# An Open Letter to Mark Zuckerberg: Africa deserves more from your IT initiatives

LSE's Kristen Hagemeister urges the Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg to rethink his current initiatives on the African continent to ensure they result in real transformational change.

Dear *Mr Zuckerberg*,

Your motivation to invest in Africa's ICT industry is commendable and in your recent visits to Nigeria and Kenya, you stated your intention to listen, learn, and understand the challenges facing African entrepreneurs. Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to offer some recommendations on how you can more inclusively and effectively invest in African markets to marshal their technological and human resources and encourage structural economic transformation in the long term.
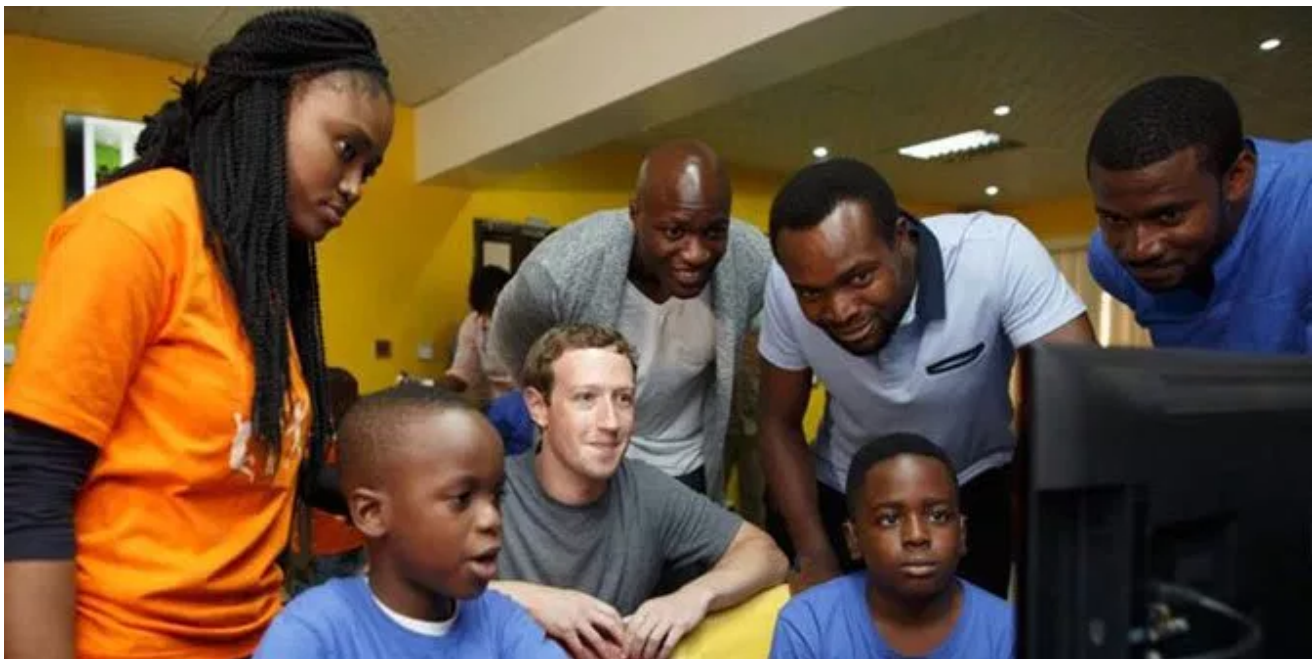
Mark Zuckerberg visits the CoCreation Hub in Yaba, Lagos in 2016
Photo Credit: TechCabal (http://bit.ly/2i6MHQg)

Your Free Basics and Express Wi-fi initiatives are important in developing entrepreneurs and salespeople at the community level. However, this approach may ignore real transformational change by only helping people to function within their current system rather than working to transform it. The Free Basics platform partners with local carriers to provide free internet on phones, yet it only allows users to access webpages pre-determined and approved by Facebook. By limiting the content of individual users and designing and creating the app at the international level, you are cutting out potential input from African researchers and technicians which could better inform the usefulness of the app. The pre-determined content also restricts internet freedom and imposes pre-selected content which limits the autonomy and options of users. It characterises people as solely consumers or beneficiaries, leaving them out of influential processes of creation, choice, and production.

You have tried to address this power disparity through the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative funding to Andela, the African start-up that rigorously selects and trains young talent from countries around

the continent in software development and ICT careers. Andela then places graduates in the African offices of top international firms like Microsoft and Google. Yet it is important to ensure that these initiatives do not facilitate further capital flight and brain drain out of African domestic economies by funnelling their creative energies into multinational firms. Are they really synthesising African tech markets into the global value chain (GVC)? These initiatives should ensure that the terms of talent development and integration can both encourage and develop domestic and regional value chains, as well as ensure that the conditions of integration into GVCs are practical and inclusive.

Regarding your Internet.org initiative, it is important to acknowledge that giving people access to the internet substantially increases equality of information availability, especially in marginalised communities. Yet internet connectivity alone is not enough, and it would be more transformative to address connectivity along with initiatives that contribute to physical and human infrastructural development, such as access to roads, education and literacy, and stable electricity. Without electricity, people cannot charge their phones to access the Free Basics platform. Without English knowledge and technological literacy, people cannot reach or compete in external markets. Without roads, it is difficult to transport goods and install fibre optic cables, which provide more reliable connectivity than satellites. So please consider the limited nature of connectivity as a sole initiative of ICT for development, as the benefits of ICTs also depend on other complementary infrastructure such as language ability, roads, and electricity.

This brings me to my last point: that power is a larger issue when developing and funding ICT programmes for development, specifically in Big Data management. Facebook has over 84 million users in sub-Saharan Africa and expects that number to grow as you tap into this "new advertising market." If you do not include African companies and governments in the ownership, management, and processing of this data, you are exploiting their consumer markets. An increasingly globalised world ensures that emerging markets will be explored by multi-national companies, but domestic and regional actors are responsible for internally growing and tapping their markets as well. Exploiting the personal information of consumers for economic gain without ensuring that it is re-invested into domestic economies cannot be considered a developmental idea, just as connectivity alone does not equate to economic transformation. Therefore please take into account the importance of including African businesses and actors in advertising revenue and data management so as to facilitate local, not international, ownership.

I hope that some of my suggestions are useful in facilitating a more inclusive model for Facebook's international development initiatives. Thank you for your time and your interest in contributing to Africa's ICT developmental transformation.

Sincerely,

A LSE Masters Student in International Development

This blog post is part of a series composed by Masters students on the African Developmentcourse at the London School of Economics and Political Science. They represent the views of an emerging body of critical young scholars interested in structural transformation and growth in African economies. The series will be featured over the ROAPE.net, Africa@LSE and ID@LSE blogs in the coming months.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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