for system leaders in communities, a role that youth can play well.

Youth that are well equipped to play the role of systems leaders can make it easier for communities to navigate complexities and develop well. As systems leaders they can facilitate collaborations that develop a deep understanding of complex social problems and create appropriate systemic solutions. This is because complex problems have many causes that cannot be well known by individuals and they defeat simple solutions that are not strategically implemented using a systemic perspective. For example, climate change, poverty, drought, substance abuse, hunger, corruption, crime, and many other similar problems. Community members that have experienced such problems possess valuable insights that can inform the way development projects are diagnosed and addressed. Youth as systems leaders can bring them together to uncover the underlying dynamics of the problems and also guide them in identifying the appropriate systemic interventions for the problems. Unfortunately, due to the shortage of programs that equip youth with complexity and systems thinking skills in Africa, there is a huge lack of youth that can serve as systems leaders in their communities. Hence, this is an urgent gap that needs to be filled throughout Africa to make it easier for communities to achieve wellbeing under today's complex conditions.

Although African countries are all dealing with complex challenges, each country is unique and different factors have to be considered to effectively equip youth with the appropriate systems leadership experiences. Kenya is one of the African countries that has a large youth population and valuable transferable lessons can be learned from youth experiences as systems leaders. According to the 2019 population census, of the 47.6 million Kenyans, 75% are under the age of 35 (Abuso, 2022). One of the most favorable factors in Kenya that enables youth to do so is the new constitution that has created processes that make it possible for youth to participate in governance. It mandates that all citizens should be allowed to participate in governance. To make that possible, it has brought governments and political representatives closer to citizens, which makes it possible for youth to participate in development initiatives and shape the way they are carried out. This can be achieved by youth working with their communities to learn about the nature of the complex social problems that undermine wellbeing and then identify the appropriate issues that need to be addressed. The knowledge that they acquire can inform the way development projects are designed and implemented. What is urgently needed to take advantage of the favorable political context is a program that can do so effectively, which is what SAYDS has designed, tested, and improved for the past four years. This is a program that can be replicated throughout Africa. The sections that follow provide the details of the program.

SAYDS Fellowship Program

SAYDS (Systems Acumen for Youth-Led Development Solutions) is a non-profit organization that tackles youth marginalization, exclusion, and disengagement in development work by equipping youth with systems acumen. Our vision is to see youth as systems leaders that facilitate the creation of development solutions that have a lasting impact on community wellbeing. Our key objectives are to:

- Ensure that youth in Africa are capable of using complexity and systems thinking to effectively tackle complex social problems that undermine wellbeing in their communities.
- Equip youth with durable knowledge of complexity and systems thinking that they can easily transfer to a wide range of problems and contexts.
- Promote, develop, and sustain a high sense of self-efficacy among youth.
- To support them as systems leaders that guide social change initiatives in their communities.
- Facilitate the inclusion of youth in the creation and implementation of development policies.
- Advocate for youth integration in the development work carried out by international development organizations.
- Establish a network of youth that are carrying out systems leadership work through-out Africa so that they can share knowledge, resources, and experiences from their work.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, SAYDS has created a one-year fellowship that equips youth with complexity and systems thinking skills. The creation of the program started in 2015 when the founder of SAYDS saw the need for these skills from his experiences of trying to tackle complex social problems in Kenya and the experiences of youth that he had worked with on various community development projects. Overall, he found - from both research and personal experiences - that complex problems were resistant to solutions that were not designed to tackle them effectively. He also found that youth are usually hesitant to be civically engaged in tackling complex social problems because they are not confident that they have the skills for doing so. Therefore, in 2015 he decided to start creating a program that would equip social change agents (individuals and organizations) with systems acumen. The program was launched in 2018 with one small cohort and has now equipped three cohorts of youth; 19 youth groups in total.
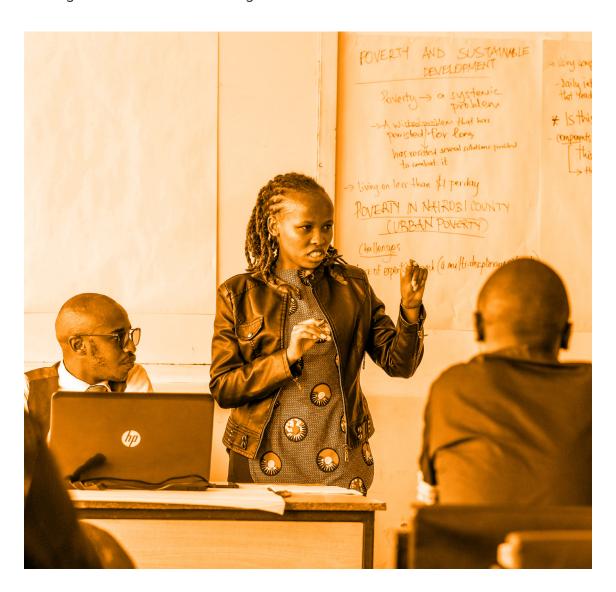
The Learning Process

Since one of our main objectives is to equip youth with durable knowledge of complexity and systems thinking that they can easily transfer to a wide range of problems and contexts, we synthesized various learning theories and approaches to achieve that goal. Based on those theories and approaches, we designed a multi-stage process that results in youth that can confidently play a leading role in catalyzing lasting change in wellbeing. Some of the key approaches that we apply are: science of learning principles, problem based learning principles, active learning principles, and team-based learning. Since 2018 we have created, tested, and iterated the different stages of the program based on feedback from the youth that have gone through it. For each of the stages we use a learning approach that is made up of the following process:

1 In the first stage of our program we place youth in groups that are concerned about the same social problem, which serves as their motivation for learning complexity and systems thinking. These groups serve as their learning teams throughout the program and keep them motivated to learn as they go through each of the stages of the program. Most importantly, they deepen each other's knowledge by filling each other's knowledge gaps through peer feedback.

2 Each stage starts with providing youth a resource that we created to introduce them to the main concepts for complexity thinking and systems thinking. This resource is made up of a brief description of the concepts and tasks that they complete to make sure that they have durable knowledge. To achieve that goal we use a synthesis of appropriate learning principles to design the tasks.

3 Each youth starts with learning about the concepts on their own and completes certain tasks individually to have a good foundation to build on.

4 To make sure that they fully understand the concepts, the self-learning stage is followed by an interactive lecture that uses a combination of lectures and active learning activities. In these interactive lectures youth ask questions on any concepts that they do not understand, provide mini-lectures, and carry out various activities.

5 After the interactive lectures, they complete any pending individual tasks and meet in their groups to synthesize what they have learned. They also complete some tasks together to deepen their knowledge of the concepts.

6 Next, they use the knowledge that they have acquired from each stage to tackle a part of the complex social problem; this entails carrying out research on the problem.

7 They then submit the work for feedback on the knowledge that they have demonstrated and the knowledge gaps that they still need to work on.

8 To end each stage, they start serving their communities as systems thinkers by using that knowledge they have acquired to carry out community workshops. In these workshops they share what they have learned about the social problem and get feedback from the community; they also get additional knowledge on the nature of the problem. Most importantly, they learn how to apply the knowledge that they have acquired immediately and deepen it. They also start learning how to serve communities as systems leaders.

9 At the end of each stage fellows are assessed at an individual and group level. The overall results of the assessments are used to determine whether a fellow should be awarded a certificate that attests a fellow has complexity and systems thinking knowledge and skills.

For each of the parts of the process above we have created, tested, and improved toolkits, guides, and other resources to support youth. The following sections provide details on how the stages unfold and what each stage entails.

Stage 1: Grouping & Establishing Baseline Knowledge

The two goals of the first stage are to: 1) Identify and group together youth from the same community that are concerned about the same social problem, and 2) Find out their baseline level of complexity and systems thinking. We start by grouping youth that come from the same communities because complex problems are best addressed by people that experience them at the local level. The groups that they create are the ones that they will also work in as systems leaders in their communities. These groups serve an important role of motivating each of the fellows to learn and complete the rigorous process that they go through. They also serve as a learning community for each of the fellows by caring about their wellbeing throughout the program.

To ensure that we understand the knowledge and skills needs of the youth that have enrolled in our program, we start by assessing their knowledge of complexity and systems thinking. This baseline assessment reveals their knowledge gaps and gives us a sense of the work that we have to do during the program to ensure that youth successfully become systems thinkers. We also use the knowledge to help youth with the assignment of roles in their teams. Our coordinators use that knowledge to identify the unique types of assistance that each of the fellows may need throughout the program.

Stage 2: Understanding Complex Social Problems

In the first stage of the program, youth acquire skills and knowledge for analyzing and understanding the nature of complex social problems that they care about. To make it possible for them to do so, we created a Complexity Analysis Toolkit (CAT) that is based on key concepts from complexity theory. The toolkit has four parts that build on each other that are designed to gradually equip youth with a complexity perspective. Each of the four parts has a section that provides knowledge of the concepts, a section that facilitates self-learning and deepening of the knowledge using the principles of learning, and a section where the concepts are used to analyze the complex social problem that each of the youth groups are concerned about. By the end of this stage the fellows are able to:

- Distinguish between complex, simple, and complicated social problems.
- Explain what a complex social problem is and its key characteristics. For example, explain the key characteristics of food insecurity, climate change, poverty, etc.
- Describe the nature of complex interactions that underlie a complex social problem.
- Identify some key outcomes associated with the interactions that underlie a complex social problem.
- Identify the complex interconnections between agents that carry out various individual and collective actions associated with the social problem.
- Distinguish the characteristics of complex social problems across different levels of a community, and the levels that are most responsible for the problems.
- Explain how complex social problems arise in a society.

Overall, at the end of this stage fellows have a deep understanding of how to acquire a deep understanding of a complex social problem before carrying out any intervention. This starts with a deep understanding of the complex social problems that they are concerned about in their groups.

Stage 3: Identifying Systemic Interventions

In the second stage of the program youth learn how to identify the appropriate systemic interventions for the complex social problems that they have developed a good understanding of. We created a systemic intervention toolkit (SIT) that is made of concepts and approaches that youth can use to apply systems thinking. This toolkit also contains four parts that are designed to build up on each other. By the end of this toolkit, youth learn the following:

- How to identify and categorize different types of people that are interested in the interventions, either because they will benefit from them or be harmed by them.
- What perspectives are and how to identify them; this is important for designing holistic solutions for complex social problems. They learn how to see complex social problems through the eyes of others and see the different ways in which the problem can be understood. This enables them to consider different framings of the problem that may hinder designing an effective solution and how to include them in designing the holistic solution.
- How to define and determine what should be realistically included and what has to be excluded when creating an intervention, and how to do so ethically. This is because not everyone and everything can be included in designing systemic solutions. Therefore, fellows learn the concept of boundaries and the ways to determine what factors, stakeholders, values, and causes to consider when designing the solution to the complex social problem that they analyzed using CAT.
- How to critically deliberate on what must be done to address a complex social problem by reflecting on the costs and benefits of various scenarios.
- Making well thought-out judgements on the actions that should be taken to address the complex social problem.

Overall, at the end of this stage youth have learned how to use systems thinking to identify the appropriate interventions for complex social problems.

Stage 4: Learning how to Shape Development Policies

Governments use development policies to tackle the complex social problems that youth care about but youth are usually excluded and marginalized when policies for those problems are being designed. Sometimes it is youth that intentionally disengage from the policy making process because of lack of appropriate skills and knowledge. Given that the knowledge that youth acquire through our program on the nature of complex problems and how to intervene systemically is highly valuable for effective development policies, we created a program to equip them with knowledge on what policies are and the policy making process. The goal of the program is to ensure that youth know how to influence the policy making process and are meaningfully included in the process. For a duration of one month youth acquire knowledge on a wide variety of topics, mainly:

- The policy making process and parts of the process that they can play an important role.
- How policy problems are defined and the way they can use systems acumen to inform problem definition.
- How policies agendas are set and how to influence the agenda.
- The key agents involved in setting policy agenda and the key roles that a variety of agents play.
- How to design a plan for participating in agenda setting.
- How they can exercise their political participation rights in their devolved county governments.
- How to map the policy system and advocate for their policy ideas.
- How they can consistently engage in the policy making process.

The first cohort that went through the program has been successful in using the knowledge they acquired to create policy ideas and submit them to their county governments. More still needs to be done as we work on improving the effectiveness of the program but for not the early results are promising.

Stage 5: Disseminating Systemic Insights

Throughout our program, fellows learn how to use complexity thinking to deeply understand them and how to use systems thinking to identify the appropriate way to address them, which results in valuable knowledge that should be shared with others that are either affected by those problems or that attempt to tackle the problems. SAYDS has created the African Youth-Led Systemic Insights for Development (AYSID) conference to serve this purpose. The main goals of the conference are to:

- Give fellows an opportunity to demonstrate the systems acumen that they have acquired in the program.
- Award fellows certificates that attest that they have acquired and demonstrated complexity and systems thinking knowledge and skills; these certificates are based on regular assessment of fellows work. Before each fellow is allowed to participate in the conference they have to submit all the work required in the program and present their final work products to each other.
- Give SAYDS fellows a platform for exercising systems leadership by conducting workshops that equip change agents with insights into the characteristics of complex social problems and the appropriate systemic interventions for the problems.
- Create opportunities for SAYDS fellows to create networks with partners that they can collaborate with to tackle social problems in their communities.
- Bring together African youth that are tackling complex social problems in their communities and give them opportunities to establish partnerships for tackling problems that have effects across countries, such as climate change.

The expected outcomes of the conference are:

- Fellows increase their knowledge of the characteristics of complex social problems.
- Fellows create new connections with people that need to be equipped with knowledge on systems thinking.
- Fellows influence the way complex social problems are tackled; for example, they encourage organizations to change the way they tackle complex social problems.
- Fellows gain access to policy systems so that they can influence the way policy problems are characterized and agenda setting.
- Youth that attend the conference are inspired to learn how to participate in development work in their communities as systems leaders.

We held the first AYSID conference in November 2022 and it was quite successful. We achieved the aforementioned outcomes at different levels and are now building on them.

Stage 6: Joining a Community of Systems Thinkers/Leaders

In order for youth to effectively and consistently serve as systems leaders facilitating lasting change they need to work together as a community of systems thinkers/leaders. Therefore, after completing the three stages of the program that equip them with systems acumen and successfully demonstrating that they possess the acumen they become part of the SAYDS Community Association (SCA). SCA is a semi-autonomous community from SAYDS that is largely led by the fellows. In SCA fellows strengthen their systems leadership skills, support each other in improving development outcomes in their communities, and equip other social change agents with systems acumen. The achieve this outcome by doing the following:

- Collaborate in implementing the complexity and systems thinking skills they have acquired in their communities.
- Working together to tackle highly complex social problems that entail a wider range of social issues, and design interventions for them.
- Encourage and inspire each other to continue serving their communities as systems leaders.
- Share new knowledge that they have acquired from their community development activities about complex social problems and how to address them effectively.
- Carry out workshops and other training events that equip other social change agents with complexity and systems thinking skills.
- Help other social change agents in designing appropriate systemic interventions for complex social problems.
- Create partnerships that equip them with the resources they need to effectively serve their communities as systems leaders.
- Mobilize, equip, and engage other youth in serving their communities.
- Work together to advocate for policies that are effectively designed to address systemic problems.

Since 2020 SAYDS fellows have been carrying out the aforementioned activities and have successfully demonstrated that they can effectively serve their communities as systems leaders by working together under SCA.

Stage 7: Community Development Activities

Systemic Insights for Development (SID) Community Forums

Once fellows have completed the four stages of our program, where they mostly acquire knowledge and skills for systemic interventions, they proceed to working with their communities as system leaders to tackle complex social problems. They do so by facilitating Systemic Insights for Development (SID) Community Forums that are designed to accomplish the following purposes:

- They develop mastery in systems thinking and systems leadership through many opportunities to practice, get feedback, and make improvements.
- Through the forums youth fight against marginalization, exclusion, and disengagement in development work. They do so by mobilizing their communities to participate in development projects.
- Through these forums youth ensure that the deep knowledge that community members have because of their experiences with complex social problems are included when development solutions are created by change agents.
- They involve disengaged youth in the forums and increase their participation in the development projects that take place in their communities.
- The forums serve as platforms for holding leaders accountable for funds spent in development projects and development outcomes.
- The forums serve as platforms where fellows use a systems thinking perspective to facilitate dialogue among community members to gather deep knowledge for tackling complex social problems, which will be shared with a wide range of stakeholders carrying out interventions.
- They use the forums to create meaningful inclusivity and participation in development decisions, especially for community members that are typically marginalized and excluded; fellows use an approach that is based on the values of inclusion and fairness. Youth can facilitate inclusion of communities in development plans that affect them by using systems thinking to review the way development projects have been designed, gather community feedback on the designs, and track the effects of the projects that result from the plans.
- In order to effectively tackle complex social problems, social change agents need to "see the system", which can be done by using systems thinking to facilitate dialogue between different people that regularly engage with the system. This is what youth do in the forums.
- Complex problems are hard to solve because they resist solutions. When a solution is implemented these problems adapt and change, which could maintain the problem, make it worse, or result in minor improvements. Hence, in order to fully solve them communities need to continue learning about their transformation and make necessary changes. This can be done by regularly gathering information on their transformation from those that experience them and use that information to change interventions. Therefore, in the forums youth guide their communities in learning how the complex problems are adapting and finding out ways how to adapt interventions.
- Complex social problems evolve in ways that create uncertainties that undermine the goals of interventions. One way to deal with this challenge is to use systems thinking to manage the uncertainties by collaborating with people that engage with the problems regularly at the community level. In the forums the fellows use systems thinking to facilitate collaborations that manage uncertainties by tracking the evolution of complex social problems.

- Another way to manage the uncertainties of complex social problems is to carry out collaborative scenario planning with people that regularly engage with and will be affected by complex social problems. This entails using systems thinking to foresee possible future scenarios based on the historic and present experiences of community members. This is what fellows will do with their communities in the forums.
- The forums serve as a place for co-creating and testing models/approaches for community development initiatives that can effectively tackle complex social problems.
- To archive the history of the way complex problems in their communities have evolved; this history can inform future plans for tackling the problems and the actions of community members, especially change agents.
- In order to manage uncertainties and ensure that interventions for complex social problems can result in long lasting outcomes, community members need to be equipped with systems thinking skills for navigating complexities. In the forums fellows equip them with
- the skills.

  The forums serve as a place where youth that want to create social enterprises to tackle complex social problems can first acquire deep knowledge on the nature of the problems.

SID Policy Community Forums

Governments usually make policies to tackle challenging complex social problems, which youth with systems acumen can make more effective by providing systemic insights for the policy making process. These systemic insights are especially important for the early stages of policy making: describing policy problems, identifying the policy targets, and setting policy agendas. The description of policy problems that are complex are best done when the perspectives of different stakeholders are included in a fair way. Including different stakeholders makes it possible to see the interconnections between many aspects that create a complex problem, and to identify the right problems that policies should target. As a result, the issues that become prioritized for policy making are well informed by a deep understanding of the complex social problem. This ensures that the resources that are allocated towards issues that will significantly address the problem. Youth with systems acumen can make this possible by facilitating discussions between different stakeholders to uncover details on the complexity of a policy problem, they can describe the interconnections between the factors that underlie the problems, and identify the key factors that policies should target. They learn how to do so in our policy program and apply their knowledge in community forums, where they bring together different stakeholders to identify systemic insights for development policies.

SID Policy Community Forums are usually conducted by fellows when they join the SAYDS Community Association (Stage 6). The main goals of these forums are to:

- Acquire systemic insights for policy by getting information from community members, which will be used to produce SIP summaries that are shared throughout the policy making system.
- Facilitate agreements among community members on what policies should target.
- Build an advocacy coalition for the policy insights acquired from the community members; this coalition advocates for how policy problems should be framed and the issues that should be prioritized by policy makers.
- Build networks for influencing the other stages of policymaking.

- Educate community members on how to use systems thinking to make the policies that address the complex problems that they face more effective.
- Fellows will use the forums to equip present and future political leaders with deep knowledge on the nature of the complex social problems that they seek to solve; they will be included in the forums so that they can learn how to "see the system" with the communities that they seek to serve.
- Through these platforms youth will be able to play key roles in policy making since they will be knowledgeable about the complex problems policies are created to tackle, especially on the preferences of their communities on what policies should target.

SID Summaries & SID Policy Summaries

As a result of completing the program and carrying out the SID Community Forums, SAYDS fellows acquire valuable knowledge on the characteristics of complex social problems and the appropriate systemic interventions, which are then shared with others that are tackling the social problems. We have created two documents known as "SID Summaries" and "SID Policy Summaries", which they use to compile the knowledge and share widely. The first document focuses on development issues in general and the second one specifically focuses on development policies.The key purposes of the documents are:

- To equip youth with a valuable resource that they can use to participate in development work in their communities. With the summaries they can participate in key stages of development work, such as: research, project design, and implementation.
- To equip youth with valuable knowledge that they can use to inform and influence the creation of development policies.
- For youth to have information that they can use to participate in governance, and influence the way governments design and implement development projects.
- For youth to accurately represent the preferences of their communities with those that are carrying out development work in their communities.

Mentoring & Coaching

In order for youth to effectively serve their communities as systems leaders they need other kinds of knowledge and skills that we indirectly equip them with through our mentoring and coaching program. This program works with different professionals to create learning opportunities for youth. We usually start with identifying the knowledge and skill gaps from the work that fellows complete and the regular interactions we have with them, and then identify the appropriate professionals

professionals that have those skills. We then work with the professionals to create lessons that are offered to the fellows. Based on the feedback that we have received from the fellows that have gone through the program, it has made them more confident in applying their systems acumen.

Outcomes

SAYDS has now equipped two cohorts with systems thinking skills with a total of 85 youth. Four groups from the first cohort joined the SCA and have produced the following outcomes:

- They have formed and registered four community based organizations that focus on implementing what they have learned during the program.
- They have carried out 6 SID Policy Community Forums focused on identifying insights for development policies.
- They have produced 12 SID Policy Summaries that were delivered to various leaders in the county government.

The outcomes above have shown that our program is working well overall but we will continue improving it. The systems leadership skills of the fellows in SCA were closely observed during the community forums by our coordinators and they noticed that the fellows demonstrated systems acumen with confidence. In their third community forums they were able to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during the program with confidence. The assessment of their SID Policy Summaries also showed evidence of complexity and systems thinking skills.

Conclusion

After almost five years of designing, testing, and iterating all the stages above based on feedback from youth, we have successfully created a program that can equip Africa's youth with highly needed systems acumen for effectively tackling complex social problems in the 21st century. The early outcomes that we have seen from the program have shown that if youth are equipped with systems acumen they can serve as systems leaders that facilitate lasting change in their communities. Three of the fours groups from the first cohort have been able to organize the SID Community Forums largely on their own, produced SID Summaries, and delivered them to key county government officials.

The work that SAYDS fellows are currently carrying out in their communities is needed in communities through-out Africa to ensure that communities are able to navigate complexities that undermine their wellbeing, and maintain high levels of wellbeing when unseen disruptions (e.g., COVID) occurs. Since communities are complex adaptive systems, unforeseen changes take place all the time and if not well monitored they disrupt efforts to improve wellbeing, such as community development projects carried out by different organizations. They also disrupt individuals' livelihoods, such as the small businesses that are created to meet family needs. The uncertainties that create these disruptions can be managed by getting communities to work together to understand the nature of complex social problems, to identify the appropriate systemic solutions, to co-design solutions with change agents, and then closely monitor the way complexities are affecting the solutions.

SAYDS fellows that have systems acumen can facilitate that process and help communities to make their efforts resilient and adapt appropriately when there are disruptive dynamics. They can also help them with taking advantage of dynamics that can advance wellbeing.

Because the complex challenges that African countries will continue to face in the 21st century will continue to have widespread effects due to increasing connectivity, we need to make sure that youth across the continent are equipped to help their communities to navigate unforeseen complexities and have sustained wellbeing. Now that we have finished creating all the stages of our program and confirmed that the program can equip youth to serve as systems leaders in their communities, we will start scaling up our operations so that many more youth can be equipped to serve as systems leaders or thought leaders. In the next five years we plan to run our program throughout Kenya and in some East African countries. Beyond the next five years we plan to extend our operations beyond East Africa to other African countries.

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DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS

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