

Hero of the Month

Richard Tushemereirwe

Co-Founder ACLENet

1. **What is your background?**

My background is in science and technology. I started my adult working life as a secondary school (junior high school) science teacher - Biology and Chemistry - after training and certification from the Institute of Teacher Education, Kyambogo in 1995. After three years of teaching, I enrolled at the school of science, makerere university, for a three years bachelor of science course majoring in biochemistry. That was 1998.

Immediately, after completing my BSc (honors) course mid 2001, I joined Kampala Pharmaceutical Industries as a medical sales representative. One year into medical sales, I joined Kyambogo University (my former college now transformed into a university) as a teaching assistant. Two years into university teaching I shifted again and joined Uganda’s state house in 2004 as an assistant private secretary in the department of science and technology. Four years later I was promoted to private secretary for science and technology. In 2010, I was promoted to senior private secretary for science and technology and another two years to a senior president’s advisor.

1. **How and when did you hear about ACLENet?**

At the end of June 2011, a Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) due to a single lightning strike took place at Runyanya Primary School in central Uganda. Nineteen lives were lost, 18 young learners and 1 teacher, in that MCI. More than sixty children were hospitalized, some for more than 3 days. It was a national disaster that was reported worldwide. I was deeply touched.

Surprisingly, the response from government officials (the same government I was serving as a science and technology advisor) was to explain the problem away without giving a solution. Officials from the national meteorology department went on national TV to explain the science of lightning and its deleterious effects. I felt that was not enough and not anywhere near a point of help, or solace, for a parent who sent his healthy child to school only to receive a corpse in the afternoon. All the messages from different government officials who offered some communication could be summarized as ‘ *this is a natural problem, there is nothing the government can do’*. There was a general sense of helplessness.

One month after the Runyanya incident I read an online advert for an international symposium on lightning by the Centre for Science and Technology of the Non-Aligned Movement and Other Developing Countries that was to be held in Kathmandu, Nepal, in October of 2011. I had attended some conferences organized by this center before that and I resolved to apply and attend this one. I was very eager to find some solutions - I felt it in my soul.

Many surprises came to me when I arrived at the conference in Kathmandu to find many attendees had read about the Runyanya incident and were eager to hear from the delegate from Uganda - myself. My presentation at that conference was very emotional. I still feel emotional writing about this incident and it is very difficult to explain it fully. My passion is aroused when it comes to the Runyanya incident. Inside the conference room, we were seated in alphabetical order of the names of countries of origin and that meant that I sat next to Mary Ann Cooper (Uganda followed by USA). After the day’s presentations we also shared seats in the bus to attend a dinner prepared by the organizers. We both shared some personal information, and passions around lightning. We also encouraged each other to do something about the problem of lightning in Africa.

1. **What motivated you to work with ACLENet?**

From the time I presented at the Kathmandu symposium I was motivated to channel my passion around the Runyanya incident towards a search for solutions. I strongly convinced the attendees that we needed to organize a similar symposium in Kampala, Uganda. My main interest then was to take them to Runyanya Primary School because I wanted them to feel what I felt. This interest was partially fulfilled when in 2012, together with NAM S&T Center, we successfully organized another conference in Kampala. However, I failed to take my guests to Runyanya due to time and logistical challenges.

In 2014, at the request of friends made in the two preceding conferences, we held another international conference in Kampala, Uganda. The theme was ‘what is possible?’ We resolved that it was possible to form a pan African organization focused on applying science based solutions to lightning hazards.

Once the delegates went back to their respective countries, it took me about two months to successfully convince MAC to take up leadership of ACLENet. It was an organization only on paper conceived mainly by two people - myself and professor Chandima Gomesi who is now teaching at Wits in South Africa. I was convinced that she had a more suitable profile, better than mine, and the grit because he was a constant fixture in every major meeting and discussion about lightning. Actually, it was Chandima’s prompting that encouraged me to contact MAC on this matter of leadership. I elected to work alongside her as a vice president responsible for relationships - mainly governmental - across Africa.

1. **Please describe your work with ACLENet.**

Since the time I convinced friends to form ACLENet, in 2014, I have worked as a vice president responsible for governmental relationships. I was convinced then, as much as now, that the success of ACLENet across Africa shall depend on our ability to work alongside national governments. This is because in Africa, due to current levels of development, governments have the single most influence in every aspect of society. Since ACLENet’s work mainly centers around confronting the misrepresentations and misinformation about lightning, it requires national governments to confront and change centuries old perceptions.

We envisaged that ACLENet is to influence African societies by working alongside national governments. This conviction still holds to this day.

1. **What are some of your key achievements so far with ACLENet?**

For the last ten years, ACLENet has registered significant progress as a pan African organization in the field of Public Health and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

We have installed standardized Lightning Protection Systems (LPS) on seven schools spread across Uganda so that ACLENet has a presence in each and every region. We are on course to install such LPS on two other schools in the islands of Lake Victoria, one of Africa’s leading hot spots for lightning stroke density. These few schools, selected mainly because of their geographical location, are a tiny drop in the more than 30, 000 schools (both primary and secondary) across the country. However, they are the seeds we intend to use as demonstration sites for standardized LPS for purposes of training and education. We are on course to influence Ugandan society from the inside and outside.

In February 2022, we successfully signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Uganda (GoU) represented by the Office of Prime Minister (OPM), Ministry of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees (MoDP&R). This was a significant milestone because it offered ACLENet an opportunity to come closer to the GoU and work alongside public dispensation. This is a national mandate delegated to ACLENet by the OPM. Two months ago, three districts were brought into the fold of this public dispensation through addenda to this MoU.

1. **What are some of the challenges you have encountered in your work with ACLENet? How have you addressed these challenges?**

The last ten years have also seen significant challenges mainly due to insufficient funding. Confronting centuries old misconceptions about the hazards of lightning, across the large continent of Africa, requires funding that is a hundred fold to the current levels of funding. We hope to address this challenge by perseverance in the search for funding.

The other major challenge has been the attitudes of public officials. All across Africa there is a dependence syndrome built around Non Governmental Organisations(NGO) like ACLENet. The typical public official in Africa expects to be ‘bribed’ with free lunch and some allowance payments to be able to listen to an agent of an NGO. It breeds some sort of dependence syndrome whereby there must be a constant flow of funds in one direction and half hearted responses. Of course, this is lobbying as is practiced in developed economies but less streamlined. We hope to streamline this kind of lobbying.

1. **How would you like to see ACLENet develop in the future?**

I would like to see ACLENet spread across Africa from the successful experiments in Uganda. It is possible to work alongside each and every national government of the 44 African countries that are active in the UN Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction: 2015 - 2030.

It is possible to replicate the experiences, and growth, of the last ten years acted out in Uganda by ACLENet in each of the 44 countries.

At this time, as ACLENet celebrates ten years of significant growth, the main challenge shall be overcoming the mountain of NGO dependency syndrome onto the valley of sustainability. I envisage this to be my main contribution in the next ten years.

1. **What do you see in the future for ACLENet regarding lightning safety?**

The future of ACLENet is bright because it is founded on a solid foundation of a conviction to serve the public, a passion to create change. I see a premier organization in the twin fields of public health and DRR educating and training millions of Africans on science based solutions against the hazard of lightning.

The focus of the last ten years has been on showcasing ‘what is possible’ just as was the theme of our successful meeting in Kampala in 2014. The focus of the next ten years should be on mass impact, reaching millions of people across Africa, in both the public and private sectors.

Fortunately, we have developed an important platform in the name of the *African Flash.* This is a newsletter that we started in early 2018 and it has been published every month since then thanks to Mary Ann. It is now published in five international languages. I

1. **Encouragement note**

The African Flash is a source of great encouragement personally and, in my opinion, for the entire organization. It is the interface between ACLENet and the African public. There is a lot of room for improving this platform so that we engage the wider African public at various levels.

It is an amazing achievement that we have published every month, for the last 72 months, without fail. That alone is a source of inspiration. God bless Mary Ann for the grit and determination to serve consistently.

1. **Is there anything else you would like to include – personal information, family, goals, etc? Is it ok to list your email?**

When I immigrated to the US in 2021, to Los Angeles in California, I prayed that I catch the silicon valley bug of IT based solutions. It was like a wish and it came to pass. Having overcome the burdens of separating from my family, for the last three years now, I feel it has been worthwhile wandering in different sectors in southern California. I now know that we have to utilize online based solutions to reach out to millions across Africa.