Seeds and Servers: Cultivating Sector-Tech Inn

Amabelle Nwakanma, Henry Ukoha, Oguche Aguda, and Adeolu Adewumi-Zer (virtual) during their panel session at the 12th SIPA. [Source: LEAP Africa]

Africa's pathway to prosperity is increasingly tied to one decisive factor: **technology**. As digital systems reshape economies across the world, Africa stands at a critical juncture. With a median age of 19.7[1] and a tech-savvy population that is rapidly expanding, the continent is ripe for transformation, yet continues to face deep structural, infrastructural, and systemic barriers that constrain its ability to fully harness digital innovation. This reality took centre stage during the panel session, **"Seeds and Servers: Cultivating Sector Tech Innovation in Africa,"** at LEAP Africa's 2025 Social Innovators Programme & Award (SIPA), held in November 2025 in Lagos, Nigeria.

Moderated by **Amabelle Nwakanma**, Director of Programmes and Partnerships at LEAP Africa, the session explored how Africa can bridge technological gaps, strengthen innovation ecosystems, and accelerate growth through collaboration.

Featuring **Oguche Agudah** (Founder, HRISP Partners), **Henry Ukoha** (Lead, Future Hub, Benin Republic), and **Adeolu**

Adewumi-Zer (Founder & CEO, ZER Consulting Africa) as panelists, the session unpacked the opportunities and obstacles inherent in Africa's sector-tech journey and what it truly takes to scale impact across diverse markets on the continent.

Together, the speakers illuminated the digital realities facing Africa today, dissecting the challenges of mainstreaming technology, bridging knowledge gaps, reforming governance, and unlocking cross-border market opportunities.

What emerged was a powerful, multi-layered vision for how Africa can transform tech innovation into a continental development engine.

Technology as a Lifeline — Not a Luxury

Amabelle opened the panel with a striking reminder: digital transformation in Africa is not optional. It is existential. She noted that a speaker at a previous event described digital transformation as a **"life-and-death issue for the continent,"** a sentiment reinforced by global trends. The panel echoed this urgency, pointing to the persistent and crippling digital divide that continues to stall Africa's progress.

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[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1226158/median-age-of-the-population-of-africa/?srsltid=AfmBOorCqEdE3HCF1WXfEfF32DY2nx_o1EwuPOXMUhdErJ8tQHTpCXCm

According to the [International Telecommunications Union](#), only 38% of Africa's population used the internet in 2024, compared to 68% globally. In Nigeria — Africa's largest economy — internet penetration is just 45.5%, despite more than 100 million users[2]. The [GSMA](#) reports that Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, has one of the world's largest "coverage and usage gaps", meaning millions live within network range but cannot afford data, devices, or digital tools. These disparities validate Amabelle's reflection: *"If we are not actively leveraging technology, we will be talking for much longer. There is no alternative."* She emphasised that technology cannot be treated as a trend or afterthought — it must become the lifeblood of African ventures and public systems.

Fixing the Tech–Finance Disconnect: A Missing Link in Africa's Innovation Chain

One of the most important contributions came from Oguche, who highlighted a persistent and often underestimated challenge: **Africa's fund managers remain deeply disconnected from the tech ecosystem**.
From his experience advising pension funds and alternative investment actors, he observed:

- Local institutional investors often lack familiarity with tech models.
- Most African pension funds still prioritise traditional assets.
- Global investors are disproportionately driving Africa's tech funding, while local capital remains conservative and risk-averse.

In his words, *"There is a disconnect… Fund managers do not understand tech as much, and the tech ecosystem does not understand the investment sector well enough."* This disconnect is aggravated by generational differences, a point he emphasised as younger, more tech-literate professionals begin to rise into leadership roles across Africa's financial sector. Contextualising his points with global trends, he opined that pension funds in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries consistently invest about 5–10% of their portfolios in venture capital and tech innovation, while In Africa, pension fund allocation to tech remains below 1% in most countries, stating that without domestic investment, African startups remain vulnerable to external shocks, as seen during the 2022–2024 downturn in global venture capital, which he cited as evidence of the vulnerability of African startups to external shocks. The Policy

implication remains that to unlock Africa's innovation potential, governments and capital markets must enable institutional investors — especially pension funds to meaningfully enter the tech space through improved risk frameworks, co-investment structures, and innovation-friendly regulation.

Bridging Africa's Silent Divide: The Overlooked Power of Francophone Markets

Entrepreneur and ecosystem builder Henry Ukoha challenged one of the continent's most entrenched yet rarely examined barriers: the divide between Anglophone and Francophone innovation ecosystems. Henry's work in Benin, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire reveals that Francophone Africa is a rapidly expanding frontier of digital innovation, but remains poorly understood and frequently ignored by Anglophone founders.
He mentioned that *"There is a lot of opportunity in the Francophone market. But people skip it… mainly because of language and misconceptions about size."* This perception is contradicted by emerging evidence. Francophone Africa currently represents 200 million consumers[3] — nearly equal to Nigeria's population. The region benefits from a unified currency (CFA franc) and harmonised regulations, enabling smoother cross-border scaling. Between 2021 and 2024, Francophone Africa recorded one of the fastest growth rates in venture capital deals[4].

Henry's solution? Creating six-month sandboxes where startups, particularly from Anglophone countries, can test product-market fit, refine offerings, and receive investment readiness coaching tailored to Francophone realities. He argued: "If you test in Benin, you can scale to Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal… The ecosystem is aligned."
This aligns strongly with continental priorities under the [African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)](#), which seeks to dissolve internal trade barriers and build a unified African market.

Reclaiming Strategy and Governance: Why Tech Alone Cannot Scale Africa

Adeolu Adewumi-Zer provided one of the most critical and cautionary perspectives. While celebrating tech's potential, she

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[2] https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-nigeria

[3]
https://techcabal.com/2025/06/17/tnw-francophone-africa-001/
[4]
https://www.avca.africa/data-intelligence/research-publications/private-capital-regional-landscape-francophone-africa/

warned against the growing trend of viewing technology as a cure-all. Her argument was clear: *"Innovation is great, but without strategy, governance, and structure, it takes us nowhere."*

Adeolu's claims are backed by broader research. African startups with strong governance and strategy are 3X more likely to attract follow-on funding[5] and corporate–startup partnerships globally succeed only when startups demonstrate transparency, board discipline, and execution capacity. Institutional investors rank leadership quality and governance frameworks above product innovation when evaluating early-stage companies.

Drawing from her SCALE framework, she emphasised the need for:

- **Strategising Vision**
- **Championing Excellence**
- **Accelerating Exceptional Leadership**
- **Leveraging Governance for Sustainable Growth**
- **Expanding Impact via Growth Capital**

She particularly stressed the strategic, leadership, governance, and impact dimensions of the framework, arguing that African startups with strong governance and leadership are significantly more likely to attract follow-on funding, while corporate–startup partnerships globally succeed only when startups demonstrate transparency, board discipline, and execution capacity. Institutional investors, she noted, consistently rank leadership quality and governance frameworks above product innovation when evaluating early-stage companies.

Her assertion that *"money follows trust"* offers a practical directive for founders: technology must serve a well-structured business, not replace its foundations.

Collaboration as the Continent's Most Powerful Innovation Infrastructure

Despite their diverse perspectives, all speakers converged on one central truth: Africa will not innovate in silos. Collaboration across sectors, generations, and regions emerged as the single strongest lever for transforming African tech.

1. Tech–Finance Collaboration
Oguche urged fund managers and innovators to build mutual understanding. Investors must become tech-literate; innovators must understand capital expectations.

2. Cross-border Collaboration

Henry argued for dismantling linguistic and regional divides, turning African countries into interconnected markets rather than isolated innovation pockets.

3. Corporate–Startup Collaboration
Adeolu emphasised that startups cannot scale alone. Corporates provide the infrastructure, distribution channels, and governance maturity that can accelerate innovation exponentially.

Building Trust in Technology: A Social and Cultural Priority

Amabelle closed with a powerful insight: "There is a major distrust in technology… *How do we become more comfortable and build trust?"*

Across Africa, fears around job displacement, digital fraud, surveillance, and cultural unfamiliarity hinder tech adoption. The panel suggested that *trust must be built through understanding.* Which means:

- Public digital literacy campaigns
- Policies that protect users
- Technology that solves real, visible problems
- Tools that integrate into familiar platforms (e.g., WhatsApp-based services, which Oguche praised as a practical starting point)

Trust-building is not a technical process but a **social one**.

Conclusion: Planting the Seeds, Empowering the Servers

From Lagos to Cotonou, Nairobi to Dakar, Africa stands at the edge of a transformation that will define its 21st-century trajectory. But as the SIPA panel illuminated, technology alone cannot unlock this future.

Africa must:

- Build strategic, governance-strong enterprises
- Connect fragmented markets through collaboration
- Leverage domestic capital and reform investment ecosystems
- Close the digital divide through infrastructure and trust-building
- Strengthen cross-border partnerships for scale
- Integrate innovation into everyday systems from finance to education to public services.

The **seeds** of innovation are already here in Africa's entrepreneurs, youth, and emerging markets. What the continent needs now is the **servers**: **the systems, structures, policies, capital,** and **collaborations** that can bring these innovations to life at scale.

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[5] https://arxiv.org/pdf/2401.05760

This is the work ahead!