

African youths and ICT: opportunities abound

In a tiny sweltering tin-roofed shack inside one of Mogadishu's bullet-riddled neighbourhoods, two brothers, Ali Hassan and Mustafa Yare, sit hunched over one of eight humming desktop computers. Together they show Nasteexo Cadey, a young veiled student at Mogadishu University, how to set up her Facebook account, browse YouTube videos and check her e-mail.

By [Jonathan Kalan](#) 28 Jun 2013

Business has been growing at the brothers' Kobciye Internet Coffee, one of the several makeshift internet cafés that have emerged in Mogadishu since the Islamic militant group Al-Shabaab fled the city.

"I wanted a business," Hassan says, "and this is something that I'm good at. I have skills in computers and IT." The café costs around \$600 a month to run, and the brothers manage to bring in around \$1,000 from their 40 or so daily customers mostly university students.

Although Somalia's internet penetration still stands at just above 1% of the population, demand in Mogadishu is growing rapidly. For millions of unemployed yet tech-savvy youth across Africa, increased connectivity is bringing tremendous opportunities.

Opportunities for youth

"ICT brings tremendous opportunity" to Africa's youth, argues Ahmed Alfi, chief executive officer of Sawari Ventures, a venture capital firm in Egypt that focuses on new technology.

"With software development, there's nowhere else you'll start with a thousand dollars and end with a million," he told Africa Renewal. An internet café may not itself be a million-dollar business but what's created in it could be.

Over the past five years, fibre-optic cables have connected the continent in unprecedented ways, slashing the cost of internet access and opening up new markets for content, software, mobile phone apps and social media. From Dar es Salaam to Dakar, Cape Town to Cairo, Africa's youth are finding ways to use ICT to drive growth, build businesses and shape their futures.

Currently, six out of the 10 fastest-growing economies are in sub-Saharan Africa. Africa is the second-biggest mobile market in the world - smartphones outsell computers four to one. Over the 18 months to February 2012, Facebook had a user growth rate of 165% in Africa, according to the blog ICTworks.

"By 2016, it is estimated that there will be one billion mobile phones in Africa," said Mark Casey, director of technology, media and telecoms at the financial consultancy firm Deloitte, in a recent report. "Mobile internet usage in Africa is among the highest in the world."

Five years ago, BusyInternet, West Africa's largest internet provider, opened an internet café in Ghana's capital, Accra. It had a lounge featuring 100 computers, and Ghanaians would pay about 50 cents an hour to use its high-speed connection. With internet penetration in Ghana at about 10% in 2011, according to government statistics, BusyInternet was one of the few places young folks could go to get online.

Inspiring youth to get online

Mac-Jordan Degadjor, 26, is one of Ghana's preeminent technology and social media bloggers and Ghana's first Internet Freedom Fellow. The fellowship is awarded by the US State Department to individuals who champion freedom of expression and assembly online. He says that "BusyInternet opened a lot of doors for young people living in Ghana," he told Africa Renewal.

According to the US Embassy in Accra, which gave Degadjor the fellowship, these initiatives served to "inspire youth to go online wherever and however they can, making sure they have Ghanaian peers available to walk them through tech challenges."

Yet business is not the only thing emerging from Ghana's young tech scene. [@GhanaDecides](#), a movement monitoring Ghana's elections via social media, received international acclaim during the run-up to Ghana's 2012 general election for fostering a better-informed electorate. It advocated free, fair and safe elections and ran online election-related campaigns

The move towards tech hubs

BusyInternet's "hub" effect reflects a pan-African movement towards technology hubs that encourage the formation of communities and empower young developers and entrepreneurs. Erik Hersman, co-founder of a software company Ushahidi and of Nairobi's iHub, one of the best-known hubs in Africa, claims that the continent is undergoing a "tech-hub boom."

There are now more than 90 hubs, labs, incubators and accelerators in Africa, covering more than 20 countries. According to recent research, African hubs are springing up at the rate of nearly one every two weeks.

iHub emerged from the success of Ushahidi's software platform used to capture and monitor citizen reporting during Kenya post-election violence in 2008. Started in 2010, iHub now has over eight thousand members spread across the world, with dozens of people using the space regularly.

Nearly 75% of people using iHub are working in or developing startups, according to a recent report by iHub's research branch. Many of these startups have a social mission, like eLimu, which is distributing e-learning tablets to improve education in Kenya's primary schools.

A thousand kilometres away in Kigali, Rwanda, a new government-sponsored ICT hub called kLab also targets young software developers and recent college graduates. Rwanda, a small, poor, landlocked country has put ICT development at the centre of its Vision 2020 - President Paul Kagame's plan to turn Rwanda into a middle-income country by 2020.

Jean Niyotwagira, a young Rwandan and one of kLab's first "tenants," has already founded a mobile applications development company, a social networking platform company and a digital supply-chain management platform company, among others. Niyotwagira maintains that kLab "helps entrepreneurs who don't have enough funds to start their own office

An ability to "try and fail" is a key advantage. In the past, failure usually meant economic disaster for young entrepreneurs but now these hubs provide crucial support for entrepreneurs to take more risks.

Yet many entrepreneurs still struggle to get their companies past the initial seed-funding stage, since few local investors seem willing to take risks on technology ventures with potential for high profits.

"We need more tech-savvy investors," Mbwana Alliy, a former Silicon Valley entrepreneur who now manages the Savanna Fund, a Nairobi-based investment fund specialising in high-growth technology, told Africa Renewal.

But Alliy also complains that many young entrepreneurs are "unfocused" and "lack discipline." They may be great developers, but they do not have the skills to build and manage a company.

This, many claim, is invariably a result of the education system. However, "ICT is one of the few areas where you can supplement your academic education online," says Alfi. "You can bring yourself up to world class through online training. You can't do that with medicine." Although people can learn software-coding skills online quite easily, learning the ins and outs of business management and finance is not so easy in Africa.

Despite the challenges, youth across the continent are getting connected and creating opportunities for themselves. Whether it's safely inside Africa's hubs or along the bullet-pocked streets of Mogadishu, they are finding ways to use technology to innovate, create employment and improve the societies in which they live.

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