

Narratives as Development Enablers: Reframing Creativity as Development Infrastructure in Africa

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Moderator Genevieve Chukwuezi with a cross-section of participants during the UNDP-hosted Solution Lab at the 12th SIPA. [Source: LEAP Africa]

“This is Nigeria. This is Nigeria.”

In 2018, when Falz, born Folarin Falana, released his song *This Is Nigeria*, inspired by Childish Gambino’s *This Is America*, it was more than music. It held up a mirror to the country.

The video showed scenes of corruption, insecurity, and social tension. It sparked national debate. The National Broadcasting Commission reportedly cautioned broadcasters over parts of the song. A

piece of music had triggered regulatory scrutiny. Creativity had entered the policy space.

Years earlier, the Federal Government had launched the “Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation” campaign across local and international media platforms. That initiative sought to project a positive national image.

Two very different narratives. One country. One told a story of dysfunction and accountability. The other told a story of promise and pride. Both were acts of

creative expression. Both shaped how Nigeria was perceived, at home and abroad.

And both remind us of something important. Narratives matter. Creative expression does not sit on the sidelines of development. It shapes how a nation is understood, trusted and invested in.

For a long time, development conversations have treated creativity as something nice to have, a cultural add-on or a small economic sector, rather than a serious driver of social and economic change. Yet we are seeing more and more evidence that creativity shapes how places are seen, governed and invested in, often far beyond the cultural sector itself.

During LEAP Africa's [12th Social Innovators Programme & Awards \(SIPA\)](#), a Solution Lab titled **Creative Expressions as Catalysts for Location-Specific Progress** surfaced a critical insight: creative expressions are not peripheral to development systems but central to how progress is imagined, legitimised, and implemented at the local level. Facilitated by [Genevieve Chukwuezi](#) and the UNDP Innovation Team, the session's discussions aligned with a growing body of global research showing that narratives, cultural production, and creative ecosystems play a decisive role in place-based development, policy effectiveness, and economic inclusion.

This article builds on the key insights from the Lab and connects them to wider conversations about creative economies, storytelling in development and innovation. It uses the Lab as a starting point to explore how creativity can function as a form of development infrastructure, particularly in African contexts shaped by spatial inequality, informal economies, and uneven institutional trust.

Creativity as development infrastructure, not cultural afterthought

Development policy has historically prioritised physical and institutional infrastructure, roads, power, schools, and governance systems, while treating culture and creativity as secondary concerns.

However, research from UNESCO and the World Bank increasingly shows that culture is an enabling system that shapes economic behaviour, social cohesion and trust in institutions, rather than an add-on.^{1,2}

The Solution Lab echoed this shift. Participants consistently described creative expressions as mechanisms through which communities interpret change, negotiate identity, and mobilise collective action. This reflects Amartya Sen's capability approach, which recognises that cultural participation and expression are central to development, not just useful for delivering other outcomes.³

Creative work often acts as an early warning system. Local artists, designers, filmmakers, and storytellers often surface social tensions, environmental stress, or governance failures before they appear in formal datasets. Research in urban studies shows that creative outputs can act as an early signal of deeper structural changes, especially in places where formal data is limited or slow to emerge.⁴

In African contexts, where informality dominates economic life, this function is especially significant. Creative expressions translate lived experience into shared meaning, enabling dialogue across social groups and between citizens and institutions. The Lab's point on creativity as "infrastructure" reflects this reality: without shared narratives and cultural legitimacy, even well-designed policies can struggle to gain traction.

Narratives shape economic behaviour and policy legitimacy

One of the most consistent insights from the Lab was the recognition that narratives are not neutral descriptions of reality. They actively shape investment decisions, policy priorities, and public trust. This insight is strongly supported by behavioural economics and development communication

¹ UNESCO. (2022). *Reshaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing Culture as a Global Public Good*. Paris: UNESCO.

² UNESCO/World Bank. (2021). *Cities, Culture, Creativity: Leveraging Culture for Sustainable Cities and Communities*. Washington, DC: World Bank; 2021.

³ Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Florida R. (2014). *The Rise of the Creative Class—Revisited*. New York: Basic Books.

research, which shows that perception and framing materially influence economic behaviour.⁵

Africa's dominant external narratives, often centred on fragility or deficit, have measurable consequences. Countries that are constantly framed as unstable often pay higher borrowing costs and struggle to attract long-term investment, even when the underlying data tells a more balanced story.⁶ Internally, deficit-based storytelling can weaken citizen engagement by positioning communities as passive recipients rather than agents of change.

Conversely, reframing narratives around capability and innovation can unlock economic opportunity. Nigeria's creative industries provide a clear example. Nollywood's global expansion has reshaped perceptions of Nigerian entrepreneurship and cultural sophistication, contributing significantly to GDP and employment while influencing global cultural flows.⁷ Afrobeats' internationalisation has similarly repositioned Nigerian youth culture as a source of global influence rather than local consumption.

The Solution Lab highlighted a disconnect, however, between cultural success and development narratives. While creative industries have transformed cultural perceptions, development discussions often stay technical and abstract, limiting their resonance with citizens. Research on policy communication shows that⁸:

Reforms framed through locally meaningful narratives are more likely to be understood, trusted, and sustained.

Development storytelling as a policy capability

There is growing recognition that storytelling is not just a communications tool. It is part of how policy

works. Governments and development institutions increasingly use narrative tools to explain reforms, manage transitions, and build public consent, particularly in complex or contested policy areas.⁹

Effective development storytelling integrates three elements: evidence, lived experience, and cultural form. Data provides credibility, lived experience ensures relevance, and creative form enables accessibility. When these elements are separated, policy messages often fail to resonate.

Research on human-centred design shows that when policies are shaped and explained through stories people recognise, they are more likely to be trusted and adopted, particularly in marginalised communities.¹⁰ The Lab's emphasis on moving away from poverty-centric narratives reflects this evidence. Deficit framing may attract donor attention but can undermine agency and long-term engagement. In contrast, **asset framing emphasises capabilities, resources, and collective strengths, reinforcing dignity, agency, and sustained engagement.**¹¹

In African development contexts, storytelling also serves a diagnostic function. Community narratives can reveal how policies are interpreted on the ground, exposing unintended consequences and implementation gaps. This makes storytelling not only a dissemination tool but a feedback mechanism within adaptive policy systems.

Creative ecosystems and structural constraints

While the Lab strongly affirmed the value of creative expressions, it also surfaced structural constraints that limit their developmental impact. These challenges are well-documented in creative economy literature.

First, regulatory systems are poorly aligned with creative work. Creative labour is often project-based, freelance, and hybrid, yet legal and tax frameworks

⁵ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁶ Reinhart, C.M., Rogoff, K. (2009). *This Time Is Different: Eight Centuries of Financial Folly*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁷ PwC. (2019). *Entertainment & Media Outlook: 2019–2023 – An African Perspective*. Johannesburg: PwC.

⁸ Andrews, M., Pritchett, L., Woolcock, M. (2017). *Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁹ OECD. (2021). *OECD Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and Governance*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

¹⁰ IDEO.org. (2015). *The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design*. 3rd ed. San Francisco: IDEO.

¹¹ California Health Care Foundation. (2021). *Understanding asset-framing*.

tend to assume stable, formal employment. UNESCO estimates that a significant majority of creative workers, often over 80% in African contexts, operate informally, limiting access to finance, social protection, and growth opportunities.¹²

Second, financing systems still struggle to value intangible assets. Traditional lenders struggle to value intellectual property, brand equity, or cultural capital, despite evidence that these assets drive significant economic value.¹³ As a result, many creative businesses remain underfunded even when there is clear demand for their work.

Third, creative activity is spatially concentrated. Investment, infrastructure, and visibility tend to cluster in major cities, reinforcing geographic inequality. Research on creative clusters shows that when secondary cities and rural areas lack narrative visibility, they are systematically excluded from development planning and investment flows.¹⁴

The Solution Lab's focus on location-specific progress directly addresses this challenge. By surfacing local narratives and creative assets, underrepresented places become legible to policymakers and investors, enabling more differentiated and equitable development strategies.

Technology as an enabler, not a substitute, for creative agency

The Lab's technology-focused discussions reflect a broader consensus in innovation studies: technology amplifies existing capabilities, but it cannot replace human creativity. Digital platforms can extend the reach of creative expressions, but only when access, skills, and governance are in place.¹⁵

Low-code and no-code tools reduce barriers to participation, enabling creatives to build digital products, archives, and storytelling platforms without

advanced technical expertise. Evidence from digital inclusion programmes shows that such tools are particularly effective in contexts where formal technical training is limited.¹⁶

However, relying heavily on digital platforms also brings new risks. Creative workers face challenges related to data ownership, algorithmic visibility, and intellectual property protection. Research on platform economies highlights the vulnerability of creators in asymmetrical digital markets, underscoring the need for governance frameworks and digital literacy.¹⁷

The Lab's emphasis on collaboration between creatives and technologists aligns with ecosystem-based innovation models, which show that cross-disciplinary collaboration produces more resilient and contextually relevant solutions than siloed approaches.¹⁸

Implications for place-based development in Africa

Synthesising the Lab's insights with existing evidence points to a clear conclusion: creative expressions are central to place-based development because they shape how places are understood, valued, and governed.

Location-specific progress depends not only on infrastructure and capital but also on whether its stories, identity and assets are seen and valued. When communities can articulate their identities, assets, and aspirations through creative forms, they become legible within development systems that otherwise privilege scale and standardisation.

This has implications for how development institutions design interventions. Integrating creative expressions into policy design, financing frameworks, and technology strategies can improve responsiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability. Creativity, in this sense, functions as connective infrastructure linking people, policy, and place.

¹² UNESCO/ILO. (2024). *Baseline survey on the state of informality in the cultural and creative sectors in Zimbabwe*. Harare: UNESCO/ILO.

¹³ WIPO. (2022). *World Intellectual Property Report 2022: The Direction of Innovation*. Geneva: WIPO.

¹⁴ Scott, A. J. (2010). *Cultural economy and the creative field of the city*. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 92(2), 115–130.

¹⁵ UNDP. *Digital Strategy 2022–2025*. New York: UNDP; 2022.

¹⁶ GSMA. (2021). *The Mobile Economy Sub-Saharan Africa 2021*. London: GSMA.

¹⁷ Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁸ Isenberg, D. (2011). *The entrepreneurship ecosystem strategy as a new paradigm for economic policy: Principles for cultivating entrepreneurship*. Babson College.

Conclusion

The Solution Lab on *Creative Expressions as Catalysts for Location-Specific Progress* highlighted a critical shift in development thinking.

Creativity is not a peripheral sector nor a soft complement to “real” development work. It is a system-level enabler that shapes narratives, legitimises policy, and unlocks local capability.

When grounded in evidence, aligned with policy, and supported by appropriate financing and technology, creative expressions can drive more inclusive and context-sensitive development outcomes. For African societies navigating rapid demographic, technological, and spatial change, recognising creativity as development infrastructure is not aspirational, it is pragmatic.

