



Lessons from Africa: What have we learned?

From ed-tech to telemedicine: Over the past year we have discussed development goals and digital solutions with a German-African community

Author: Bettina Rühl, translation: Gretchen Vogel

This article appears as part of our series on sustainable development goals and tech-based solutions from Africa, which we are discussing with an African-German community.

Since September 2022, RiffReporter's "Lessons from Africa" series has presented 11 stories featuring technological solutions from African developers. The goal of these technologies is to improve the living conditions of the population in different areas and contribute to the achievement of the [United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). We deliberately focused on solutions developed in Africa instead of projects promoted by development aid organizations or solutions that were devised in the Global North. That's because the African developers' projects are usually tailor-made for the challenges that local people face. In contrast, many international development cooperation projects ignore local realities.

As part of our "Lessons from Africa" research project, we looked in particular at solutions that aim to achieve the first six of the 17 sustainable development goals:

1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere: For example, a project in Mozambique that helps informal workers find more employment opportunities, or a project in Kenya that allows small-scale farmers to increase their production through easier access to tractors.

2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture:For example, a project in Tunisia that uses software to make digital precision farming solutions accessible to everyone.

3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages:A telemedicine startup in Uganda helps make this easier.

4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all:In Ghana, young people have developed mobile infrastructure solutions for schools and have also developed an ed-tech app that works offline. In South Africa, a community-based cooperative is the local internet provider and is helping to close the digital divide.

5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls:In Senegal, a start-up that produces organic baby food using modern technologies brings people closer to this goal.

6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all:For example, with an innovative system for underground irrigation in Tunisia.

We discussed these solutions with a German-African community that includes people from both continents who are interested in intercultural exchange, development goals, agriculture or African-European cooperation. We are now letting the developers and members of the community tell us what they think of the project.

We asked them first about their thoughts on the potential of solution-oriented reporting. Can such articles really change anything, be it the perception of the African continent or the reach of potential solutions? The community's reactions were mixed.



Journalist Mpindi Abaas from Uganda: "Journalistic projects like this, which allow community collaborative journalism, can help people who do not have a platform to amplify their voice."

Journalist [Mpindi Abaas](#), executive director of the Media Challenge Initiative in Uganda and a trainer for solution-oriented journalism, believes that such reporting can “change narratives about Africa” by showing that it is not only a continent of crises and by opening people’s eyes to potential opportunities.

Pastor [Martin Schwarz](#) says he was grateful for the opportunity for direct exchange with people from the Global South through the “Lessons from Africa” project. From his point of view, however, more is needed for real changes to take effect. He finds it “essential that those with reach and access to positions of power ensure that everyone has their say and their needs are heard.” Journalists could make a contribution, but other institutions such as social organizations or political organizations would also have to do their part and take on an “advocacy role.” However, this is “often still dominated by the voices of ‘experts’ who represent specific interests and rarely gives voice to those who are directly affected.” This “always runs the risk of stabilizing power relations, even if marginalized perspectives are brought in,” he says. His conclusion: “The institutions retain their gatekeeper role.” This also applies to journalism, even if it strives for solution-oriented and participatory perspectives.

Gerhard Karpiniec, who has more than 55 years of experience with Austrian development organizations, was even more critical. In order to be able to really change something, journalists would have to work even harder to “combine facts with out-of-the-box ideas.” The economic interests of the publisher prevent truly critical reporting, because the content of the reporting is based primarily on the expected circulation and sales figures of newspapers - and not on the question of what information society really needs.



Martin Bruce, Ed-Tech Developer in Uganda: “Any time Africa is in the news it is about someone hungry and dying on the street or someone living in difficult conditions. But there is a gradual shift where there are more reports on solutions coming from Africa. For instance, having you coming here covering the work we are doing in education as an Ed-Tech company. That gradually changes the perception, so that people no longer look at Africa with eyes of pity, but rather see it with eyes of opportunities.”

Another question interested us: What do community members think Europe needs to do to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

"I believe Europe and Africa can work together and complement each other to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals," said Noxolo Mbokoma, former executive director of Zenzeleni Community Network, the first South African cooperative-owned internet service provider. "Africa has the market, and Europe has access to finance. Why not blend the two and come up with something remarkable?"

Could your solution also work in Europe?

Rabeb Fersi, co-founder of Crop's Talk, Tunisia: "Crop's Talk can be used in any country, anywhere. Our algorithms adapt to any culture in any country. So, whatever the crop and conditions, as long as the application helps those growers."



However, the German agricultural scientist Tobias Liemersdorf also sees a need for action in Europe: It is "important that Europe - the individual countries, politicians and the people in Europe - understand that the world is not divided into developed countries and non-developed countries, and that the SDGs are also of great relevance for us in Europe." Because in Germany, for example, it is "a huge challenge to make our behavior really sustainable." Liemersdorf has been working for [a climate protection project in Togo](#) for years. He also questions the way Germany and other countries send money to countries in the Global South so that they can achieve the SDGs. This is not an issue of help or charity, he says. "Because of their past [colonial history], Germany and Europe have a clear obligation to support poorer countries in achieving the SDGs. Europe also benefits from this." Much of the money paid as part of development cooperation flows back to Europe in the form of salaries or through the purchase of vehicles and other materials. But Liemersdorf says few people realize this: "I keep finding that people in Germany still see themselves as 'helpers.' I think we still need to do a lot of work to change that."

What advice would you like to give to our German readers?

"Keep an eye out for mistakes and possible errors, and don't see everything through the eyes of a 'helper,' but with a more open mind," says Gerhard Karpiniec.



Lucy Mugenkenyi, organic farmer from Kenya: "Africa is not a single place in which the same solutions can be effective everywhere. Many media reports do not take into account the vast differences across the continent. I wish that would change."



Nour Trabelsi, Engineering student from Tunisia: "We can all learn that there are people in the African countries that really care about the future and are also updated on many projects -- and that they care about technological development despite all the other issues."

We also asked for some answers from the developers whose solutions we've featured throughout the series:

What could European developers learn from you?



Martin Bruce, Young at Heart, Ghana: "What European developers can learn from us is resilience. Because Africans are resilient persons. Despite all the challenges that we have, we are still able to innovate through obstacles and innovate from it. So they could learn resilience and also they could learn practicality. Because when we are developing, we are aware of the challenges that are prevalent in our environment and include those challenges in our solutions."



Tiago Borges Coelho, co-founder of job placement platform Biscate, Mozambique: "I think European developers could learn about how can you be more empathic with your users, how you should stop looking at your users as an asset that you have to sell something for or to earn something for. But look at how your users can actually make your platform something that's life changing, something that's impactful, something that's meaningful."



Rispa Miliza, Hello Tractor, Kenya: "One thing is that we listen to our customers and take time to understand the challenges that our customers face. Our customers in this case being tractor owners and farmers. So understanding the challenges that both of these groups face and tailoring the solution to fit each and every customer in the Hello Tractor ecosystem, and as well as bringing in a team that has lived the experiences and understands the needs of the customers as well."



Martin Schwarz, pastor, Germany: "We should stop trying to implement solutions that were developed in Europe everywhere else. There is so much we can and must learn from others: about cultural context, different approaches to solving problems, and so on. We have to learn to keep learning."



Nour Trabelsi, student, Tunisia: "Change cannot be one time and one shot. I think we should step back to see what are real priorities, to keep on building step by step."



Shaun Pather, ICT4D Professor at the University of Western Cape, South Africa: "Our solutions do not focus on the service mentality, but on development-oriented thinking. I hope Europe learns from this approach."

And for our part, we've learned a lot through the series. We learned a lot about some other African initiatives related to digital solutions. This helps us to become even better at achieving our goal."

The project was funded by the European Journalism Center, through the Solutions Journalism Accelerator program. This fund is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

More articles

					
Let's talk to each other: What can Africa teach ...	"Hello Tractor"—an Uber for tractors in Africa	Affordable internet for everyone: A village in ...	Can underground irrigation help farmers save water ...	One puree at a time: How a small enterprise uses social ...	The right to food must not be left at the mercy of free markets
					
Consultation on the couch: In Uganda, young doctors are ...	IT teaching in Ghana: Learning is more fun thanks to ...	Mozambique: How informal workers find jobs through an app	"Farm Like a Man" How an App Brings Investors to	A personal agricultural adviser that fits in your pocket	