



Importing Innovation? Culture and Politics of Education in Creative Industries, Case Kenya

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the need to critically reframe the concept of innovation, especially regarding North-South development cooperation. The emerging discourse on the “Silicon Savannah” illustrates the situation: Eastern Africa is becoming more and more interesting to the Global North because of local technological innovations and emerging examples of locally inspired content that has begun to reach both local, regional, and global customers. This has evoked discussion on how ICTs, innovation, and entrepreneurship will form the core of bottom-up solutions for development. At the same time, training and mentoring programs tend to be designed to match the ideals of Western start-up culture, without broader regard to local practices. Given some of these conditions,

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it is fair to ask, “whose innovation?” This case study seeks to answer the question based on a case study on a creative industries’ start-up incubation project in Kenya. The multi-method Living Lab study within the project (2014–2017) points to how different actors of innovation ecosystems can add value to the ecosystem and offer also value to participants through managing relationships with peers, clients, funders, and partners and thus creating new learning and development possibilities. At the same time, they tend to import Western start-up discursive culture and politics of innovation. This may be in contrast to other creative opportunities that are embedded in country- and region-specific cultural content and practices that might be overlooked. Using the case study as an example, the chapter highlights key tensions of definitions, policies, and practices of innovation and development.

Keywords

Innovation · Development policy · Digital creative industries · Discourses · Kenya · Living Labs

Introduction: Development, Creative Digital Industries, and Innovation Education

Communication for development has always had different dimensions, functions, and impact. They range from the perspectives of social relationships, of access to information and competencies, and of citizen participation to those of structures and institutions paramount for democracy and of international cooperation (e.g., Servaes 2008; Scott 2014).

In the second decade of the millenium, yet another approach seems to have entered policy-making and public discourses: that of communication as entrepreneurship. Innovation and creativity have become broadly used terms in many national development strategies. The creative industries concept in policy documents suggests added value, exports, and new jobs, implying a foundation of competitiveness. Innovation and creativity terms are used in development strategies worldwide and are included in policy documents of the UNDP, OECD, WTO, World Bank, and other large international organizations (Moore 2014).

In addition, ICT for Development (ICT4D) has evolved to broader discourses about social entrepreneurship, or the so-called Fourth Sector (e.g., Sabeti 2017), broadly referring to a variety of ventures that in some manner do good socially but also make money to sustain their operations. In tandem, due to growing digitalization, creative industries and related communication products and services have been hailed as some of the new areas that support sustainable development in the Global South (e.g., UNESCO 2012). Numerous actors involved in development, from UN programs to governments to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and corporate donors, have embraced ICTs and digital creative industries, as significant contributors to social and economic development. A part of that strategy has been the rise of

educational and entrepreneurial projects that are designed to enhance capacity for innovative products and businesses in the field.

Yet, the trend of innovation education as a part of development has at the same time evoked debates about how ICTs, innovation, and entrepreneurship can form the core of bottom-up solutions for development. Creating knowledge and skills in the Global South for participation in the global marketplace of digital creative industries seems to meet the needs of the ever-globalizing sphere of communication. At the same time, communication, training, and mentoring programs tend to be designed to match the ideals of Western start-up culture, without broader regard and engagement with local practices.

Based on a case study on a creative industries' start-up incubation project in Kenya, this chapter illustrates why asking "whose innovation?" should be key strategy when addressing communication for development projects. Using the case study as an example, the chapter highlights some of the key tensions of definitions, policies, and practices of innovation and development that these types of projects confront.

Illustration: Case Kenya

Eastern Africa is becoming more and more interesting to the Global North because of local technological innovations and emerging examples of locally inspired content that has begun to reach both local, regional, and global customers. This is also the case in Kenya. Several international rankings place the country among the ones on the rise (e.g., Digital Index 2015). Many technological innovations, such as the mobile banking system M-Pesa, and social innovations such as the crowdmapping system Ushahidi have been discussed and praised in the global media and, in many cases, have been exported to other regions. Innovators from the Global North, as well as numerous Western governments, have established and supported a variety of creative and entrepreneurial hubs and makerspaces (De Beer et al. 2017). These developments have given rise to the moniker of "Silicon Savannah" (e.g., Bright 2015) that refers to Eastern and Southern Africa.

With income levels rising, Eastern African countries and Kenya in particular are said to be on a path to become a middle-income country over the next 20 years or so. In the 2010s, Kenya's mobile phone penetration is already providing an infrastructural base for many new ventures. It is no wonder that foreign direct investment is increasing and with it innovation ecosystems that cater for local, regional, and even global markets. All these trends have thought to pave the way for growing more technologically oriented innovations as well as related cultural products and services. The pride in, and demand for, local cultural products in the region is in the rise, and this means new opportunities for digital creative industries in Kenya and elsewhere (Fleming 2015; Van der Pol 2014).

At the same time, research indicates that institutional support for cultural production and digital innovations has not developed with the same speed as the developments in the country require. A major challenge for digital creative industries

is that the bulk of the applicants for work are those without qualifications or experience: Many individuals learn the skills needed on their own, because of their passion for their field (ACRI 2012). There is also a need to increase the participation of women in these sectors to fully utilize the country's human resources (UNCTAD 2012). Finally, acclaimed innovations do not automatically translate into sustainable businesses: The skills of, and educational models for, entrepreneurship in cultural production need to be further developed (Okolloh 2012).

The case in point, the GESCI-African Knowledge Exchange (GESCI-AKE) program, aims to educate young people at the beginning of their creative industries' careers with new skills in digital animation, sound production, as well as game design. The program was initiated by the Global e-Schools and Communities Initiative, aka GESCI, an international NGO in Nairobi, Kenya. As the case is with many of the Kenyan and Eastern African innovation education projects and incubator hubs (De Beer et al. 2017; Marchant 2015), the work was funded partly by foreign donors, in this case the Foreign Ministries of Finland and Ireland.

The program followed a Living Lab participatory action approach that documents the processes from curriculum development to innovation team-building and showcasing. The Living Lab research was to inspire participatory practices that would feed into the concrete teaching modules of media skills, as well as incubate ideas for future start-up businesses for the participants and reflect on the results and future of the program.

GESCI's initial focus was in ICT4D. It was founded on the recommendation of the United Nations Task Force on Information Communication Technology, at the first World Summit on the Information Society (2003), with a mandate to assist governments in the socioeconomic development of their countries through the integration of technology for inclusive and sustainable knowledge society development. Today, GESCI supports ICT and education policy-making, as well as training of teachers, but also creates educational innovation programs for the disenfranchised youth. GESCI's African Knowledge Exchange (AKE) training program belongs to that sector of GESCI's work, with the purpose of combining culture and digital media technology. The program addresses the changing employment environment driven by new technologies in the context of growing youth unemployment.

The first GESCI-AKE projects, *The Sound of the City* (2014–2015) and *GESCI-AKE Creative Media Venture* (2016–2017), were pilots to develop this approach to development, digital creative industries, and youth. They offered training for Nairobi-based young creatives, by combining digital and creative skills, and project work, with start-up business model building and learning entrepreneurial tools. GESCI-AKE's training and enterprise model is in line with the trend that believes in local entrepreneurship as one of the most empowering, and cost-effective, solutions to local systemic problems of youth employment (Schoof 2006).

In practice, these projects trained entry-level digital media creators in three different fields: animation, game and app design, and sound design. Training was done in three phases: First came technology skills training, then apprenticeship, and lastly the so-called start-up incubation. These phases included several benchmark projects: showcases, community events, roundtables, feedback and pitching sessions, as well as policy forums. The events were designed to discuss the results,

progress, and insights from the projects made by participants with different stakeholders, the most important being policy-makers, educators, and industry representatives.

For most of its duration, the GESCI-AKE program employed the so-called Living Lab method, a participatory action research model in which innovation happens hand in hand with research (Feurstein et al. 2008). Living Labs have become a key tool in creative industries as well as in policy-making because they have radically mixed the roles of those who innovate. They involve user or client communities, not only as observed subjects but as cocreators (Higgins and Klein 2011). The goal was to examine how to facilitate engagement between mentors, students, digital creative industries specialists, researchers, and entrepreneurs. The secondary aim was to create new knowledge that can also be translated into policy recommendations, networking and partnership opportunities for support, and sustainability plans of the training and trainees beyond the project parameters. The Living Lab process included several methods and tools, ranging from background market and policy analyses to questionnaires, interviews, collaborative blogging, visual diaries, and participatory observation in different events. Other participants included the young creatives, their tutors and mentors, the GESCI management, as well as industry contacts and policy-makers from Kenya and the region.

Three Dimensions of Innovation in Education

Different iterations of innovation and development create challenges for digital creative industries and related education. These iterations of innovation and development can be seen in three different levels: the macro-level policy context, the meso (discursive) framing of the particular educational initiative, and the microlevel, practical reiterations of teaching innovation and pedagogy.

MACRO: Development and Innovation in the Policy Context

Organizations like GESCI operate not only in youth education in creative media but also in training, interacting, and advising teachers and policy-makers. In this case GESCI is an organization well informed by the macro-level policy goals, and it constantly interacts with Kenyan, and other African, innovation, ICT, and education policy-making as well as the related industries. Therefore, understanding the tensions requires a review of the Kenyan policy context for innovation and development.

Kenya has been hailed as one of the next hubs of technology and creative industry innovation. Specifically, cultural distinctiveness, very strong traditions, and flair across creative sectors including music, crafts, fashion, visual arts, and film define the centrality for creative industries for the economy in the region. At the same time, there are significant challenges, including aversion to risk-taking and general entrepreneurialism. Policy-making around copyright is inconsistent, as is policy support

in the field of education for creative digital industries. Digital literacy still needs to be supported, as must creative and entrepreneurial educational opportunities that are few and far between (Fleming 2015).

Kenya is addressing these challenges in several fronts. Its first innovation policy, the so-called Vision 2030 initiative (2008), is the national long-term development policy that aims to transform Kenya into a newly industrializing, middle-income country by 2030. The Vision comprises three key pillars, economic, social, and political. Science, technology, and innovation (STI) are thought essential to the vision (Ndemo 2015). This Vision 2030 has been practically parallel to Kenya's new cultural policy (Kenya 2009). In general terms, Kenyan policy-making has been geared toward protecting cultural products (e.g., copyrights). The challenges lie in the livelihood of cultural creators. For instance, the draft policy recommendations for the music industry illustrates numerous mechanisms, ranging from education to incentives and funding, that can be used to not only support but actively encourage creative industries (Kenyan Ministry of Sports, Arts and Culture 2015).

These developments follow recognizable patterns identified for developing innovation ecosystems in global economies. However, Kenya's wider socioeconomic context does not match the innovation model of the Global North or even those of the Asian digital economies. In Kenya, as in many other African contexts, it is international funders and other partners who are playing bigger roles in incubating innovation, much more than venture capital does. Multinational corporations have set up research and innovation labs in Kenya to expand their own reach while getting closer to the source of unique problems and markets (Marchant 2015; Ndemo 2015). The innovation ecosystem is thus created in collaboration with for-profit and not-for-profit local and international partners.

The policy context recognizes the gaps in meeting global standards in creative media education in terms of skills, as well as in terms of entrepreneurial training. At the same time, much of this education is currently tied to international actors: foreign universities, companies, and donors, with specific agendas. This is well exemplified in the case of the emergence of innovation hubs and training labs for digital skills. Already in 2015, the country hosted 23 different ICT hubs based on innovation and learning models well established in the Global North (Fleming 2015). The emergence of these hubs is the result of research efforts in Kenyan universities, yet many have developed co-funding and other sustainability mechanisms. In those cases, international funders, either countries or businesses, are key to the sustainability of these actors (Marchant 2015).

MESO: Discursive Framing of Innovation

The ambiguity in the macro-level between local needs, national policies, and global drivers of innovation is replicated also within the meso-level in GESCI-AKE. This does not, by any means, indicate that the programs would not serve an important purpose and offer both skills training and innovation opportunities. Their experiences are illustrative of a shift that reflects the broader transformation in terms of

development and communication. While GESCI started as an ICT4D-focused organization, GESCI-AKE works toward individual livelihoods and independent small business ventures.

This shift may come from the above-described global development and innovation discourses, as well as practices established in the Kenyan context at large. But GESCI-AKE's own experiences may also play a role. Indeed, the outcomes produced by participants of the 2016–2017 training are small ventures combining art and jewelry design or collaborating as freelancers in music production. The program even notes that the employment rate after the training is 100% and that some of that is self-employment. Hence, the core concept here is not local cultural products, but rather youth entrepreneurship.

It seems that the GESCI-AKE program itself has become the innovation product, rather than the framework in which its trainees learn skills and produce digital media innovations. It has transformed from organizing ICT and creative training for local youth to another innovation hub, a makerspace that facilitates meetings with investors and policy-makers. Sustainability of the existence of the programs (a key challenge for many innovation hubs in the region, CSBKE 2014) is incubated by their Living Lab approach and GESCI-AKE's multi-stakeholder policy forums.

MICRO: Practices of Innovation Education

The third tension arises at the microlevel of practices. In the GESCI-AKE, it involves between the above-described educational innovation and its concrete training curriculum. While it was clear that a significant amount of time was skill development and concrete team-building, the curriculum also entailed numerous segments that draw on typical product innovation and Western start-up practices.

GESCI-AKE has experimented with several strategies to turn the hub into an accelerator of promising start-ups. The curriculum framed entrepreneurial competences to mark a holistic training process, ranging from “opportunity-seeking behavior” to “taking calculated risks” and “self-confidence.” Pitching sessions were prepared geared to help the teams gather investments. Some support was organized to help them think about business models. Discussions and training for mapping needs regarding protecting intellectual property rights were organized. Showcases of product prototypes and innovations were done in fancy hotels. The incorporation of some of these practices implied that the results of teamwork and their expected goals shifted. From the early idea of GESCI-AKE as a supportive environment for the emergence of small-sized creative ventures, a new purpose took shape, conceptualizing GESCI-AKE as an incubator or start-up accelerator. This manifested itself both in the abovementioned inserts into the training program and in the discourses about the program, including mentions of GESCI-AKE as a lab or a hub.

The initial purpose of the GESCI-AKE program placed emphasis on the underlying cultural ambition and on ventures as more open-ended aim for the entrepreneurial activities that could emerge from the work of different teams. The first pilot did not include an “incubation” phase but rather a collaborative project phase. When

the approach shifted to one, in which start-ups should be formed, should begin to make money, and should grow – and therefore would initially need funding and investment – some discrepancies emerged. The ideas and prototypes were not Silicon Valley-type technological innovations, but small-scale cultural products, ranging from modest synopsis of games to singer-songwriter endeavors and jewelry. The continued reinforcement of start-up discourse ended up generating conflicting expectations for participants and for some members of the collaboration network of the program.

In the course of its transformation from an ICT training program to a hub, GESCI-AKE transformed its young creatives to innovators – but with what impact? While it is too soon to tell how the start-ups formed within GESCI-AKE are making their mark in the Kenyan digital creative industries, GESCI's partners in industry, government, and civil society have been adamant in stressing the need for local content and opportunities for both for- and not-for-profit content creation. Recent research seems to back up the potential and urgent need as well (Bekenova 2016). Did the imported innovation discourse take over the local needs here as well?

Redefining Innovation

Does communication as entrepreneurship belong to the realm of communication for development and social change? Whose innovation is at stake here? Whose development is fostered via digital creative industries and their cultural products, as described in this case? The tension between global innovation discourse and local cultural appreciation is, in fact, expressed as an opportunity by many, ranging from market reports to policy decisions. On one hand, sub-Saharan Africa at large is seen as a vast market, and “Silicon Savannahs” are emerging, clearly indicating potential for international players. On the other hand, the reports on creative industries celebrate “Africa Rising” in terms of rekindled interest and modernization of local cultures, in ways that attract regional and international markets of creative industries. The role of culture has also been stressed globally as one of the key drivers of development, as expressed, for instance, by the United Nations Development Group: Cultural productions should “make an important contribution to poverty reduction, as a resilient economic sector that provides livelihood opportunities.” In addition, “education strategies should aim to develop cultural literacy and equip young people with the skills to live in a multicultural and diverse society, in both economic and social terms” (UNDG 2014).

Yet, absent from this discussion is the discourse of innovation as a local, communal, grassroots phenomenon. Not everyone will build a tech empire or become a global music producer. There are many skills courses and foreign-sponsored innovation hubs. But how to educate and inspire creative media producers who can service local communities and make the difference that the UN is calling for: life skills, cultural appropriation, tolerance, and diversity?

The rise of social entrepreneurship as a business model is at least a discourse, if not yet universal model, that tries to address development, social change, and

livelihood by small, local, concrete steps. There is clearly a political trend to favor and support activities, big or small, that position themselves as innovators of social value. This does require specific support system, most importantly including ongoing support networks and leadership training for young social entrepreneurs (see, e.g., Brixiová et al. 2014; Ndemo and Aiko 2016). Local and international investors are ever more keen on supporting local social innovation (UNIDO 2017). But even then, who sets the parameters and frames for what innovation needs to be?

The GESCI-AKE experience highlights ways in which some new actors in innovation education ecosystems can add value by providing young entrepreneurs new brokering relationships with peers, clients, funders, and partners, creating new learning and development possibilities. At the same time, it also exemplifies how it is that it is very easy to import Western start-up discursive culture as the global standard and, with it, market-driven politics of innovation – and similar policies of development. There is a need to continue questioning and redefining innovation and related innovation education and policies. Broadening the idea of innovation, its pedagogy, and its meaning for development and social justice would not only benefit Kenya but the global North and South alike.

Cross-References

- ▶ [A Threefold Approach for Social Change: Uneven Development, Recognition and Communication as Context for Interaction](#)
- ▶ [Communication for Development and Social Change Through Creativity](#)
- ▶ [DevCom in Kenya, Zimbabwe, South-Africa](#)
- ▶ [Empowerment as Development: An Outline of a Concept](#)
- ▶ [ICTs and Modernization in China](#)
- ▶ [ICTs in Nigeria](#)
- ▶ [Information and Communication Technologies for Development \(ICT4D\) in Africa](#)

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