



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

“Expanding digital entrepreneurship in Africa”

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Guest:

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Episode Summary:

Africa has a growing problem – a large population of youth and working-age people with limited employment opportunities. She Leads Africa co-founder Afua Osei joins host Landry Signé to discuss the role entrepreneurs play in closing that gap. Highlighting the importance of technological access, the Africa diaspora and the outsourcing of digital talent, Osei offers insights and solutions into how African entrepreneurs and policymakers can narrow the divide.

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SIGNÉ: Hello, I am Landry Signé, senior fellow in the Global Economy and Development Program and the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to Foresight Africa podcast, where I engage with contributors to our annual Foresight Africa report, as well as with policymakers, industry leaders, and other key figures. You can learn more about this show and our work at Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast.

Today on the podcast, I am pleased to welcome Afua Osei. Afua Osei is co-founder of She Leads Africa, a digital lifestyle platform that gives multicultural women the community and resources needed to achieve their goals. Afua is also a digital entrepreneurship policy advisor who works with entrepreneurs to gain the confidence and skills to work with corporate clients. Her website also describes her as a rebellious daughter, annoying sister, favorite aunty, meme sending friend, and competitive mango eater.

Welcome to the show Afua.

OSEI: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Landry. And I take mango season very, very seriously.

SIGNÉ: You are incredibly accomplished. You have your MBA and MPP from the University of Chicago. You have co-founded a successful business and have collaborated with household brands like Visa, L’Oreal, and Facebook. Can you talk about your journey and how you ended up where you are now?

[2:24]

OSEI: When I look back on my experience, I recognize that I’ve always been looking for problems to solve and really focused on skills to build. I come from a Ghanaian family, and I grew up in the United States, so I was always aware of global challenges, global opportunities, as well as what connects all of us. Having friends that were from Ethiopia, from Bangladesh, from the UK, I recognized that there actually was a lot more that connected us, that was similar about us, and many cultures and communities were facing very similar challenges.

So, after my undergraduate experience, I had the opportunity to work in political campaigns. So, I recognized that who we have in office, who we have making the laws, really can significantly impact the way that we live our lives. I also was a Fulbright Scholar in Malaysia and enjoyed learning and working across Southeast Asia.

When I went to policy school and then business school at the University of Chicago, I had a classmate of mine say very plainly, he said, you care so much about impact, you really want to help communities, the place where you can make the biggest difference is in Africa. And this was in 2012 and this was the time of "Africa Rising." Everywhere said Africa was rising, everywhere said there was a lion on the move, and a lot of people were excited and optimistic about the potential and the opportunity that existed in African markets.

[4:01]

I had an opportunity to move to Lagos, Nigeria, full time to serve as a management consultant. And while I was there, I definitely saw the opportunity. But I also saw that unless we helped certain demographics fully engage in economic change, fully engage in new technology, then patterns would repeat themselves. Systems would not change unless we pushed and we advocated for these systems to change. So, that was really the impetus and the background to She Leads Africa.

Recognizing that there was a lot of energy and excitement around the tech ecosystem, but very rarely did we see young women who were on those stages, who were getting access to the financing and to the opportunities. There has always been a lot of aid and development programs focused on African communities, but many times they're focused on very rural communities, those who are working in subsistence farming or low-income areas.

And while that's very valuable, there also is a demographic of young people who have gone to school, who have connections and access to global markets, and who want to use their skills to make a better life for themselves, for their families, for their communities, and for their countries. And we wanted to create something that would speak directly to this demographic and help them achieve the goals and the aspirations that they have.

And that is what got us to She Leads Africa and was so blessed to start this organization and to connect this community. And from there, being able to learn more about the policy challenges as well as opportunities to go on and advise others on how they can improve in their own markets.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic, Afua. Can you describe what She Leads Africa does for those who may be unfamiliar?

[5:46]

OSEI: She Leads Africa at its core is a platform. And recognizing that platforms are there for others to build on. When you think about the foundation of a building or a house, when you think about the foundation of a transportation system, you need something strong and sturdy that others can build upon that will bring things together for this building or for this great outcome that you're hoping to build.

And so, when we thought about She Leads Africa, my business partner and I always knew that it wasn't about us and it wasn't about the organization. It was about how others could benefit. So, at its core, it is a resource center that's built off of digital media. So, it's a community, it's a resource, it's a platform where we aggregate resources, whether those are internship opportunities, they are funding opportunities, whether they are job opportunities. And we share them to our community. We share them via events, we share them via digital media, and we share them via trainings that we've hosted.

And we've done this for nearly ten years all across the continent. So, we've actually hosted events in more than ten different cities across three different continents. We've worked with partners all across the globe. But the most important thing is that

we have created a community that let people know that your goals and your aspirations are valid. Of course, you need to work hard. Of course, you need to be diligent. Of course, you need to focus. But if that opportunity exists out there, there should be nothing that keeps you from going after that opportunity and hopefully achieving it as well.

SIGNÉ: Fabulous. Are there any digital entrepreneurs you have worked with or heard of that have being especially inspirational?

[7:27]

OSEI: I'm so impressed by anyone who decides to put their hand up and put themselves in the ring. When we look on social media, there are so many people who are complaining, who are speaking negatively about people who are trying. And it's challenging to decide that you're going to do something different, that you're going to take an idea that's in your mind, and you're going to try and turn it into reality. And so, there are so many women—from those who are selling on Facebook and Instagram and WhatsApp—who are taking the little bit that they have in their hands and turning it into something major. I'm so inspired by them. All the way up to those who are building global businesses that are growing and scaling across markets.

I have so many examples that I actually can't even list because I just, I just understand that it's really hard to start a business. It is really challenging all across the globe, but especially in some of our markets across Africa. And we think about funding, and we think about currency challenges, how you can put an order in today for something and then two days later you're paying double for it. When we think about our electricity and our energy challenges, to be able to maintain communication. When we look at how challenging it is to be able to sell across markets, it's not easy at all. It's not easy at all. And so, I'm just inspired by anyone who decides to put themselves in the ring, who decides to do it.

[8:50]

I think we've seen a lot of innovation around fashion and recognizing that that's something that's really popular, that that's an area of expertise. Also, I've been seeing a lot of excellence in agricultural and food processing. There's one entrepreneur, her name is Essie Bartels, she's Ghanaian, and she sells indigenous spices and flavors. And when you think about the food—and her company is called EssieSpice—when we think about the food and how that is so dear to us as Africans, our flavors, our seasonings, and how if you try to replicate that in America, it's really hard because the ingredients aren't the same. They won't land. And so, Essie has been able to take our indigenous flavors and share them across the globe, and she's stocked in many different outlets across the U.S. and she's doing very well.

And the same in the food category, there's a brand called Sweetkiwi, and Ehime is the founder of that brand, and taking yogurts and natural flavors and adding in an African twist as well. So, I'm just really inspired by entrepreneurs who are trying, who are creating, and who are expanding despite the odds and despite all the things that are going wrong and that they're pushing through.

SIGNÉ: Afua, I like how your examples are both in the food industry.

OSEI: Yes.

SIGNÉ: So, turning to your *Foresight* viewpoint, "Digital entrepreneurship in Africa," you mentioned the digital divide and that women in the region are 37% less likely to have access to digital technology. It is a tough question, but how do we work toward ensuring that women have access to technology and the digital tools they need to be successful in this industry?

[10:36]

OSEI: I appreciate this question because you're absolutely correct. It is very challenging. And when we speak about African markets, it's so important for us to be clear and specific about the markets that we're speaking about. Of course, Africa has many major global mega cities, from Johannesburg to Accra to Dakar to Kinshasa to Nairobi, Cairo, and we will find that in these markets, people are engaged, they are connected, and they are accessing the global ecosystem through technology.

But even in those spaces, we're recognizing that, first, cost is a barrier, having access to the actual digital infrastructure is challenging. We are seeing more low-cost phone models come out, recognizing that mobile phone technology is the primary way that many African consumers and young Africans are accessing the internet. But recognizing that there's still a cost barrier. And the majority of Africans are living on a low wage, or they are struggling to make ends meet. And so, having a phone that has then access to consistent data is a cost barrier, and there are some who will be able to afford it and those who cannot.

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And when we look at the priorities of young women, they are more likely to invest and put their funds into others, whether it's their families, if they have children, if they don't have children, their communities. And so, recognizing that there's a cost barrier, first for the actual device, and then secondly for data tariffs. And when we compare the cost of data across the globe, we actually see the cost of data is actually relatively more expensive in Africa than it is in other markets.

And so, one of the solution sets is how do we lower the cost? We're seeing a lot of conversation around undersea cables. We're seeing a lot of conversation about increased connectivity with its satellites in the sky, or small mobile technology that's able to go to rural communities. But recognizing that if we lower the cost for everyone, women will also benefit. If we have access to and we encourage opening up our markets and our ecosystems to allow more low-cost phone technologies, that will help everyone access digital technology.

[12:46]

Also recognizing that if you've never utilized your phone for productive uses, right—I think we can utilize the phone, talk to our friends and to chat versus using it for business— understanding how to do that can be quite challenging. What are the applications? What are the platforms? How can you utilize that? So, training is so

important. And over the years there have been a variety of technology companies who have hosted these kind of trainings and programs.

Also, there's a question is should digital literacy be in our educational curriculum, starting younger? So, not just when individuals are in secondary school, but in primary school, because even at that young age, they're having access to mobile technology. And what does it look like to have across- the-board digital literacy training within our curriculums?

Not only for business and productivity users, but we also think about misinformation. And now misinformation is also spreading. Misinformation can come across all forms whether there's political or health wise, maybe about climate. And so, digital literacy training and education also could be very valuable to make sure that people are starting off hopefully on the same level playing field.

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I think also, when we think about other institutions where individuals are interacting with the state, with government, with large scale sectors, I think there's opportunity for government through education, but also our financial sector and banks to think about how can they combine access to digital technology with also opening an account. We've seen a lot of success in terms of basic cash transfers and also resource transfers that when you give people access to productive technology, it increases their income, it increases their productivity, and you get that money back five-, ten-fold because of the way that they're able to utilize it.

So, those are just some initial ideas. But what I do know is that no longer is access to digital technology a privilege or a special benefits. It's more so becoming a right. I was thinking about how in some places you actually can't access government resources; you can't access benefits in your community without having access to a mobile phone. So, just thinking about how many people we're excluding some from our services, from our society for those who don't have it. And so, this is something that I think we definitely need to work on if we want to expand access, increase opportunity, ensure that more women are active in digital trade.

SIGNÉ: Fabulous. One recommendation you give young African entrepreneurs is to double down on exporting African culture. Have you seen increased demand for African entertainment, fashion, and other forms of culture over the last few years as these things have become easier to share with the world via the internet and social media?

[15:43]

OSEI: Landry, this is a million-dollar, billion-dollar question. It is a question of big debate on social media. And as a political scientist, you're an economist, I think we look at global trends and we look at it at a macro level. I think about it from the form of diplomacy and looking at it as a form of cultural diplomacy. And when we like people, when we respect people, we're more likely to want to work with them. We're more likely to want to welcome them into our countries, we're more likely to want to hire them. And so, I think that what we've seen is an organic, natural extension of the things that make Africa great. The things that we've already experienced, and we've

known, those of us who are in the ecosystem, who grew up going to the parties, listening to the music, eating the food, wearing the fashion. I think the diaspora has done a really, really, really strong job, excellent job of bringing that culture to the mainstream in the markets that they're in.

[16:45]

One of the reasons why Nigerian afrobeats artists are so popular is because of the Nigerian diaspora. That they are in these countries, they're in Canada, they're in the U.S., they're in the UK. They're requesting these songs on the radio. They're listening to them on Spotify and Apple Music. They're attending the shows, which gives the mainstream companies the data, the information to prove. Because before, I think it was really hard to prove that this is valuable. It can be hard to measure the economic value of culture. I think on our side, we don't have as much data. Whereas we can see this is a billion-dollar market in other countries. But in Africa, we didn't have the data.

But now, we have the data, we have the numbers. When an artist sells out Madison Square Garden, we can quantify that. When an artist walks on New York Fashion Week and they then get orders to be placed in major department stores, we can measure the economic value. And so, that data is so powerful.

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So, absolutely, we've seen an increased demand for African entertainment, fashion, food. And I think what it does is it creates an opportunity for more people to access, more people, to be able to share so that you don't have to be a big company. You don't have to maybe have a large import or export business. But if you are a small fashion designer and more people are primed to recognize the value of African fashion, to respect it, and to pay the cost, that then enables them to go and hire more people. So, they can go and hire the tailors. They can then go and hire the social media managers. They can have a marketing manager, a factory manager, and there'll be such significant trickle-down effects.

So, we talk a lot about, particularly in African policy circles, we talk a lot about youth unemployment. We talk a lot about this demographic boom and how there's going to be hundreds of millions of young Africans who will be shifting the world and how Africa's the youngest population. But I wish we had more conversations about what it looks like to have those people engaged in productive economic activity. And the cultural and creative ecosystem is one way to do that. It has the potential to hopefully generate millions of jobs as well as increase the soft power and the diplomatic strength of our African markets.

SIGNÉ: Fabulous, Afua. Your essay also highlights the role of homegrown digital platforms in supporting African entrepreneurs. What unique advantages do these local solutions offer and how can they be further strengthened and scaled?

[19:27]

OSEI: I am so impressed by the number of African solutions that have been tailored to African problems. I think first and foremost, they understand the environment and

they're able to see in advance where the challenges may be. So, one of those companies that I mentioned is called ANKA, and they are really focused on e-commerce, e-commerce and enabling African fashion and cultural producers to be able to ship their products. They have a really strong foothold in the Francophone market, and they also have expanded to Anglophone West Africa as well.

But one of the things that I really like is that first of all, to get people to sign up on your platform, you can't just do a lot of ads. Right? Your sourcing model is going to be different. And so, because they understand who their target sellers are going to be, they're going to approach it differently. They're going to go to the markets. They're going to go through community organizations. They're going to go through our faith-based institutions. So, even recruiting and their focus on inclusivity is going to be different.

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Secondly, they also understand that when you are a small-scale fashion entrepreneur, maybe you might have two or three things to ship out a week. That is so extensive via UPS. UPS or DHL or FedEx, they have their business model. They have to make their money, which makes quite cost prohibitive to ship things from Africa to the U.S. So, ANKA aggregated those orders so that they could ship out instead of two or three orders, they could aggregate 50 different sellers, maybe send out 100 to 200 orders, which lowers the cost to the businesses and lowers the cost to the end consumer, which makes it more likely for the end consumer to want to purchase more things. So, I think understanding the challenges and being able to design around it is so important.

[21:21]

And in terms of how they can be further strengthened and scaled, African entrepreneurs have to utilize them. Many of us, we've been socialized to believe that Western technology is the best. And their solutions may be good. But if we want to have companies that focus on our needs and our challenges, there may be a desire, and then we may need to work with local, homegrown solutions.

I think secondly, there's an opportunity for local investors to further amplify and ensure that they are funded so that they can grow and scale the way that their competitors are. Because international companies are going to look at the African market, as they already have, as an opportunity and a place to grow. So, our companies have to be well-funded and well-staffed to be able to grow, and scale, and compete.

SIGNÉ: I like that, Afua. And your final recommendation is to outsource digital talent. Can you elaborate further on this idea on how outsourcing digital talent might present greater opportunity for young African entrepreneurs?

[22:28]

OSEI: In the policy world, we many times look at what other countries have done in order to develop and how they raise the standard of living for their population. And we can look at the China model, which in some ways could be relevant for Africa, but

industrialization has changed it. When we look at India, they really started and grew with outsourcing. When you look at Eastern Europe, they also have found key pockets of excellence around outsourcing.

Today with gig working, with freelancing, with remote work being even more popular, there is a major push for companies in the West to lower their costs. And one of the ways they do that is through outsourcing. So, Africa and West Africa in particular, time zone is closer. They're speaking English or they're speaking French. Well-educated, friendly people. Why not have this be positioned as a market? And South Africa has done a really great job in positioning their country as a central place for talent. I think there's a lot more opportunity to do that.

And instead of going through a large industry, when we look at the creative sector, whether it's graphic design, motion picture, social media marketing, those are places where young Africans can gain employment and serve as their own entrepreneurial venture. They can be their own boss in doing that.

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And I think that this is important because we have hundreds of millions of people, who between now and 2050, who need to find employment, and our local markets cannot absorb that amount of talent. We do not have enough large companies on the continent to be able to employ all of these people. Small-scale entrepreneurship is allowing people to survive, but they do not have benefits. We do not have the social safety net. And so, if the question is, how are we going to raise the standard of living? How are we going to bring in much needed external capital and foreign currency? The question needs to be, how can we utilize the skillsets of young people across the continent and connecting them to opportunities externally?

And what does that look like to export without leaving? I know we've done that with nursing, we've done that with doctors, and many countries will send out their talent. But what does it look like to keep people locally but allow them to outsource their talent through a remote tool or through a digital platform? I think there's a lot of opportunity.

And I think my policy recommendation would be for governments to take this seriously. To identify how can their country or certain markets in their countries be beacons of excellence, whether it is for the motion picture industry, whether it's for accounting, it could be for financial processing, it could be for backend operations, and ensure that their talent is trained to the highest world class standards. But then they're also effectively going out and marketing and going on the road and positioning their places as good places to do business and inviting companies to hire their talent.

SIGNÉ: Fantastic, Afua. As you know from previous *Foresight Africa* podcast episodes, I love finishing these sessions with a couple of questions for all my guest. AGI looks at Africa from an economic perspective, and we focus on how to accelerate economic growth and structural change while fostering inclusion, especially for youth and women on the continent. Building on your work and experience, what is one piece of advice you will give to African or global policymaker to ensure the best outcomes for digital entrepreneurship on the continent?

[26:12]

OSEI: My number one piece of advice for African policymakers would be to move out of the way. It's important not to stifle these industries. And it's very challenging because technology and digital is moving faster than lawmaking can catch and keep up. And we've seen a tendency in certain countries to want to control and stifle. And while I recognize the need for national security, for stability, also recognizing that these technologies and these tools and these entrepreneurs have the potential to bring enormous, enormous growth and economic opportunity to thousands, if not millions of people in those markets.

And so, I'd encourage policymakers to not be so wary for their first response, not to be to clamp down or tamp down when it's election season and we know that certain countries are going to turn off the internet or to decrease access to digital technologies.

I always count and think about the economic loss, the economic loss that happens during this time. But I imagine AGI has done the research around this and what that looks like. And so, I think there's a fine balance on how to ensure that countries are able to grow while maintaining security. But I think that what we've seen historically and worldwide is that when you give people the freedom to innovate and to create, good things happen, and that communities are able to move forward and progress is made.

So, my number one advice would be don't tamp down. Encourage, support, have conversations, and learn and give people the room and space they need to be able to grow and scale.

SIGNÉ: I like that, Afua. Given you a successful career an impact, what advice would you give to youth, especially women hoping to follow in your footsteps?

[28:00]

OSEI: My number one advice to other young people and young women and young people on the continent would be to explore our continent. There is, I think, this thing where many of us want to stay close to home. We believe that our country is the best, and we love to debate it. You know, the West Africans are always debating about Jollof. The East Africans are debating about dance. You know, Southern Africans are debating, North Africans are debating about football. I think we love to debate. But I think that so much good can come from exploring other cultures, from traveling, from visiting, from building community. Because we will learn that actually, we're all neighbors. We have so much in common. And that there are opportunities to grow and scale together.

When I went to Kenya, I learned, and I was able to bring that to Nigeria. When I went to South Africa, I was able to learn something that I could take to Ghana. And it could only happen when we are connecting and we're building community. And so, I want everyone to go out there and move somewhere else. You don't have to stay where you're born. You don't have to stay close to home. I think we keep home in our heart but go and explore so that we can learn and take those lessons back to where we come from.

SIGNÉ: Thank you so much for joining me today, Afua.

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OSEI: Thank you so much, Landry.

SIGNÉ: I am Landry Signé, and this has been *Foresight Africa*. To learn more about this show and our report, visit [Brookings dot edu slash Foresight Africa podcast](https://brookings.edu/foresight-africa-podcast).

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