

Community Driven Change

An Interview with Ashlee George, Executive Director, Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project (CTAOP)

EDITORS' NOTE Ashlee George is the Executive Director of the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project, a U.S.-based foundation committed to advancing and investing in the health, education, safety and community support of young people living in Southern Africa to create a more equitable future for all. In the 10+ years that she has led CTAOP, she has overseen dramatic growth, including increasing the foundation's grant making, communities served and youth engaged in CTAOP's vision of a future where all youth are empowered to live healthy and productive lives. George aims to merge the influence of the entertainment industry with strategic philanthropy, working at both a global and grassroots level. She has been a part of Charlize Theron's team for over 15 years, and oversees her philanthropic activities, including her work with UNAIDS and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, as well as engagements through Charlize Theron's position as a United Nations Messenger of Peace. George has an undergraduate degree from UCLA in European studies with minors in women's studies and LGBT studies and received her MBA from UCLA Anderson School of Management.



Ashlee George

work also has broadened. Our mission now is to advance and invest in the health, education and safety of young people living in Southern Africa to create a more equitable future for all. HIV prevention programs remain very much a part of our efforts, but we see it as one piece of the puzzle. We believe that true HIV prevention will require broader community and systemic change along with the investment in the whole young person.

FOUNDATION BRIEF The Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project (charlizeafricaoutreach.org) advances and invests in the health, education, safety and community support of young people living in Southern Africa to create a more equitable future for all. CTAOP was created in 2007 by Charlize Theron, Academy Award winning actor and UN Messenger of Peace, with the hope of making a difference in fighting HIV in her home country of South Africa. Although the geographic scope of CTAOP is sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa has remained the primary area of focus with the highest number of people living with HIV in the world. CTAOP is a fund of the Entertainment Industry Foundation (EIF), a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. EIN: 95-1644609. EIF is a Charity Navigator 4 Star Charity that meets all 20 BBB Charity Standards and carries the GuideStar Platinum Seal of Transparency.

Will you highlight the history of the Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project (CTAOP) and how you define its mission?

The Charlize Theron Africa Outreach Project (CTAOP) was founded by Charlize

Theron – actor, producer, United Nations Messenger of Peace. Charlize is originally from South Africa and feels deeply connected to the country and the people of South Africa. In 2007, she created CTAOP. The foundation's mission has always been focused on investing in the health and potential of young people. It began with a focus on HIV prevention, since South Africa had, and still has, the highest number of people living with HIV in the world, but as the foundation grew the scope of our

Will you provide an overview of CTAOP's work and initiatives?

CTAOP partners with community-based organizations (Program Partners) that specifically support the sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of youth and/or work to prevent gender-based violence (GBV). By providing funding, strengthening capacity, and bringing awareness to the work of our Program Partners, we help ensure the youth they serve are on a path to reaching their full potential. Thanks largely to our incredible founder, CTAOP has a unique platform and community, and we utilize our resources, experience, and diverse network to strengthen and amplify the work of our Program Partners.

In 2018, CTAOP launched a scholarship program to support and cultivate young changemakers in South Africa. The Youth Leaders Scholarship program provides university scholarships and wraparound support – for example, accommodations, books, travel, mentorship, mental health support – for those young leaders as well.



At one of HIVSA's (CTAOP Program Partner) Choma Cafés, a safe community space for young women and girls, Charlize spends time listening to Choma Champions

Additionally, we are active on the advocacy front. For example, you may have seen Charlize's powerful speeches at the International AIDS Conference, or the campaign to prevent domestic violence that CTAOP launched in 2020 in partnership with CARE and EIF – Together for Her. Just last year, CTAOP partnered with the Ford Foundation on a global vaccine equity campaign. We really try and take the learnings and feedback about needs that we hear from our Program Partners and young people and focus our advocacy on areas we believe will help address them.

To date, CTAOP-supported programs have reached over 3 million youth, a tremendous source of pride for us, but we are equally as proud of the long-standing trusted relationships we have built with our Program Partners that have allowed this level of impact to be possible.

What are the keys to driving lasting, sustainable impact in addressing the challenges facing African youth?

That is the million-dollar question and, in reality, I'm sure there are many different answers that have led organizations to successful change, but I can speak to CTAOP's approach.

Every community is different, and those closest to the challenges understand them better than anyone. We believe the messenger matters, and we need to be intentional about finding the organizations that are locally led and have the relationships and trust of their own community, and then provide long-term, multi-year funding – and other types of support – that allows for the flexibility to adjust to the evolving and complex landscape. In youth development, just like in many other areas, generating structural and systemic change is a combination of serving individual young people as well as understanding their ecosystem.

“CTAOP will always continue to reflect and evolve based on what we are learning from our incredible Program Partners on the ground and the inspiring youth we are in service of. This is a journey. One that we walk alongside our Partners, young people, and all our committed supporters and peers around the globe. It takes all of us, and as we look back on 15 years – we are filled with so much gratitude for this CTAOP community.”

Charlize Theron, Founder, CTAOP

Health, education, and safety are broad goals – reflecting a diverse and interconnected ecosystem. Our Partners address everything from HIV, SRHR, and GBV, to mental health and wellness. They act in schools, create their own safe spaces, and ultimately help to create access to youth-friendly services. They work toward economic opportunity, family strengthening, and valuing and investing in young people as contributing members of society. If that seems

like a lot, it is – and no one entity can do it alone. That's why we are always looking for ways to collaborate, strengthen trust in relationships, and look within and across sectors for inspiration and possibility.

You mentioned that CTAOP launched the Youth Leaders Scholarship (YLS) program in 2018. Will you elaborate on this program?

The Youth Leaders Scholarship (YLS) provides young leaders, who have been nominated by CTAOP Program Partners, with funding, tools, and resources to access tertiary studies and achieve long-term success. YLS was created with the understanding that true, lasting change will only come from within communities themselves. CTAOP believes the leaders there are the experts – they have the vision, the passion, and the true connection to and understanding of their community. YLS is an investment in those young leaders, their potential as changemakers, and the future they envision. We always say, “our role is to help make sure they have the tools, access, and opportunities, but then we just need to get out of their way because they will shape and shake the world.”

The program was inspired by a young community leader who was already taking action. In 2017, Charlize, the CTAOP team and a group of supporters, were visiting one of our Program Partners in the Eastern Cape (one of nine Provinces in South Africa). During a group discussion, a remarkable young woman, Aya, stood up and powerfully declared that she wasn't going to wait around anymore for change to come to her community. Her words were the driving spark of inspiration. That trip was in the summer of 2017, and we launched our first cohort for the Youth Leaders Scholarship program in 2019. This year we are on target to have our first graduates.



Charlize connects with a young community leader while visiting dlananathi (CTAOP Program Partner)



Charlize celebrating with youth in Edendale, South Africa

How did CTAOP adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

When the pandemic began, our initial approach was to reach out to all our Program Partners and try to learn. We asked, “What are you hearing? What are you seeing? What do you think you will need? How can we help?” Across the board, our partners worried about food security in their communities as well as gender-based violence. We also knew that the responses of our partners would need to be different based on their individual communities, so we wanted to provide them with as much flexibility as possible in our support. In addition to their existing grants, we issued additional \$20,000 unrestricted grants to all partners so they could use those funds for any need their communities were facing. We felt completely confident in this action because we have worked together with these partners for years.

In addition, we worked together with CARE and the Entertainment Industry Foundation to launch a global campaign called Together For Her to deploy funds and support the response against gender-based violence, appropriately deemed the “second pandemic” in South Africa and around the world.

Overall, the additional financial commitment CTAOP and Charlize made to the COVID response was over \$1 million.

Our work continues on this front. Just a few months ago, we partnered with the Ford Foundation on a campaign to address COVID-19 vaccine inequity and misinformation. Our Program Partners shared the challenges they were witnessing around vaccine hesitancy and lack of access, and they were actively involved in fighting these inequities, often without any funding. This campaign’s message was critical, but in addition, we wanted to ensure that funding from the campaign was directed to the Program

Partners who were working on vaccine access and battling misinformation at the community level because both the Ford Foundation and CTAOP believe that the messenger matters. To that end, we were able to provide an additional \$380,000+ to them as part of this effort.

How critical are metrics to measure the impact of CTAOP’s work?

Metrics are critical in anything, but we must ask ourselves who is determining them, and why? CTAOP does not define the metrics of success for our Program Partners, nor should we. We can help support the creation of their own metrics, but CTAOP works to avoid imposing, even inadvertently, our norms or presume to know what success looks like in their community. We ask questions, listen, and learn alongside our partners. We work to earn and build trust, and by centering our work in the trusted relationships, we also aim to shift from a funder and donor-centric model of philanthropy and grantmaking to a community-centric one. The partners are the experts with lived experience who should have the opportunities to try different solutions, to fail forward without penalty, to not be burdened by funder restrictions and requests. In that vein, they, alongside their communities, define their own metrics.

Don’t get me wrong – we still have an agenda: we serve our Program Partners. We do provide funding, but also try to be thought partners, sounding boards, support mechanisms, and even critical friends, at times. For CTAOP, we need to be held accountable to our partners in the way we support them to be able to do their work. We want to know that we are strengthening our partners’ ability to work within and respond to their communities’ needs, and to create positive change in young people as well as in their ecosystem. That is the metric to which we hold ourselves at CTAOP accountable.

We also acknowledge the limitation of data and metrics alone. For example, we track throughput and progression rates as part of our Scholarship work, but that reveals nothing about important context details such as the mental health challenges of our scholars who converted to online learning in 2020 or the lack of preparedness from universities to support these students online.

Will you discuss Charlize’s passion and commitment for the work of CTAOP and how deeply engaged she is in its efforts?

I have been in the room when global leaders describe Charlize as “the real deal,” and she truly is. Obviously, I am biased, but she is deeply committed to this work, and to a more equitable, just, safe, and kind world generally. CTAOP’s work is in no way a vanity project for her. She and the foundation have been quietly doing this work since 2007, and 15 years later she/we are more committed than ever. She commits her own funding, her name, her network and so much of her time and heart to this work – from fundraising throughout the entire year to doing site visits, to personally holding Zoom sessions with our Scholars just to check in and support them. She gives her all. I think it’s a passion driven partially by her love for her home, but even more so fueled by her humongous heart and infinite empathy. She is genuinely one of the most compassionate people I have ever met, and it’s an absolute honor to have spent the last 15+ years learning from her and being inspired by her.

Did you always know that you had a passion for this type of work and what makes the work so special for you?

It’s funny because I certainly didn’t know I was going to end up doing this kind of work, but when I look back on my life, I can see the path being cut even when I didn’t realize it was. For example, my senior project in high school was to teach sex ed classes and write a research paper about HIV prevention. There was no personal reason for choosing this, other than general interest, so it does seem that I’ve had a direction, even though I didn’t know it.

There are lots of reasons this work is so special to me, from the inspirational Program Partners who commit their every breath to making their communities better, to getting to support such a purposeful and influential changemaker like Charlize. But if I had to pick one thing I love the most, at the risk of sounding cheesy, I would pick this: CTAOP has been built around a core set of values and has been able to grow while staying true to them. The value of Ubuntu probably stands out the most to me. Ubuntu is the African philosophy that roughly translates to “I am because you are.” It’s the idea that all of us are interconnected in our humanity, and I get to see that, feel that, and support that every day. I see how a shared commitment to young people and making our world better connects the Program Coordinator in Cape Town to our donors in New York City to an AIDS activist in Geneva or the 16-year-old in Tokyo who follows CTAOP on social. We all are pushing for the same dream – and it gives me so much optimism. There are people all over the world who want to do good, support good, be good. ●