

How ICT and skills will sustain each other in developing Africa

 By [Ayanda Dlamini](#)

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ICTs can develop skills, which in turn can develop the ICT sector, in a 'benefit cycle' that can propel Africa into the mainstream knowledge economy, but more effort is needed to get this wheel rolling.

A vicious cycle is one which 'reciprocal cause and effect leads to a worsening of a situation'. One might say, then, that the opposite of a vicious cycle might be termed a 'benefit cycle', in which reciprocal cause and effect leads to the improvement of a situation.

To our mind, ICTs and skills development are tightly connected in such a cycle: ICTs can significantly improve skills development; and improved skills can benefit the ICT sector, which again sustains skills growth. In an effectively-rolling ICT-skills benefit cycle, communities and economies benefit and progress is fast-tracked. However, Africa has been slow to get this particular cycle moving.

A crucial step in maximising the potential of ICTs to develop skills is to actually put the ICTs into the hands of the unskilled. While progress has been made and costs of connectivity and devices have dropped, vast regions remain unconnected. According to ITU, almost 20 per cent of Africa's population had access to the internet by end 2014, up from 10% in 2010, but far from full penetration. Another challenge is to ensure that communities are given the skills they need to use the ICTs effectively.

ICT has the ability to bring excluded communities (e.g. rural areas) into the mainstream economy, as has been illustrated by the advent of mobile money and USSD-driven cellphone banking. ICTs also have the potential to significantly improve education, as we have seen in projects such as pilots in schools in Gauteng, which gave students access to textbooks, past papers and library material on tablets, making life easier for both teachers and learners. Connectivity is a proven development enabler in all industry verticals; enhancing instant collaboration across borders (which improves the virtual workforce), as well as enhancing data transfer and information sharing and facilitating the development of newer business models.

When communities have connectivity, the appropriate ICT tools and the skills to get maximum benefit from them, growth and innovation follows. Typically, ICT innovations emerging from Africa have focused on improving skills, efficiency and productivity. So ICTs boost skills, which boost ICT innovation and development, which in turn improve societies.

To speed up this 'benefit cycle', it is important to do more than just make connectivity and ICTs available. African stakeholders need to start thinking big, and collaborating on initiatives to enable cross-border trade, collaboration and

connectivity. We must overcome the infrastructure challenges that might hamper development in many regions, implement policies conducive to growth and launch continuous capacity building programmes that are continuously aligned to the ever-changing business landscape. New policies must be aligned to technological advancement; addressing issues such as intellectual property rights, privacy, security, confidentiality, anti-piracy, censorship and info-ethics. Perhaps the time has come for enhanced collaboration across borders on the subject on a more implementation focussed approach. When a concerted effort is made to get the ICT-skills benefit cycle rolling, it will gain momentum - and all Africa stands to benefit as a result.

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