

# How a fellowship influenced my development plans in Kenya

by Jeremy Riro

Before leaving Kenya to participate in the summer 2018 Mandela Washington Fellowship at Northwestern, I promised my team back home at Fie-Consult that I would return with new insights aligned with our firm's philosophy: that a sustainable economic development model for Africa should be anchored on knowledgeable entrepreneurs operating in a vibrant ecosystem of transferable skills and business development support.

In Kenya, there are more than 7 million MSMEs—micro, small, and medium enterprises. As of 2016, these

created 81 percent of the country's jobs and contributed about 33 percent to the annual GDP. Unfortunately, most MSMEs do not survive beyond three years due to lack of knowledge and business development support.

After graduating with my finance degree, I had a burning passion to support MSMEs in my country and across Africa—to bridge the skill and knowledge gaps—so they could grow beyond their local markets. Most small businesses, however, could not afford the type of consulting services offered at my former employer; they ended up failing for the reasons cited. After discovering this, I quit my management consulting job and started Fie-Consult to offer customized training and business development services to MSMEs and startups in Kenya and beyond.

Fie-Consult is a Nairobi-based strategy consulting and investment advisory firm that helps entrepreneurs create, manage, and expand their businesses across sub-Saharan Africa. We structure innovative operational processes that improve efficiency and maximize profits for our clients. We also develop competitive and sustainable long-term strategies for entrepreneurs, support them in implementing growth plans, and offer investment advisory services for raising external capital.

In the past three years we have completed more than 76 engagements with startups, high-growth businesses, social enterprises, and NGOs in Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and South Africa. We have also collaborated with development partners and local organizations to implement entrepreneurship programs. Thus far we have trained more than 1,600 entrepreneurs, yet we have barely scratched the surface of the work that needs to be done.

I often thought about this huge knowledge gap during our course at Northwestern. As I listened to professors break down complex business theories into simple and practical concepts, I remembered the many entrepreneurs who do not have access to such knowledge. The more my mind was enriched in class, on visits to Chicago, and during other socio-cultural interactions in the US, the more I knew I needed to do something bigger back home.

Northwestern gave me world-class training in leadership and entrepreneurship, as well as a strong network of 24 fellow young leaders from across Africa. Now sufficiently empowered, I look forward to empowering at least 1,000 more entrepreneurs annually through knowledge transfer and business development support. I dream that in five years we shall have completely transformed the entrepreneurship landscape in Africa.

*Former Mandela Washington fellow  
Jeremy Riro lives and works in Nairobi.*



*The author (far left) with his Mandela Washington Fellowship cohort*