EPIC- Africa's Learning Journey: Leveraging Appropriate Technology to Strengthen the African Civil Society Ecosystem

EPIC-Africa's journey from big idea to the proof-of-concept phase has been a process of ongoing learning. Our quest to design a data-driven initiative to address the pressing but underserved needs of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Africa – and their funders – for targeted, effective organizational capacity building has led us to many discoveries. The main one being the realization that we're part of a pioneering movement to develop and utilize culturally appropriate and relevant technologies within the African development space.

To keep our constituency and context central to our program design, we:
- Convened a panel of experts to review our proposed indicators and methodology while consulting CSO umbrella bodies to generate dialogue that brought clarity around the purpose of EPIC-Africa awards and appropriate criteria to measure organizational excellence.
- Commissioned a scoping study to map existing CSO awards and indices around the continent.
- Used the knowledge we were gathering to create an "incentive" mechanism to encourage CSOs to opt into an interactive ecosystem unlike anything the sector has engaged with before and to begin to harness and leverage their collective strength.

From the outset, we remained open and adaptable to the knowledge we were building, and this approach allowed us to keep iterating. Our scoping study, for example, quickly challenged our assumption that "if we build it, they will come." We noticed that the CSO leaders we interviewed consistently described the importance of intentional outreach and hand-holding, a need we had not flagged as being so widespread.

In keeping with our desire to ensure that the awards platform would be appropriate, "a grassroots technology … expressed in an extensive array of inventive, creative solutions to problems that 'outsiders' would be unlikely to consider,"[i] we sought to build a platform that would be adaptable to a range of intended users across the continent. We thus needed to build into the project a "beta testing" phase to solicit user feedback and ensure that the awards platform was highly intuitive and user-friendly. We learned that some of our proposed approaches needed to be reworked and that we'd need a longer timeline than initially planned to give us the space for the iterative feedback we needed to establish a truly "local" and people-centered technological solution.

This unfolding journey has reminded us that we can trust our experience and let it guide us. Being on and of the continent, and having learned experientially from more than 40 years of combined experience working with CSOs and funders, we are credible thought leaders who are sensitive to cultural nuance and aware of the issues that plague the sector, as well as potential solutions that resonate with Africans.

As a result, appropriate technology design has become the lynchpin of our work. Our commitment to remaining open to the ongoing exploration of how technologies can be understood and utilized both as a means *and* as a medium through which the transformation we envisage will happen. Designing a robust database for African CSOs with this appropriate technology reduces the barriers others have faced in attempting to compile data on African CSOs, such as the considerable amounts of human and financial investment needed. EPIC-Africa strikes a middle ground between basic directory-level information found in existing databases and in-depth, time-intensive accreditation/assessment efforts to provide interested stakeholders with a more comprehensive and dynamic picture of CSOs in Africa.

The technology we have launched will enable EPIC-Africa to harness the power of data to drive change by **mapping out the sector**, **fostering collaboration**, **highlighting best practices** and ultimately helping to grow the African philanthropic ecosystem. Technology-backed data helps with decision making and drives performance. The data from the CSO index will give funders and CSOs the tools to strengthen the capacity and promote sustainability of African CSOs. The index, which will be continuously updated, will make it possible to track the evolution of organizational effectiveness for individual groups, sub-sectors, and the entire CSO sector.

The Annual African CSO Excellence Awards, which will be the main gateway for data collection and the foundation of the EPIC-Africa CSO platform that we will gradually build, has been meticulously developed in collaboration with two leading human-centered tech design innovators in Africa-iHub(Nairobi) and YUX (Senegal). These two companies sit at the intersection of technology and business strategy, and have been keen to bring the benefits of human-centered technology to the CSO/philanthropy space. We are exploring further collaboration in various areas such as data analysis and additional platform functionalities (e.g. search, automated reports, etc.).

The platform we propose would become a dynamic philanthropy marketplace where different participants in the ecosystem come to offer and procure services, resources, and information. It will be a place for publicizing funding opportunities, jobs and consultancies, networking events, learning events, topical issues impacting the sector, new research, etc. Such a space will also draw funders, who can discover and partner with African CSOs they may not have otherwise connected with – thus "democratizing" giving by using technology to connect local ideas and opportunities with change-makers from near and far. Effective use of technology and data allows us to open up the African philanthropy sector, provide relevant information for decision-making, and bring much needed visibility to key change-makers working to transform Africa.

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[i] Peterson, M. J., (2008). Appropriate technology. International Dimensions of Ethics Education in Science and Engineering. Available at
https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1026&context=edethicsinscience