

## South Africa: From Dropouts to Innovators by Ashoka

RLabs, founded by Marlon Parker, is an innovation movement that transforms youth in troubled communities, gangsters, dropouts and ex-convicts, into changemakers. In this blog we look at how RLabs invests in young "problem experts" to beat crime & unemployment.

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Marlon Parker grew up in the Cape Flats township of Cape Town, surrounded by increasing rates of unemployment, crime, gang violence and drug abuse. As the eldest in a single-parent household, Marlon was compelled to supplement the family's income and by age eight he was selling candy and carrying grocery bags to earn extra cash.

At 19, while working at the airport, a serendipitous conversation with a coworker motivated him to study information technology (IT) and inspired in him new possibilities. He had never touched a computer before enrolling in university and by the time he completed his computer science degree, he had never owned one.

Fast forward 15 years - Marlon is now the founder of Reconstructed Living Labs (RLabs), a social innovation-driven movement where dropouts, ex-convicts, gangsters, the homeless, former drug addicts and single mothers (a majority of whom are youth) are positioned to drive lasting social change. RLabs, originally founded in Cape Flats, are now present in 21 countries. They include physical and virtual hubs which offer free IT and entrepreneurial courses, incubators for youth-led enterprises and youth cafés where young people can exchange good deeds for RLabs-developed virtual currency. Each component of RLabs is designed to inspire hope and catalyse youth-led creativity in order to change entrenched systems of unemployment, crime and violence in disadvantaged and troubled communities.

Marlon paved his own path by creating opportunities out of the very challenges that were tearing his community apart.

Marlon's journey took him from struggling for survival as a young boy in a community with very little hope, to the founding of RLabs, designed to bring innovation and new possibilities to troubled communities. His journey inspires a vision for other young people with few prospects:

"We have always encouraged youth to stop thinking about the job because there will never be enough jobs [in South Africa]. Instead we motivate them to focus on the work that needs to be done in our communities. We have an abundance of work to do but limited jobs. So we focus on turning the work into economic opportunities - into a Hope Economy."

So far, RLabs and the IT innovations designed in its incubators have created 20,000 jobs (directly and indirectly), by addressing social challenges through 22 IT-powered social enterprises and 185 RLabs-inspired business products.

RLabs has also provided free training to more than 27,000 people and university scholarships to 438. RLabs is building momentum for a "Hope Economy" movement globally in countries as far reaching as Somalia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Kenya, Botswana, Nigeria, Namibia, Malaysia, Portugal, Brazil, the UK, and the Philippines (including 17 physical hubs mostly located in Africa).

Marlon's work has led to his election as an Ashoka Fellow, the US President Barack Obama's Young African Leaders Network in 2012 and his selection as a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader of 2014.

"How can we make hope contagious?"

Investing in young "problem experts" to drive systemic solutions for their communities

"The most innovative aspect to RLabs is its approach to engaging with people." says Marlon, "It works because RLabs is a movement by people for people. The same people we serve, live in the community and have a good understanding of the context making them 'problem experts'."

At RLabs these young "problem experts" are given the tools and resources to create innovative, demand-driven enterprises and solutions based on an understanding that their personal experiences with the problems gripping their communities, make them the people best positioned to drive lasting change.

RLabs focuses on creating the right spaces for innovation by investing in people to help them feel respected and valued as agents of change. RLabs Academy offers free courses in software design, programming, operating systems, entrepreneurship, social media and leadership. Each course has an underlying focus on problem solving through critical thinking and design thinking; 70% of participants are women, 90% are black, colored or Indian.

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There are two very simple rules at RLabs: smile and pay-it-forward.

The Academy is free and the incubator moves forward due to a self-sustaining design – graduates give back by serving as course facilitators and 60% of RLabs' income is generated from projects within the Lab. "The greatest currency in the world is people," says Marlon.

This idea informs the design of RLabs in the most fundamental ways. Building on this principle, Marlon recently partnered with the Western Cape Department of Social Development to launch a series of Youth Cafés where young people go to learn by doing good. These cafés do not accept cash – the only way to buy something is to do good and earn currency.

"Innovation, to me, is the outcome of creativity (or creativity in practice) that leaves a positive socio-economic impact. Innovation has always been in the DNA of Africans as we are naturally wired to survive all kinds of challenges in our societies. This new generation of young people has an opportunity to move from 'survival innovators' to 'purpose innovators'."

For instance, instead of just innovating to ensure that you and your home have clean water, create a new way of cleaning water that will transform emerging markets." says Marlon.

Marlon practices what he preaches. His own transformation from a young boy struggling to survive into a world-class social innovator happened as he continued to ask and address the toughest questions at the root of his community's problems; "What causes social transformation and ingenuity in environments where hope is scarce?" and "How can we make hope contagious?"

These kinds of questions help him, R Labs and the communities they engage, to stay at the cutting edge; continuously designing ever-evolving and innovative models for a rapidly changing and globalized world where the demand for problem experts and problem solvers continues to grow.