Young Ghanaian innovator wants to inspire youth

SAP, UNESCO and over 130 partners from the public, private and non-profit sectors are currently gearing up to introduce coding skills to 1.5 million youth across 37 countries in October 2019. This year's youth ambassador for Africa Code Week (ACW), Mustapha Diyaol Haqq, hails from Ghana, where he taught himself to code, walking kilometres to internet cafes.

Coding workshop.

According to Claire Gillissen-Duval, director of EMEA Corporate Social Responsibility and Africa Code Week Global Lead at SAP, this 2019 edition will feature a strong focus on empowering girls and building teaching capacity at the community level, hence the importance of role models like Haqq. "We are extremely proud and honoured to welcome Mustapha as our Youth Ambassador for ACW 2019. He overcame major challenges and his amazing journey has the power to inspire many. As a young innovator and change maker, his mentorship and guidance will be crucial as we strive to empower an entire generation and strengthen teaching capacity in ICT education among African communities."

Africa Code Week will take place in October across 37 countries. Spearheaded in 2015 by SAP's EMEA Corporate Social Responsibility department as part of its social investments to drive sustainable growth in Africa, Africa Code Week is instilling digital literacy and coding skills in the young generation, to drive sustainable learning impact across Africa.

"It takes a village to raise a child"

As the Fourth Industrial Revolution sweeps across Africa and more of its youth develop coding and other digital skills, there may come a time to update this old saying to: "It takes one child to raise the prospects of a village." And based on the quest of one young man from a village in Ghana to solve some of the major problems faced by his community, this saying could become commonplace as more young innovators enter the fray.

Inspired by global technology success stories, Haqq, a 19-year-old from Kumasi in Southern Ghana, realised he too could deliver innovation where it was most needed, starting with his very home town. "Seeing how the big tech companies used innovation to solve some of the world's biggest problems made me realise how important it is to learn to code," says Haqq. "I looked online for any free courses that could help me develop coding skills and completed as many as I could."

Despite being self-taught, Haqq was able to develop a potentially life-saving solution for women across the continent. "I used my knowledge of coding and machine learning to develop a model for diagnosing breast cancer, which I hope to release freely to communities across Africa," says Haqq.

Also high on his agenda, hunger and food security which he sees as two of the biggest challenges faced by the continent's rapidly growing population. "Africa relies heavily on smallholder farmers to meet its food production needs. However, much of the produce from farms are spoilt before it reaches the markets in the cities. I'm currently working on a machine learning and AI model that can help reduce post-harvest losses and ensure the work our farmers do translate into food security for our communities."

Connectivity challenges remain limiting

One of Haqq's biggest challenges when learning to code was accessing the internet. "We don't have a good internet connection where we live, so I had to walk kilometres to an internet café where I could access free online coding courses. Internet access is expensive but, thanks to the generous support of my parents, who made some sacrifices to give me a chance to complete a few online courses, I built sufficient coding skills to start developing solutions to some of the problems affecting our community."

Ghana suffers from poor internet penetration, with only 14% of the population having access to the internet. Despite this, the Ghanaian government has set out an ambitious plan to position the country as a leader in ICT innovation in the sub-Saharan Africa region by 2023. Young innovators such as Haqq will undoubtedly play a crucial role in achieving the government's ambitions and inspiring more youth to pursue careers in tech.

Haqq says internet access is also the single biggest obstacle to greater adoption of coding among African youth. "Our continent does not enjoy the fixed-line infrastructure of our more developed peers, and mobile internet can be expensive. For me to afford the internet cafes where I learned to code, my parents had to make sacrifices. Global companies can play an invaluable support role by investing in providing internet access to our communities to support us as we get ready for a digital future."

Digital literacy

One of the initiatives working to address digital literacy in Ghana is SAP's Africa Code Week, an annual, continent-wide digital literacy programme that has engaged over 4.1 million youth in 37 African countries since 2015.

"I participated in Africa Code Week as an opportunity to share my knowledge with young people in my community and inspire more youngsters to learn one of the most important languages of our time: coding," says Haqq. "I am also a volunteer and instructor for Ghana Code Club, and with the help of some friends we have established coding clubs in several communities, where we spend our free time and weekends teaching both kids and adults to code.

"Being appointed Youth Ambassador for ACW 2019 is a dream come true, and a unique opportunity to inspire change on a global platform, encouraging young talents across the continent to learn digital skills and code the change they want to see in their community."

Strong partnerships with the public, private and non-profit sectors are the driving force behind Africa Code Week's ability

to drive sustainable learning impact in support of UN Sustainable Development Goals. Africa Code Week has benefitted over 4 million young Africans so far and is now actively supported by UNESCO YouthMobile, BMZ, Google and over 130 partners and 120 ambassadors across the continent. SAP also works closely with UNESCO to increase girl participation in ACW workshops.

This fifth edition of ACW will see thousands of free coding workshops organised for 1.5 million youth across 37 countries in October 2019, with a strong focus on girl empowerment and community capacity building.

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