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Entrepreneurship Research Conference

How Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Actors Can Turn Knowledge into Lasting Change?

Debby Osias, Auburn University, USA

The Promise and the Pitfall

"The knowledge is there, but just the way of doing things is completely different, which causes a lot of challenges to us on the field."- Community member, on barriers to making the knowledge relevant to them

According to the World Bank, over 90% of the workforce in Benin are in the informal sector. Entrepreneurs in this setting often lack access to entrepreneurial training, funding or supportive infrastructures and depend on fast-track learning from outside experts. The entrepreneurs soon realize that the content and tools received are not enough when their local conditions are vastly different from that of the experts. Although the external experts are well-intentioned, their knowledge transfer is one-directional and can't possibly make space to fully understand the complexities of the conditions in which they share their knowledge. Entrepreneurs continue to develop emotional attachments to promises and dreams only to find that the dreams are delayed and the promises lose power once the experts leave and the support is gone.

Knowledge Exchange is the Real MVP of Entrepreneurship

With a population nearing 15 million and a large informal economy centered around agriculture, craftsmanship, and trading, entrepreneurship in Benin is less about innovation but rather about survival. Benin has one of the lowest rankings of the Africa Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Index¹ (score of 1.82) in areas like financing, marketing, governance, culture, infrastructure, and human capital. Compare that to East Africa, where countries score up to 4.93, the evidence is clear that there is a gap. In this context, the real MVP and game changer is not just about more information and content. It's about intentional knowledge exchange, the two-way sharing of information that builds confidence, collegiality, and lasting progress.

"It's like we were all at the same level. We were learning. We were communicating as if you are just my friend." – Community member, on the reciprocal nature of knowledge exchange after our training

Knowledge exchange is an interactive process whereby people share ideas, information, and suggestions with each other, which enables individuals to capitalize on distal knowledge and enhances the local actor's capacity to adapt to the new ideas and solutions. Prior research has examined knowledge exchange processes in developed economies with slack resources. However, we know very little about how knowledge exchanges are enacted in resource-constrained environments.

¹ Africa Ecosystem Builders. (n.d.). *Africa ecosystem insights*. <https://africa.ecosystem.build/>

Understanding the Role of Knowledge Exchange

Our research team participated in a 10-day business and governance training program that brought together American business experts and community members in Benin. We visited seven municipalities: Cotonou, Lokossa, Bonou, Djougou, Dassa-Zoume, Savalou, and Ouake (see travel map below). After capturing over 1000 images, hours of videos, informational conversations, local discussions, and live trainings, we realized that it wasn't just about the classroom training. It was about our town hall meetings in each municipality, meals with local leaders, car rides to neighboring villages, walks with the community members, and honest conversations. With the help of translators, learning went both ways, and the collaboration felt human and less transactional. And for a short time, people relied on each other like family. We call this moment "swift reliance", where the organizational actors quickly built confidence in each other, despite of differences. We were able to see how swift reliance is deployed to support and facilitate rapid entrepreneurial learning and knowledge exchanges while navigating complex sociocultural conditions. But swift reliance is just that, it is swift. It is temporary and fragile often fading away once the organizational actors disbands.



What Can Be Done?

For Entrepreneur Learners:

Make the most of the trainings from external experts. Ask questions and request that the knowledge being shared fits your realities. By developing a knowledge map of the group's "know hows," you can understand the areas of expertise in the classroom setting. Form a group on WhatsApp or on another platform and continue learning from each other long after the experts leave.

For Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Leaders:

Invest in strengthening knowledge management systems to organize, translate and reuse the exchanged knowledge. Invest in increasing digital literacy rates and explore how artificial intelligence tools may offer a solution for organizing knowledge and intelligence. Without strong knowledge management systems, maintaining long-term entrepreneurial learning and activity becomes increasingly difficult.

For External Experts:

Before sharing your entrepreneurial tools and resources, understand the context in which you are in. Take a walk in your learners' shoes, visit their regions, talk to the community members and learn from them before they learn from you. Build in regional succession "cheerleaders" who will champion for you and keep the momentum going long after you leave.

Knowledge exchange is impactful when it understands the people and realities on both sides.

CONTACT: Debby Osias; dzo0022@auburn.edu; Auburn University; 405 W. Magnolia Ave. Lowder Hall Auburn, AL 36849, USA.