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To Help Africa, Build Tech Corps

East African Business Week (Kampala)

OPINION

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By Andrew Mack

All over Africa, there is a significant realisation that tech is the wave of the future and should be at the center of the continent's development agenda.

This, of course, is not completely news. There have been programs aimed at building an African tech sector before. Still, in today's African ICT world two things are fundamentally different: The first is Leadership in Government. Leaders around the continent are supporting policies that will protect intellectual property and promote ICT investment. The second difference is the increasingly active private sector, and its willingness to work with Government and civil society on all manner of partnerships.

However, today it's simply not enough to raise the flag for enlightened governments and innovative companies. Why? Because tech today is reaching only a small fraction of the people that it should. Specifically, tech is reaching only a small fraction of the youth and young adults that need it most, the citizen-consumers that are the heart and soul of tech-centered innovation and commerce in the "more developed world."

So what will it take for ICT in Africa to REALLY catch on?

The answer is as simple as YouTube, the same as anywhere in the world - DEMAND, specifically demand from networks of fearless, innovative, tech-friendly young Africans. And what will it take to bring African youth and young adults more into the global chat room? Why not start by building bridges - and programs - to work between young techies in Africa and the US? Why not form an Africa TechCorps?

There are already good models that can be leveraged and groups with much to teach us. There's GeekCorps, with more than 3,500 technical experts around the world. Or Kabissa, an international organization that trains African NGOs on the use of ICT. There is iEARN, an NGO working with teachers and young people to increase Internet use. There are no doubt many more.

We should build on these examples, but we can and should go further - with broader reach and a broader focus on creating sustainable businesses.

Imagine young African and American TechCorps members paired to work on technology projects, providing training aimed at youth, taught by youth, with an end goal of building not just friendships and skills but legitimate, lasting young business networks. Imagine some day soon... projects that are currently being outsourced to international firms could instead be "in-sourced" to TechCorps teams on the ground with support from the TechCorps network around the world.

Naturally taking this idea to "the next level" would involve investment. It would require close collaboration with the ICT development plans of participating countries. However, many parties - from donors, to Governments, to universities, the private sector and people themselves - are eager to make this happen. And think of the opportunities...

"TechCorps hubs in secondary cities like Gulu in Uganda or Makeni in Sierra Leone that might start as a collaborative aid project, but move from Peace Corps-type activity to legitimate corps (as in corporations) - creating an ongoing commercial relationship with Gulu TC members wherever they are in the world, something made possible by today's technology.

"Partnerships with suppliers of hardware and software, bringing the latest technologies and training to young adults who will run the new e-gov programs and service the back offices of growing companies - after all, a country unfamiliar with the latest technology can hardly demand it.

"Real business-focused training aimed at creating real businesses, directly addressing issues of project sustainability and employment that have stymied the growth of these markets.

"Opportunities for young US adults to get to know Africa and its future - today's real Africa - in an organic way, giving future US business leaders a real, on-the-ground understanding of technology's next frontier, something that today only European (and increasingly Chinese) companies have.

Is this a big idea? Perhaps. But it could be closer than you think. The projects are out there. Consider the ICT hubs program recently proposed by Uganda's State ICT Minister John Nsambu. With a budget of Ughsh1.2 billion (just US\$700,000) for the establishment of 20 ICT hubs in 20 districts across Uganda, it would hardly be a big money maker for a consulting firm. However, it might be a great fit for a kind of Africa TechCorps with a focus on training and entrepreneurship. If experience from around the world is any guide, much more than computer literacy education is possible from these centers, and the personal connection is the key.

The best thing that we in the West can do regarding tech in Africa is to approach it as a market, not a charity case. In a rapidly globalising world, where personal networks and technology are the keys to prosperity, an Africa TechCorps could help build the skills, networks, markets and experience to make us all better off, together - sustainably combining the best of both the development and business worlds.

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