

Silver bullets or white elephants? The role of incubators and entrepreneurial training in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Entrepreneurship education takes many forms, and the wide range of scope, mission and size of the programs in Sub-Saharan Africa proves this. We present a review of academic articles on incubators, hubs and informal training programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. From personal initiative training for entrepreneurs in Lomé, Togo, to highly specialized bio-tech support in industry specific incubators in Cape Town, South Africa, it was clear that there was no “one-size-fits-all” program for entrepreneurial development. Additionally, many programs targeted otherwise untapped or marginalised potential: for example ultra-poor women with no other source of income in semi-arid Northern Kenya, or young female school drop-outs in a combined HIV awareness and entrepreneurship program in Lesotho.

This proliferation of hubs and incubators in Sub-Saharan Africa is an attempt at a solution to a very real challenge. According to the African Development Bank Group, annually 12 million young people enter the labor force, while only 3 million new jobs are created. Over the last decade or so, foreign development aid and governments have championed entrepreneurship as a silver bullet, pushing entrepreneurship training programs as a tool to grow the economy and provide more jobs. These incubators and informal training programs across the continent are the result: an attempt to help develop, mentor, and teach entrepreneurs and support their ventures.

They aim to equip participants with the skills to create their own jobs, in the face of a dearth of other options in the market. However, it is unclear if the programs are successful: *Are they creating meaningful opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs, or are participants better off learning skills that would improve their chances in the labor market?* Given the precarious livelihood positions of many participants, this is an important question to ask. Few programs underwent rigorous evaluations to address this concern. While subjective feedback was mostly positive, it is difficult to conclude whether there has been a significant value-add across Sub-Saharan Africa. In the face of this lack of evidence, what should incubator and entrepreneurship facilitators, and the government programs and policy makers that fund them, consider next?

We need to start thinking about entrepreneurial endeavours as positioned within a broader ecosystem. The concept of “entrepreneurial ecosystems” has

emerged over the last ten years to explore why some regions experience persistent high-growth entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial ecosystems theory proposes that it takes a complex interconnected system to provide a productive space in which innovative entrepreneurship emerges and flourishes. In order for entrepreneurial support programs, such as incubators and training, to be successful, they need to be rooted in entrepreneurial ecosystems where innovation and competition are encouraged.

We also need to consider the local environment and context when we design and implement entrepreneurial support programs. While some elements of entrepreneurship are fundamental concepts that span across space and time, there are many drivers of success which are deeply contextual. If training programs are not well conceived and managed, they can become white elephants. Understanding the contextual embeddedness of entrepreneurial training programs could lead to better results, especially when other actors and environmental factors of the local entrepreneurial ecosystem are well aligned. Without a supportive wider ecosystem, entrepreneurial ventures might struggle to survive, let alone provide the promised job creation and enterprise development. It is just as important to develop incubators and programs in areas which can support entrepreneurial ventures afterwards, as it is to ensure that the programs themselves are impactful.

While it's important to better evaluate the ongoing training programs for entrepreneurship, there are systemic contextual issues that no amount of excellent training can fix. Seeing these training programs in context within their broader entrepreneurial support ecosystems will facilitate more effective ways to develop human capital and bridge gaps where training alone will not suffice. If we expect entrepreneurs to build a better future for themselves, and by extension the community around them, we need to examine the types of support we give them outside the walls of the classroom. As the popular African proverb goes, "It takes a village to raise a child". We need to re-frame entrepreneurial training to better reflect this.

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