Africa's Internet-Remote Slave Trade

The Paradox of Africa's Tech Potential

The technological future of the world will depend largely on the rise of Africa's population and their introduction to foundational and advanced digital technological skills, research, and education. Statistically speaking, one-third of the world's population—and of the working-age population—will be African by 2050, according to UN projections. By 2030, the continent's working-age population is set to increase by two-thirds, from 370 million adults in 2010 to over 600 million in 2030 (McKinsey Global Institute, "Lions on the Move II," 2016).

This demographic shift presents an unprecedented opportunity. While the rest of the world ages, Africa remains young and will grow into full maturity in its relevance on the global stage. But what guarantees Africa's relevance isn't merely statistics showing a rising working population, but rather the power this working population will wield in decisions that pertain to the advancement of the world.

Historical Parallels: From Cash Crops to Code Farms

The European market once demanded large quantities of sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other commodities, which fueled the expansion of plantations in the Americas and created the need for a large, cheap workforce. This demand was a major driver in the global economy between 1640 and 1807 before the transatlantic slave trade was abolished.

Fast forward to today's digital economy. The introduction of machinery and automation has decreased the need for physical labor while increasing profit margins due to reduced spending on workers. Since then, world economies have been driven by automation and technological advancement, with major players like the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom taking dominance in global economic deliberations.

Africa's role in world economic relations is largely dependent on its participation in the technologies and policies that drive the world. Despite our high projection of workforce growth, we may be witnessing the emergence of what I call an "Internet-Remote Slave Trade"—where African innovators and technologists devote their lives to working for foreign tech companies in a bid to get paid in foreign currencies, inadvertently growing overseas economies instead of their own.

The Modern Tech Exploitation Pattern

This Internet-Remote enslavement of Africa's tech population isn't new—it has been happening for more than 30 years. African technologists have been exploited by Western companies to process and censor data assets in grievous environments.

In Kenya, content moderators working for major social media platforms like Facebook (Meta) experience severe psychological trauma while being paid approximately $2.20 per hour—a fraction of what their Western counterparts earn—as documented by Time Magazine's 2022 investigation. Former employees reported developing PTSD from viewing thousands of violent and disturbing images and videos daily, with inadequate mental health support.

Similar exploitation occurs in Ghana, where workers for companies like Sama (formerly Samasource) label data for AI systems, often viewing disturbing content for as little as $2 per hour. These workers sign restrictive NDAs preventing them from discussing their work conditions, according to a 2023 report by the Mozilla Foundation.

In South Africa, tech companies have established development centers where they hire local software developers at 30-40% of Silicon Valley salaries while selling the resulting products at global market rates. This creates a significant value gap where African labor generates substantial profits that primarily benefit shareholders in Western nations.

In Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Egypt, foreign tech companies contract remote workers for software testing, data annotation, and quality assurance at rates far below global standards. Many of these arrangements are facilitated through gig platforms that take significant percentages from already low compensation.

This is only the beginning. As technologies like AI and blockchain become more mainstream, new use cases for Africa's rising innovators will emerge. The pattern is clear: African tech talent is poached, underpaid by Western standards but sometimes overpaid by local economic standards, and their ideas fuel these companies' continued relevance and success.

This mirrors exactly what happened during the transatlantic slave trade, where Africans were made to build the economies of the West. The difference? We're not being moved across oceans—we're being enslaved through the internet, "remotely," from the convenience of our homes. And tragically, we're happy doing it; we're even celebrated for it.

Breaking the Chains

This will remain our fate if we do not rise to this understanding and let this consciousness guide us: what was done to our ancestors should not be repeated. This will be our fate if we do not see the need to embark on our own research—to ask questions, imagine, think, and solve problems pertaining to Africa and her people.

If we are capable of building the West, I believe we are also capable of building Africa—unless you believe Africa is not worth it, that the future of your children and grandchildren is not worth it. No one will be secure in another person's land, and no one will become a king in another person's kingdom.

Remember, for every time the children of Israel went to Egypt for economic relief, they became slaves, and one time it lasted for 430 years until a deliverer named Moses was born. As recounted in Exodus, what began as a journey seeking prosperity during a famine ended in generational bondage until divine intervention was required for liberation. Our technological slavery has been ongoing for far longer than that, and I am calling on you to rise up and deliver Africa from the shackles of this Internet-Remote Slave Trade.

Building Africa's Tech Sovereignty

This is not to disregard the work and efforts of some African innovators and institutions who are creating systems that help grow the African tech community and find innovative solutions for Africa. That's a positive step toward combating these issues.

However, we need more hands to drive the message that Africa is not a sell-out and can build her own future with the blood and sweat of her own innovators. With this mindset, coupled with research, collaboration, and sheer determination, we will contribute our quota to the world and rise in rank to start negotiating with other regions on how to drive the future of humanity through technology.

We will have many cards to play when our population of trained scientists, innovators, technologists, and professionals makes up one-third of the world's population. We must eliminate the idea in the minds of Western nations that Africa's young, educated population is merely another resource to exploit. Instead, they should seek partnerships with Africa for mutual survival and prosperity.

The choice is ours. Will we continue to code for others, or will we code our own destiny?