



**The Brookings Institution
Africa Growth Initiative
Foresight Africa Podcast**

**“Connecting Africa’s tech talents with the world”
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Host:

Aloysius Uche Ordu
Director, Africa Growth Initiative
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development
The Brookings Institution

Guest:

Cecilia Värendh Månsson
CEO and Founder, TalentUp Africa

Episode Summary:

Dr. Cecilia Värendh Månsson, founder and CEO of the Lagos-based TalentUp Africa, tells host Aloysius Uche Ordu about founding her HR technology and employment company in Lagos. She also describes some of the challenges of starting a new company during the COVID-19 pandemic, including infrastructure, but also the opportunities and market trends that make Africa the source of great tech talent for the world.

ORDU: From the promise of new technologies to the youthful population shaping the continent's future, Africa is full of optimism worth celebrating. Hi, I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution and host of Foresight Africa. Since 2011, the Africa Growth Initiative has published a high profile report on the key events likely to influence outcomes in the continent in the year ahead. Titled "Foresight Africa," the goal of the publication is to bring high level attention to these dynamics and support policy actions. With this podcast, AGI intends to engage the authors of the report, policymakers, captains of industry, scholars, and Africa's youths to continue these important conversations.

Today, I am delighted to be joined by Dr. Cecilia Värendh to discuss opportunities for young people across the continent, especially in the technology sector. Dr. Värendh is the founder and CEO of the Lagos-based TalentUp Africa, an HR technology company that connects Africa's youthful talents with international companies, those in Silicon Valley and elsewhere.

First, I'd like to tell you about a new podcast titled Vying for Talent.

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RYAN HASS: Hi, I'm Ryan Hass with the Brookings Institution.

JUDE BLANCHETTE: And I'm Jude Blanchette with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. We're the co-hosts of "Vying for Talent," a podcast examining the role that human talent plays in competition between the United States and China.

HASS: Both the United States and China are vying to demonstrate which governance and economic system is best able to deliver results in the 21st century. Much of this competition hinges on economic performance, which is driven by innovation, which is being pushed forward by talented individuals in both countries.

BLANCHETTE: "Vying for Talent," puts faces and stories to the sprawling competition underway between the United States and China. Through this podcast series, we're using stories to shine a light on what more the United States can do to improve its edge for the future.

HASS: "Vying for Talent" is produced by The Brookings Podcast Network and distributed by both Brookings and the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

You can download and listen to it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts. Learn more at Brookings dot Edu slash Vying For Talent.

ORDU: Cecilia, a warm welcome to the show.

VÄRENDH: Thank you very much, Aloysius. I will want to say I'm equally happy and looking forward to this conversation. Thank you for inviting me. Thank you for having me.

ORDU: You're most welcome. Tell me about your personal journey, which is the great place to start. Where did you do your studies and in what field?

VÄRENDH: I'm from Sweden, I ended up going to the U.S. for my undergraduate degree. I did economics and mathematics at Columbia in New York. I had a startup during that time as well, but I did econ and math as a field, did a minor in French. Worked a year in New York before starting my MBA at Oxford University. And after the MBA, I went in to do my Ph.D. and the Ph.D. took me through Oxford, Wharton, and Harvard. My Ph.D. focused on how financial technology or digital

devices impact microfinance in Africa. So it was a quantitative study around the continent, a qualitative study in Nigeria.

ORDU: It's like a who's who of the best and brightest institutions on the planet. Oxford, Wharton, and Harvard. Congratulations indeed. And let me just ask, how did a Swedish lady like you, end up as CEO and founder of TalentUp Africa in Lagos, Nigeria?

VÄRENDH: So the story between Columbia and going into my MBA, I was going for two different job positions and I got the opportunity to go to wherever I wanted in the world and I decided to go to Zimbabwe. I was very influenced by a friend who did his Ph.D. at Oxford. Came to Zimbabwe, and I really fell in love with the place, with the people, the dynamics, the air.

So during the MBA, Professor Mthuli Ncube had a class in South Africa on business opportunities across Africa and in Johannesburg over the spring break. So I went down, and it's very difficult to not fall in love with Africa's opportunity when you're being taught by Professor Mthuli.

So during the summer between the Oxford MBA and going into the Ph.D., I decided, okay, I want to learn more about the opportunities on the ground in Africa. I'd never been to West Africa, so I decided to more or less blindly go to Nigeria and Ghana, with the ambition to speak with as many CEOs as I possibly could to realize one single question: what was their biggest problems creating scalable businesses in the region?

At that point, I heard three things—it had just been a devaluation of the naira, the Nigerian currency. Obviously that created recession. So problem number one. Problem number two, corruption, not a big surprise. And problem number three was around people—finding the right people with the right skill sets, and digitalized recruitment system, subjective recruitment processes. I heard stories over and over again how recruitment teams got CVs sent to more or less in-boxes and companies' H.R. teams had to go through them manually.

So all those insights, they sort of stayed with me throughout my Ph.D. And mid for the Ph.D., when I was at Wharton, I decided to do something about it. So at that point, I decided to start to raise capital with ambition to create a double-sided marketplace for hiring for Africa. Something like a Monster, CareerBuilder, Indeed for Africa.

ORDU: So tell us a little bit more, about what exactly is the business model of TalentUp Africa?

VÄRENDH: We started with this double-sided marketplace and that was the ambition with raising the capital to create this tech-enabled platform that would make hiring more seamless for companies in West Africa, starting in Nigeria, and then more seamless for job applicants wanting positions in West Africa. COVID happened. Clearly launching that kind of a platform in the middle of a pandemic when companies are furloughing versus hiring seemed to not be as lucrative as it was when I initially spoke with the investors. So we pivoted to trying to use the platform to hire top talent from Nigeria to U.S.-based startup, scale-ups, organizations.

That seemed to be a very efficient or a very fruitful pivot. It wasn't very difficult to convince U.S. based companies about the opportunity of hiring from Nigeria. So right now, what we're doing is really using our platform, identifying top talent, assessing them for their competencies, and hiring them as remote workers for U.S. based companies, focusing foremost on tech roles, but it's not only tech roles.

ORDU: Being based in Lagos obviously must have enormous challenges and indeed opportunities as well. Could you share with us a little bit more of the challenges and opportunities your company has faced thus far?

VÄRENDH: There are many, I would say, organizational level opportunities and challenges that has come across, partly also from the pandemic. And there's clearly also macroeconomic for the whole business model. But if I started looking at the organizational for the little startup, trying to get a company culture for me as a Westerner in Nigeria during a pandemic, when it's difficult, it was difficult to meet every day with the team. That has clearly been a little bit of a challenge. Challenge when it comes to the bigger market opportunities if I would say three—is really for the new business model, finding enough good tech people. That's one. The people that we do find they lack possibly vocational or the real skills to actually do the coding in the way that would be necessary in comparison for a U.S., a U.S. company.

I would say other problem, as always, for the team and the people that we have working for international companies, problems with the infrastructure, problem with unreliable Wi-Fi, unreliable electricity. It's very often my infrastructure myself at home, but also for the workers, Wi-Fi drops out in the middle of the meeting, people cannot attend when they are supposed to attend because the generator turned off, et cetera, et cetera So those kind of problems.

The opportunities on the other hand, is there is this big vibration of the attitude of really wanting to learn more, wanting to go abroad and work for international companies. The market trends that we're seeing happening based from the pandemic off remote opportunities is clearly a very big opportunity for African youths and for our company as well.

ORDU: Fascinating. Clearly, infrastructure deficiency is by far the most binding constraint to growth and development in Nigeria and in fact on the continent as a whole. Let me now turn to Africa's talents. Africa, as you know, which is probably why you set up shop on the continent, is the world's youngest population. The youth wave collides with another powerful developmental trend, and that is the digital transformation. So what potential do you see in Africa's growing population and emerging tech-savvy youths?

VÄRENDH: I want to say a few things about the challenges as well, because it's easy to say that the technology and the tech savvy is really evenly distributed. It's really not that simple. But if you look at the opportunities first, I would say the new tech-savvy people with the tools that they have now will make everything more flat. The opportunity to actually get access to education from the top universities, which means skills development on an international comparable way, the opportunity for information sharing, the opportunity to actually look at influencing politics, influencing organizational strategies because they can participate more, transact money. I mean, it will open up democracy, it will open up opportunities in terms of work, entrepreneurial opportunities, role models, several opportunities which will clearly impact the markets.

I do want to tie it back to how I've started to answer your questions, which was a negative start to a positive question. But it's not everyone still has access to the infrastructure that urban centers have, and even in the urban centers it's only a fraction of the total urban centers that have access to tech. And mobile phones, we know that the mobile phone penetration is massive across the continent, but internet and reliable internet and internet with wi-fi that is cheap enough for the common person to access, it's still quite difficult. So it's still only a fraction that they can take advantage of the opportunities.

ORDU: So clearly, harnessing Africa's talented youths requires a lot of the policymakers in terms of enabling framework, infrastructural, et cetera, et cetera. But we also hear, Cecilia, that the global

demand for talented tech youths far outstrips the supply, and that Ukraine, for example, which is very much in the news right now, is the second largest source of tech talents after India. How can Africa capitalize on this new opportunity?

VÄRENDH: Yes, so I would say that we see three market trends now that are something that really will make a benefit for the continent. We do know, just as you correctly say, Africa has the fastest growing population in the world, growing about almost to 2.5 percent annually. We also do know that Africa has the biggest, biggest number of youth in the world, and they are willing to work for international companies, and they're very hungry to do it, too. The second trend, COVID, opened up for the acceptance of remote work arrangements. And thirdly, the tech talent shortage in the world, which is really daunting. If I could just cite a few numbers—last year, the U.S. alone was unable to fill 900,000 positions. Nine hundred thousand. It's clearly creating problems. Also last year, to fill 500,000 data science roles, there were only fifty-thousand graduates. Eighty percent of CEOs globally are saying that finding tech people is their biggest problem.

All those three trends together are clearly a good recipe of making Africa the source of good people to the rest of the world and really changing the sort of framework of Africa would do something for the global economy, rather than the global economy would give something to Africa. Because this would really benefit many stakeholders, benefit African continent. The youth get to earn higher salaries, they get exposure to international companies, they get the frameworks that are used in international companies. But international companies also get access to what they need to really create their business models wherever they're really operating in the world. So there is a massive opportunity here.

You started with the asking the impacts of now the very sad situation that we see happening around us. Clearly, as you said, Ukraine was the second or at least top three sources for remote tech people up until now, and India's number one. That's going to change and with this change the opportunity and the demand to get to Africa, I think, will be even bigger now than before, because those positions need to be filled with people from somewhere and finding them in Western countries it's too difficult, too expensive.

ORDU: Very, very interesting. And I understand based on what we read in the literature that many of these hires out of Africa, the firms, for example, in Silicon Valley don't necessarily want them to move to Silicon Valley. They can work directly from home.

VÄRENDH: Exactly, that is very correct. So they were placed from Africa, pay their taxes to the African governments. So it's actually benefit the whole communities as well. And many of the Silicon Valley, the companies we are working with, they are having remote work arrangements anyway. So even though U.S.-based employees are actually going into office, whether or not they're placed in Lagos and Nairobi versus Silicon Valley or Toronto, it doesn't really matter because they're remote anyway.

ORDU: This is a borderless world now, which further reaffirms your earlier point that governments need to pay attention to what is going on and really, really view those three words—infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. Right?

VÄRENDH: I couldn't agree more.

ORDU: Let me turn now to we often hear of “fintech unicorns” and that some African fintech companies are now unicorns. For the benefit of our listeners, what are these unicorns? And what lessons can we learn from the highly successful companies that have turned unicorns in Africa?

VÄRENDH: I think there were six or seven unicorns in Africa or gaining unicorn status in 2021, the highest number in any decade for Africa, for sure. It's mostly fintechs, as you said, but there is also marketplaces. I would say the biggest impact of this is all of a sudden the world really started looking to Africa for unicorns, and that opportunity that opens up from them when you have investors globally looking to Africa and realizing, Wow, that is a massive opportunity. It's a very big opportunity for African entrepreneurs to really see that it's actually equally possible for me in Lagos or Nairobi or Kampala or wherever you're based to create the unicorn and really get it recognized on an international level. Most of the unicorns are still just operating within Africa, not always scaled internationally. But I think that's the biggest takeaway, the opportunity for the world to look at Africa as a startup scene. The opportunities for local entrepreneurs to actually get the view that it's actually possible also for us. So I think it's a big symbol and it's a big symbol of change. It's a big symbol for seeing Africa's as very on the forefront, especially since the unicorns are within tech.

ORDU: Interesting. So in terms of what does of magnitude, what sort of amounts are we talking about? I can't just be a unicorn, right? What amounts are we talking about here?

VÄRENDH: A unicorn is a billion dollar valuation. I believe you have to reach that within five years from founding or it's 10. I should know if it's 10 or five, but it's within a certain timeframe.

I would say that there's two things for those unicorns that is important to note. That is they're solving problems that are to the masses of the people. So it's really for the people who are in the middle bottom of the pyramid, a problem big enough to solve. And they're all in some way or other tech enabled.

ORDU: Let's now turn to where you actually live and work—Lagos itself. On the outskirts Yaba, Lagos has emerged as a technology hub, one of the most rapidly growing technology hubs on the African continent. Could you give us a sense of the dynamism of Yaba and the role of the youths in bringing this about?

VÄRENDH: Energy. Always energy. Optimists. Always optimists. Hard work, never sleeps. What you would really see when you think about a highly dynamic, quick moving atmosphere. I mean, the environment of Africa, it's hard to explain what that means, but it's clearly the young people, the optimism, people wanting to do startups, wanting to learn programing skills, attending something that for me was a very positive surprise. So when I would see my fellow Westerners being quite bored throughout the pandemic, working from home, et cetera, I saw my fellow team members, many of them and the youngest, doing a master online or attending classes online, working for me in the day, attending programing classes in the evenings or the front-end programmers attending MITx or edX, trying to learn machine learning in the nights, to really continue to develop to get more opportunities. And that entire energy and atmosphere and willingness to just grow more and more, you feel that and you feel that especially in Yaba. Yaba is also where CcHUB is, one of the most famous impact hubs across the continent.

ORDU: So where others see challenges, you are drawn by the energy, the optimism, and the dynamism of Yaba, Lagos?

VÄRENDH: Yes, and I would say it's not only Yaba, Lagos, I would say it's in many places, it's across that will go to Lekki to to [vee-aye] at the right places, it will go to Ikeja at the right places as well.

ORDU: So for you at the personal level, as a foreigner doing business in Lagos, Nigeria, give us a sense of what is it like? What are the opportunities you face? What are the challenges at the personal level of living and working in Lagos?

VÄRENDH: Yes. I would say I moved down to Lagos at the time where it was possibly not the best time to move down to Lagos. I moved down literally in the sort of first phase of the pandemic, or at least mid-phase of the pandemic. Under normal circumstances, I would probably have had a little bit more of a Western expat community around me. But that was not really the case because most expats had been moved home to their respective countries. I was very reliant on my team, the Nigerian team and the networks I also had for my advisors really helped me very quickly get into to the Nigerian culture.

You learn to live with the problems, when I came down, there were problems, I don't see them as problems, I guess, anymore, but it's everything from, you know, water not working, Wi-Fi not working, traffic to and from office, meetings changing all the time because traffic was too long. All of those things, that was a problem that was slightly time consuming, somewhat frustrated in the beginning. Yeah, water is a big one. The heat, A/C doesn't work, et cetera. But you move to Africa and you know that those are the problems, and if you cannot stand with them and especially traffic, you wouldn't stay as long, I think. And I see ... it's part of life, I would say that.

ORDU: So, I guess a word that comes to mind is tenacity, staying power. And that's really what has kept you going in spite of the difficult operating environment.

VÄRENDH: And I would say just trying to be flexible, trying to look at the positive sides and also trying to realize that it's not only me, it's everyone around, and there are many times that you end up with problems, but the problems were something you couldn't have done anything about, right? So it's just part of operating in an environment like Africa, or Nigeria, I would say.

ORDU: So in your team, how many people are we talking about in the team and now what are your aspirations, say, three, four or five years from now? What are you hoping to build out the team in terms of numbers?

VÄRENDH: Yes, I mean we at the height of the pandemic, we had 14 full timers, six entrants, were twenty one. Right now, we are about 10 people full time with a couple of interns. The goal right now is to really take the business model that actually seems to be working very well with revenue, to scale it to address some of the problems that we have, to really make a bigger business opportunity for it.

The goal is clearly to be a market leader in providing the world with African tech people to solve the global tech talent problem using Africa, and in that benefit African youth and the world. Our goal is really to build this on a social enterprise model, where the more people we train, the more people we can actually place abroad, and the more people we place abroad, the more revenue we get and the more we can train. So we hope to create this positive force of change, really benefit many stakeholders.

In terms of people, I don't know what that would look like, but clearly, hopefully we'll grow a big, strong team. I have the privilege to be working and being advised and having as an investor Aboyeji Iyin, who is also on the board and clearly brings a lot of help to what we're trying to do, also to bring insights of what we should do in a good way to actually make economies of scale. So for those who doesn't really know who he is, but also because I might be pronouncing his name incorrectly, he co-founded two of the unicorns in Africa today, Flutterwave and Andela.

ORDU: Fantastic. There is a dimension to what you are sharing with us today, and that is the capacity building dimension, because we know that there are clearly very, very smart kids coming out of our higher education universities and high school and all that, very talented. But at the same time, some of the people coming out are certified in terms of paper qualifications, but do not necessarily have what it takes to be hired by a Silicon Valley firm. Tell us that capacity building dimension, how does your firm approach that?

VÄRENDH: Yes, you're very correct. But it depends on what university of course you are going to in Nigeria. And that's across not only data science or data engineering or engineering overall, it's across many subjects. Whatever you've been taught is quite outdated. The lack of rigorous testing on what is being taught on a national level is also missing. But specifically the sort of vocational practicality of specifically a technical degree it's not enough to be placed abroad. There's one thing to write codes, there is another thing to do production coding or to actually write something on a backend or on the front end.

What we are trying to do is to identify the top people that have some kind of understanding about coding, have some kind of base insights and degree or teaching—being that a vocational program, a university degree, being it online classes because you didn't get access to university. One should also not forget that there is about two people per every seat at higher institutions in Nigeria. So also looking at people who go online to teach. And then for us, it's about when we have the true top people, really refine and train them in more production skills. Give them the tools and the frameworks to really use the talent that they have and the first preliminary insight, train that, and then then place them.

ORDU: Do you come across in what you are doing the situation of young people everywhere in the world, those that require second chances, right? What do I mean by that? You have a bright, smart, young person who basically very good at school, but the principal breadwinner, the mother or father dies and therefore this education is stifled. It could be a young lady, very smart, and gets pregnant early in her life and that puts an end to her education. And yet, you know, when you are face to face with these people, they are exceptionally smart, and therefore they need to give such people second chances. Do you come across that?

VÄRENDH: I get goose bumps of what you're saying because I can speak from my own team. We had a young lady, she came to us, or to me, wanting an internship in machine learning. She was young, she didn't say much, she was very quiet, but she really excelled in the interview she spoke with our machine learning specialist, a brilliant, brilliant man with a Ph.D. from Lagos University in machine learning. And he said, yes, I think we should give her a chance. She seems very capable, so we welcomed her.

Then three weeks later, sadly, I got a call from my employee who promised to be her manager for her duration during the internship. And he said, I'm sorry, I should have asked the personal question, but she has to leave us because she is pregnant and she cannot continue. And that's exactly to your point. It was very sad because she couldn't continue her education. She couldn't continue the internship with us. And for her, it must have been a very big disappointment. If she would have come back to me and had that opportunity and said I've had my baby and I went to work four days, four hours a day to help with machine learning, I would definitely give that chance.

But the need for those kind of second opportunities, yes they are everywhere and they are especially for women. Hence, there is also a need possibly to, if we say we are going to place top talent from Nigeria or Africa later, I mean, my goal is not to stay in only Lagos. The goal is to go to Accra, to go to Nairobi, to go to Addis, it's to go to other places. Also French speaking countries and get top talent due to international firms.

But if we don't provide accommodation or at least office spaces, it becomes very difficult even for a woman to actually take advantage, because there is still—forgive me if I'm wrong, but still as a woman, I see that also in my team—you are even if you're bringing home a very big income share, you will still be required to cook the food and do the cleaning and all the rest. And having an office for women to go to in tech would actually mean that they get out from the house and they get the possibility to work the hours that is necessary and to get the infrastructure, the electricity, and Wi-Fi necessary to perform as good as a peer in the U.S. or in India or before in Ukraine, with the exact same talent as anywhere else, male or female.

ORDU: That's fascinating. Your expansionist take on beyond Nigeria makes me think in terms of second chances. With so many fragile states on the African continent, some of these second chances are young men and women who happen to have been on the frontline of fragility, child soldiers, et cetera. And then as part of their rehabilitation, all they're asking for is an opportunity to be given a second chance. It could be that at 16, one turned into a very difficult group of people and became a criminal or whatever, but then rehabilitated themselves. Again their smartness is indicated, but all they're asking for is an opportunity. So I wish you luck as you really grow this business and also expand in other parts of the African continent. On that note, actually, in terms of the makeup of your current team as you build them out, presumably all your staff are exclusively Lagos-based, right? Do you have ambitions for other states, because clearly Nigeria is a huge, huge country. Any plans for other states in the federation as sources of talents?

VÄRENDH: Yes, definitely. The reason to why we're starting in Lagos or Nigeria is clearly it is possibly one of the most interesting states or countries to go to when looking at people, I mean, the business people to outsource. I mean, the youth in tech is bigger in Nigeria than possibly anywhere else. Maybe followed with Kenya very tight behind.

Still, for us, that was just a start. But I would also say that for me, I had the strongest network from Nigeria. My fieldwork, my Ph.D., was in Nigeria, so for me it was an easier way to set up. Although I would say that starting a business in Nigeria for the first time, this little index that you do learn from undergrad or in the MBA, ease of doing business rankings, I became very aware of the importance of that rank of doing business because setting up a business in Nigeria wasn't specifically easy in terms of registration and getting bank accounts, et cetera. But to your point, yes, we're definitely looking at going to other places with the next step would most likely be Kenya. Also, one of our board members is based out of Kenya.

ORDU: That's great. I like your alluding to the World Bank ease of doing business, an institution I happen to have worked in for over two decades. And I must admit my favorite of the many, many, many publications from the World Bank, I've always liked the Doing Business report, which, as you may have read, was recently discontinued. But there are momentum afoot to basically bring it back. We hope, we hope it comes back because this is a fascinating read.

VÄRENDH: It certainly is. And I had several challenge just getting bank accounts, personal BVN numbers—that's the biometric numbers—setting up a company, daughter companies. Just navigating that. I would say, though, to Nigeria's defense, a lot of it was actually caused by the pandemic. So I would also say that many things closed down.

ORDU: You chose the right time to leave your country, go to Lagos of all places in the world, and start a business ...

VÄRENDH: [laughs]

ORDU: ... during a pandemic, right.

VÄRENDH: We signed the stockholder agreements one week before they closed the borders. I would say, it was really on the borderline, and I had a mentor of mine, Ladi Delano, very fantastic entrepreneur who put me in contact with [____], the board member now, someone I'm working very close with in TalentUp Africa. He said, I don't know if I should congratulate you or say sorry because you have investors' money in your bank account and you need to give a return in a situation that is not the way it was when you pitched your business model, and you don't want to lose anyone's money, that's not fun. So I would agree with him. It's like it was a bittersweet problem, but I'm very happy that it turned out to be the way it did.

ORDU: This is great. This is fantastic. Perhaps an ideal opportunity to pivot to something you alluded to earlier, and that is this notion of public policy to harness all this phenomenal energy, the optimism, the dynamism of Africa's youth—

VÄRENDH: —the talents—

ORDU: —the talents, the talents, indeed. The huge role of public policy. So if we had him in this conversation today, a couple of African finance ministers, development ministers, et cetera, what would you say to them were the top three things you believe that they should focus on in order to continue to make sure that Africa's youthful population of talented young women and men basically conquer the world, especially now that the demands, if you like, of talents is exponentially increasing across the world.

VÄRENDH: Three things, and I will elaborate on them a little bit later. One is infrastructure—infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. Number two education—and relevant vocational international-standard level education. And then, thirdly, both bringing in private capital to help out in this, and also partly making the move to actually sell its talent as a resource opportunity to the global economy, really. So I would say four things there, possibly.

But if we start with infrastructure. Even if you find the top, top talent in any state in Africa, and you give them with a computer, and you train them with relevant tech training, that's not going to be enough because that person will be working for a U.S.-based company and the person will have problems with Wi-Fi, housing getting too expensive, not an office space. And if you don't have an office space, you're going to have the problems that I sometimes feel in my team meetings, Wi-Fi is dropping out so I couldn't hear what the person is saying, or I couldn't join at that time because the generator stopped, just like I said before.

So you need for someone in Africa to be able to successfully give a solution to the global tech demand. They need to have the relevant infrastructure around them. Otherwise, the equation is just not going to work because a U.S.-based company or, say, a UK-based company or a Swedish company, they will at certain level understand, but it will come to a point where they will say, This is not working. I will rather pay a higher salary because the person's Wi-Fi or reliability is not good enough. So infrastructure needs to be the foundation, especially if we're looking at scaling of the opportunities of African talent to the world.

Secondly, the lack of relevant education. I mean, if we look at what we spoke about before, there is one thing of learning data science and maybe not as relevant for vocational. I mean, it's a very evolving animal, the entire market is, but really making sure that the training that is being delivered is good enough for the people. Also subsidizing relevant tech training like marketing tech training and especially for women, opening up that opportunity.

And then thirdly, is really engage private sector. It's not enough to just from the government, the fresh air, And maybe I'm biased, clearly, international coming on the ground. But engaging international that really has a view of international standards, both in terms of inflows of money and advice, very important.

I do also think that governments and also entrepreneurs can play a role in also selling the message that African talents are equally good as the Indian. We know Indian has always been famous for good tech education. But there is also from the government's perspective to really highlight that because it is in a way, an export commodity that actually benefits the states as well. Because for me, for example, I'm paying taxes for all my people working for U.S. based companies in an area, so it's actually a win for them as well. So we really carry that message and that narrative on a global international arena.

ORDU: Right. That basically reminds me of a saying that my country, Nigeria, exports two things at polar extremes. At one extreme, it exports brains, now you see all these doctors, nurses, and tech talents, as you've just been talking about. And then at the other extreme, it exports crude oil. And the idea basically is that for the country to really, really move to the next level, it cannot sit on these polar extremes. It has to also converge and export things in the middle ground as well. Anyway, those are challenges for policy makers and business entrepreneurs on the continent.

Just to round off, Cecilia, this is a fascinating conversation, in our "Foresight Africa" report, which I believe you read, some of the viewpoints expressed there in the gender chapter—just before jumping in on this interview with you today we had a gender session for the gender chapter of Foresight. Those viewpoints emphasized the importance of making the future of STEM education female. What's your view on that?

VÄRENDH: First of all, I just want to congratulate you. I know many have done, for that really good report. I did read the entire report. And it's very important, really very, very important to Professor Ekine and Aremu's piece, really emphasizes STEM education. But I would go back to what I said before to just emphasize that, and not giving them the opportunity to go from the university to actually get the second opportunity after, well not only university but undergrad, high school, and lower level education. There has to be a plan after as well, otherwise we might have a situation where STEM for their education and then you go into something else later, which actually happens quite often as well. I see from my experiences, I've been in and out in Lagos for five years, but living there for two, and there is one thing of having education in STEM and then going into something completely different, like admin or whatever. So, there has to be that change as well in the entire system. But is it important? It's clearly one of the most important thing, and that's something that for me and my team, I really have trying to get as many people as possible that are female within specifically the tech team. But sadly, there are not so many of them. So that is a problem and that needs to come from the root. More education from the beginning will mean more supply.

ORDU: Cecilia, thank you for coming on to our podcast to share your personal story, your career story and we really, really wish you well. Many at your age and level of experience could have chosen to be teaching in a university as a professor in one of the northern universities, many of which you passed through yourself for your Ph.D., but you chose this unenviable and challenging task of developing a brand-new company, TalentUp Africa, in the famous city of Lagos, Nigeria. Thank you very much for all you're doing for our people. I really appreciate the opportunity to chat with you this afternoon

VÄRENDH: Thank you, really, thank you, Aloysius. A true opportunity, a privilege.

ORDU: I'm Aloysius Uche Ordu, this has been Foresight Africa. To learn more about what you heard today, find this episode online at [Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast](https://brookings.edu/podcasts/foresight-africa). Each episode will be listed on its own web page, and there will be links to the content discussed in the episode.

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Thank you very much.