



20 Minutes with OTIM GEOFFREY, MSc.

Founder & CEO: SynBio Africa

In the International Biosecurity and Prevention Forum's (IBPF) first member spotlight, IBPF sat down with Otim Geoffrey, founder and CEO of SynBio Africa, to learn more about him, his work, and his aspirations for SynBio Africa in the coming years. SynBio Africa is hosting its inaugural Synthetic Biology and Biosecurity Conference in Africa to bring together those working in synthetic biology across public, private, academic, and policymaker communities. For more information regarding this conference, you can visit the following link: <https://SynBioafrica.com/sba-1-inaugural-synthetic-biology-and-biosecurity-conference-in-africa-2021/>



How did you get started in Synthetic Biology?

I developed a strong passion for synthetic biology after attending my first synthetic biology conference (SB7.0) in Singapore as a Biosecurity fellow, sponsored by Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. There, I met, interacted, and created networks with many thought leaders and pioneers in the synthetic biology field, who have continued to play bigger roles in mentoring and supporting my SynBio initiatives. I founded iGEM Makerere University team in 2018, the first iGEM from East Africa to participate and represent at the iGEM Giant Jamboree in Boston, US. I later founded SynBio Africa as an after iGEM initiative to promote and spread the gospel of synthetic biology across Africa.

Why did you start SynBio Africa?

SynBio Africa is a forum for students, researchers, citizen scientists, policy makers and the public at large to convene and develop successful pathways for the propagation of synthetic biology technologies, products, and services throughout Africa. Synthetic biology promises to provide sustainable, low-cost, breakthrough technologies to many grand challenges of the modern society via innovations in agriculture, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, energy, environmental conservation, crop improvement, and microbial bio production among others.

How is SynBio Africa organized (internally)?

SynBio Africa, is a legally registered company in Uganda and hosted at Makerere University-COVAB. It is governed by a steering committee which consist of the Executive committee members headed by the Chief Executive Officer, and an advisory team consisting of thought leaders in synthetic biology field.

What is the social impact of SynBio Africa in your community?

SynBio Africa is building a network of synthetic biology enthusiasts and after iGEMers in Africa through the Ambassador's program, creating awareness, providing knowledge, and conducting research in the field of synthetic biology aimed at solving grand challenges in African communities using synthetic biology tools, technologies, and applications.

Where do you see SynBio Africa in 5-10 years?

SynBio Africa is positioned to become a World-Class center of excellence in synthetic biology research, education, and biosecurity in Africa with a vision to have a healthy, safe, and sustainable world through synthetic biology. Our future prospects are to establish a synthetic biology research center of excellence in Africa and incorporate SynBio Africa hubs in different African nations.

What role do you hope to play in Africa's Synthetic Biology space?

With my background in International Affairs and Diplomacy, I'm determined with strong passion, and dedication to champion in creating awareness and fostering negotiations as an enabler for acceptance of synthetic biology across the African continent through tested communication and advocacy strategies. Engagement with policy makers and top government officials from different African countries in a dialogue to negotiate on enacting biotechnology and biosafety act to enable and regulate synthetic biology research in Africa.

What is the role of local government in SynBio Africa? How would you like to engage with government as SynBio Africa grows?

From the notion that "charity begins at home"; local government is one of the key stakeholders on our stakeholder matrix. Their role is eminent in gaining political will and access to local support right from the grassroots level. I intend to engage local governments' leadership at every stage of SynBio Africa programs from planning to monitoring and evaluation of SynBio Africa programs. Holding regular consultative meetings, dialogues, policy engagements and feedback meetings with local government authorities to gain their trust and support.

What do you like to do in your spare time?

Well, it's so unusual that I am not at all a soccer fan which is more of a gender-associated hobby for men. Rather, I am a big fan of athletics and boxing where I spend most of my free time watching video archives from athletic and boxing legends like Mayweather, Pacquiao, Usain Bolt, and starring Claressa Shields, among others. It's crazy but true, sometimes Deejaying and emceeing is what I do best depending on the mood while hanging out with friends.