

Images and voices from digital Africa

Part I: An interview about the film documentary “Digital Africa” with Elke Sasse



“We can help you! We can set up a traffic robot at any junction. I think that Berlin needs such a robot, too. It could regulate traffic in Berlin, the capital of new technologies.”

Therese Izay Kirongozi,
Women’s Technology, Kinshasa,
Democratic Republic of the Congo

Traffic accidents are the second most common cause of death in Africa. The imposing traffic robot that was put up at a traffic junction in Kinshasa reduced accidents by 40 %. The robot is equipped with cameras and radar systems, works with solar power and is built out of at least 50 % recycled materials.

“Social enterprises operate more long-term than NGOs. I believe the private sector can solve a lot of the problems in Africa. That’s really where my passion is.”

Henry Nyakarundi, ARED, Kigali,
Republic of Rwanda

The “mobile solar kiosk” is a solution to local power shortages and rare power access in rural areas. From a mobile charging station it expanded to a provider of free intranet, low cost WIFI and access point to public authority administration services, which are done exclusively online in Rwanda.



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“DIY is the general mentality here: people don’t give up on things once they break down. 3D printing could solve local problems, by producing spare parts locally.”

Roy Ombatti, AB3D, Nairobi, Republic of Kenya

AB3D builds 3D printers out of self-printed parts and local electronic waste. Because of the usage of older western technology, spare parts are hard to get. Also, with 3D printing medical parts and tools can be obtained with reduced costs.

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For the film documentary “Digital Africa” Elke Sasse, together with her colleague Bettina Haasen, has journeyed through Kenya, Rwanda, Congo and Ghana. Elke Sasse spoke with Mathis Walter for TATuP about African implementations and usages of information and communications technology (ICT).

TATuP: *With what goal in mind did you approach your film project?*

Elke Sasse: Our idea was to let entrepreneurs and other stakeholders of African digitalization speak for themselves. We discovered a continent with glass fibre internet access and a creative start-up scene that comes up with innovative technical ideas, that could usefully be applied across the world. We found that the specific contexts of innovation with their unique local challenges give rise to creative solutions. So, we wanted to make visible African innovation in digitalization, because this perspective is rarely represented in Western media. We wanted to challenge the common western perception of Africa.

What did you find fascinating about African digitalization?

We were intrigued by the plethora of different innovations and by the creative power and strong motivation of local innovators. Their work is very problem oriented. It is about problems, that are unknown in the U.S., or in Europe. For example, one app offers education for children. If you think that this is old hat, than please consider that few people in Africa own smartphones. So, this educative app works on a simple mobile phone. “Made in and for Africa” is the label for many innovations. It means that tablets for school classes are resistant against dust, or water and can even be charged with solar energy. Such inno-

vations out of Africa can give innovative impulses to other countries in the world.

In Europe, we also see the downsides of digitalization. Have you encountered any problems with African digitalization?

One could say that in many places the problem is not one of too much, but of too little digitalization, like the lack of digital educational materials for children. As one Kenian inventor said: “If we wait now, we will lose a whole generation.” But, of course, data security is a problem. And the politics and governance of digitalization, too. Rwanda, for example, is open to innovation, but it is listed 156 out of 180 countries in Reporters without Frontiers’ freedom of press ranking.

What about cultural stereotypes in the perceptions of African digitalization?

Our film received many comments, like “that’s a totally different image of Africa!”... Well, “images of Africa” ... that’s a complicated topic. One would not speak of an “image of Europe” without doing injustice to the continent’s diversity. Many western people carry the preconception that Africa has little to offer to the rest of the world in terms of technical innovations. The innovators we met see that very differently.

Haasen, Bettina; Sasse, Elke (2018): Digital Africa. Berlin Producers, 52 min. www.arte.tv/de/videos/077470-001-A/digital-africa-1-6, available online until 31. 07. 2019.