

Foreword

In Africa, the rise of digital in the form of widespread mobile telephony **feeds the hope that a technological leapfrog will drive and accelerate the continent's transformation as it strives to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).** As Jean-Michel Huet points out, the cross-cutting impact of digital technology on development has been even more influential during the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. And there is a common denominator behind the acceleration in all these changes: African people. The continent that will be home to half of the world's young people by 2070 will perhaps also be the cradle of *Homo numericus*. A place where three major development challenges converge: social inclusion, entrepreneurship and participatory governance.

Digital inclusion in Africa brings a three-pronged accessibility challenge.

The first challenge is equipment: infrastructure must be rolled out as Africa's population grows, but the internet is becoming more freely available than mobile telephony. While 81% of the population has a mobile phone, only 30% of inhabitants were able to connect to the internet in 2017. But inequality reigns. While half of the inhabitants of the countries in northern and southern African countries were able to get online in 2017, fewer than one in twenty people living in Niger and Burundi had internet access. In addition, the price of a broadband connection in 2018 was still three times higher than it was in France, and average incomes much lower. That is why France is strengthening its support for digital infrastructure projects in Africa, doubling its funding between 2018 and 2019 from 160 million euros for 27 projects financed, to 318 million euros for 35 projects.

Software accessibility is another challenge: if citizens are to have access to online services, then they need a digital identity. In

Nigeria during 2020, less than 40% of the population had official identity papers. Access to public and private social services, especially banking, remains highly unequal. The State of Nigeria is trying to cope with this challenge by borrowing 430 million dollars, 100 million dollars of which has been donated by the Agence française de développement (AFD), to provide 80% of its population, especially women and children, with an individual digital identity.

Third challenge: accessibility for all through education on how to use internet services. The Covid-19 crisis has underlined the risk of worsening inequality between people who know how to use the internet and those – often the least privileged populations living in rural areas or unstable neighbourhoods – who are less able to take advantage of it. On the one hand, services need to be designed that are accessible to all, and on the other hand vulnerable populations need training and guidance to help them learn how to make digital tools work for them. In Senegal, where fewer than one in ten adults has a bank account, Oxfam provides training to 13,000 people, including 9,000 women, on how to use their telephones to manage their finances.

These challenges arise while digital services are flourishing and entrepreneurship is thriving, shaping the digital economy of the world's youngest continent.

Entrepreneurs, who are key to Africa's development, **could play a leading role in its digital transition.** The creativity of young people in Africa could be channelled and used to create local development innovations and counter the need to import technologies, which sometimes come at the price of personal data. This is the driving force behind the Digital Africa initiative announced by President Emmanuel Macron during his speech in Ouagadougou in 2017. As part of this programme, we are providing nearly 60 million euros in funding to encourage innovative digital business creations by Africans. The 7,000 listed start-ups on the continent are also drawing greater interest: in 2019, the most mature among them raised more than two billion euros from investors around the world, up 74% on the previous year.

While creators of digital businesses in Africa are mostly self-employed innovators working in a situation of subsistence entrepreneurship, **an ecosystem is developing that will increase their chances of success.** The number of tech hubs, business incubators and accelerators is growing rapidly (+97% between 2016 and 2018, from 314 to 618 centres). These support platforms can be found all over Africa but are mainly concentrated into a few innovation clusters: in 2019, five cities – Cape Town, Lagos, Johannesburg, Nairobi and Cairo – played host to nearly half of the continent’s start-ups.

This entrepreneurial movement could have a ripple effect and inspire the public sector while a growing number of users, administrators and consumers are looking for ways to go digital. **And conversely, public initiatives can help trigger start-ups.** This is the case in Tunisia, for example. The AFD granted a loan of 27 million euros to the country in 2019 to reduce regional inequalities in access to speciality care. Five virtual medicine initiatives were organised to update the information system in 15 public hospitals (medical imaging, digital medical records, etc.) and to structure the local e-health ecosystem.

Finally, the open source and Fab Lab communities, as well as cooperative entrepreneurship, are paving the way for more participatory and collaborative methods of governance.

These innovations draw focus back to the citizens and are based on their specific concerns and experiences. In Morocco, for example, the Covid-19 crisis has reinforced the kingdom’s intention to expand its digital public services offer. The Agence de développement digital (ADD) has taken inspiration from the experiences of the French public start-up incubator¹ to experiment with a new way of creating public services with a single aim: to improve user satisfaction by constantly adapting to their needs. When a citizen has a problem, an innovative civil servant and a team of experts (developer, designer) work together to design an *ad hoc* digital service that will help to solve it.

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1 beta.gouv.fr

In doing so, the team provides the public with concrete proof of how useful the new service really is.

Digital teams can even provide new services where public authorities do not have enough resources to create them. For example in Accra, Ghana, 80% of the country's public transport is provided by independent minibuses which circulate on unofficial routes. In 2017, minibus users were trained on how to use collaborative mapping: they learnt and recorded several hundred trips using their phone's GPS, identified the main lines and shared them on OpenStreetMap. Residents of Accra now have a map of the city's transport network and can keep it up to date. The initiative has also been rolled out in other cities.

To conclude, Africa is fast becoming the new epicentre for digital challenges and innovations and is supported by the Agence française de développement, which channels half of its funding into the continent. Indeed, public development banks and long-term investors closer to the ground can help “increase access to information and communication technologies” in accordance with SDG 9.C. On the strength of this conviction, the 450 public development banks, meeting for the first time in Paris for the Finance In Common Summit,² have also made a common commitment to turn digital transformation into a lever for sustainable development that will accelerate the implementation of the 2030 agenda.

I would like to thank Jean-Michel Huet, whose passion for development and Africa I share, for this book. The work contributes to a debate that is essential for the future of the continent.

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CEO of the Agence française de développement (AFD)

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2 The summit was held on 11 and 12 November 2020, as part of the Paris Peace Forum.