APPG for Africa meeting memo

Bridging Digital Divides: Pursuing UK-Africa collaboration for inclusive digital trade

Monday 14th May from 6.30-8pm in Wilson Room, Portcullis House

Chair: Chi Onwurah MP, Chair of the APPG for Africa

This meeting of the APPG for Africa with support from the Royal African Society is the first exploratory meeting in preparation for a longer-term series exploring African digital innovation and collaboration. This first meeting attempted to begin unpacking how digital ecosystems can be more inclusive both at a multilateral and national level. The meeting was held in partnership with the 3rd Africa Tech Summit London, and was organised as a side meeting to the summit and aimed to stimulate discussion around the emerging role of policy makers and parliamentarians in enabling inclusive digital trade ecosystems.

Key speaker points:

'Bosun Tijani- Chief Executive Officer of Co-Creation Hub, Nigeria

- The growth of affordable computing power and access to information has created a wealth of new opportunities in tech innovation from healthcare to transport, across a range of facets.
- The speed of change has allowed the more rapid testing of products and applications. As such, start-ups require less resources to get started than was previously the case.
- Not innovating would mean Africa being left behind in the tech revolution and would become a national security issue.
- Supporting tech in Nigeria is not about creating jobs but ensuring people are involved in change.
- Key challenges for the African tech sector-
  1. Legislative challenge: Laws makers struggle to keep up a relevant level of knowledge as tech is rapidly developing and affects all areas of society at a growing pace. Legal interventions is needed to protect innovators and consumers but also to foster investment and creativity.
  2. Participating/funding: Funding needs to go beyond SEED funding. Ongoing and supportive funding to drive innovation and allow failure and learning from that failure.
  3. National security: ensuring tech is inclusive and accessible is important for national security- its value is not just in potential to create jobs.
- Whilst tech hubs have a role to play, they are not a magic bullet- education and funding more important. Building African tech know-how is essential as otherwise there is no incentive for tech companies to base themselves in a country in order to work in it. E.g. Netflix in Nigeria doesn't have an office there.

Barbara Birungi Mutabazi- Founder/Director of Women in Technology, Uganda

- Internet costs in Africa are still a big barrier to inclusion.
- Legislators don't fully understand the tech and digital economy and so cover-regulate it and sometimes even shut it down. For example, taxes on social media and the banning of drones in Uganda. Capacity in their understanding and knowledge of best practice needs to be built up. For example, there needs to be adequate IP protection for African innovators seeking funding.
- Without effective regulations to smooth transactions- electronic payment systems in their current set up actually create barriers for African business to access global value chains and capture value from them. As such, the current pattern is that foreign traders buy goods from Africa and sell them abroad.
- Paperless trade would also allow better access and inclusion for smaller trading firms as at present the paperwork and time to allow goods across borders presents a barrier.
- The education system also means young children are often excluded from digital know-how. ICT should be introduced in every subject at school.
- On the gender front, women wanting to get involved in tech companies and education need to have more flexibility- for example more family friendly work policies, flexible and remote working.
- African sources of investment need to trust African tech and be encouraged to invest in the sector.
- Scalability of applied tech is a big challenge in all sectors e.g. in agriculture the crowd funding of farmers. Scaling works in tech when it is backed by policy e.g. an African wide internet portal to check exam results is one of the most used platforms on the continent.
- The tech sector will react to different government policies that affect them once they are published but the sector needs to be consulted and be part of initial conversations too. More groups need to be established to analyse government actions on tech and consult with government on different laws. Some laws need repealing! An open and ongoing conversation with legislators is crucial.

Robyn Farah- Founder of KATO & chairperson for Women in Tech South Africa

- Tech hubs allow communities to be empowered to create solutions to everyday problems faced by themselves and their peers. Once that expertise has been built, tech hubs can then be used by paying customers and business to solve specific problems. E.g. Kato
- Not enough data collected on women in tech and their experiences and attitudes. Therefore is difficult to fully understand and therefore address the barriers women and girls face when they haven't been asked in a language that they understand.
- Education in ICT has to go beyond what tech is already readily available and needs to encourage creative thinking.