

Report on the Young African Innovators, Creators and Entrepreneurs Workshop: Intellectual Property (IP), Innovation, Creativity for Entrepreneurship and Job Creation

to the Dakar 2015 African Ministerial Conference

**by
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65% of the people in Africa are below the age of 35. Europe is concerned about their aging population. China has abolished their one child policy. They all want to remain competitive.

Africa is sitting on a gold-mine; its youth!

On Monday, November 2, 2015, WIPO did something historical and empowering by bringing young innovators and inventors from Africa together in a centralized location, with resource people in Intellectual Property and Innovation.

The theme of the one day workshop was very appropriate for Africa's needs in the 21st Century: "*Young African Innovators, Creators and Entrepreneurs Workshop: Intellectual Property (IP), Innovation, Creativity for Entrepreneurship and Job Creation*". It was a lot for one day but we achieved a lot covering issues from:

- The fundamentals and use of innovation with a focus on Industrial Property and Copyright; and an understanding of the Africa Innovation Ecosystem so that the youth can also compete for awards like the Africa Innovation Awards;
- IP Commercialization and monetization of creativity (where it was evident that most of these young people do not know how to exploit their IP; many give away what they can monetize due to ignorance; and many do not know, or struggle, to scale up);
- Product Commercialization which included how to brand and scale up businesses with very apt examples, including one of a young South African who has invented a 'Dry Bath' lotion, just because he did not want to have a bath – it is a solution for those who do not have time for a bath or lack the water. By the way he claims that it can save two hours for homework; and
- How to capitalize and attract public and private funding. This came towards the end of the day and it was evident the youth would like more support in this area to be able to promote innovation and creativity in Africa.

WIPO was also able to share with the youth about the:

- WIPO-World Economic Forum Inventor Assistance Program; and
- WIPO's Project on the Establishment of Technology and Innovation Support Centres.

Nevertheless, the crowning moment (which could have taken half a day but this young people did it in about 1 hour) was the exchange of experiences from the different parts of the continent.

It is amazing how language was no barrier. It was even difficult to moderate this session as there was constantly a *wow factor* when each spoke or demonstrated what they had created.

One of them (from Burkina Faso) shared how he came from a poor background. His mother was a musician who never commercialized her work. He may not have inherited money but he inherited a rich musical heritage that even rich people with all the money cannot buy. This has taken him to a level his mother never reached.

Allow me to spend about 15 minutes or so to allow representatives from these youth to give you snap-shot of this session. I have to admit that there is no better way to report on this but from the horse's mouth.

Recommendations:

It is based on this that I now highlight some of the recommendations from the youth workshop:

1. The need for support to access funding and/or funding sources was a rallying theme. In response, one of the resource people shared how each year he attends the Fund Forum International in the USA. This is where all Asset Managers meet and many have shared their interest in Africa. The question is are we really ready to capitalize on this funding internally and utilize it to take our continent to the next level? On that note I learnt of two other potential avenues:
 - The African Union Foundation (AUF) has funding for potential projects from the youth. They shared this yesterday in a meeting that the youth had with the President of Mauritius and the Director-General of WIPO.
 - The Commonwealth Secretariat has a youth division for its 17 member countries. They want to use it as a platform for the youth to voice their concerns and share their projects. The Secretariat is willing to give technical assistance and help source funding. It is worth noting that CHOGM will be in 2 weeks and there is an exclusive youth forum.
 - There could be seed funding at national level for development of innovations. Some countries have these and some are working with varying degrees of success. Many youth have challenges in accessing these funds. More importantly most countries have none.
2. There is a need to review the education system in many African countries and incorporate an element that allows more independent and creative thinking; this would encourage innovation. The school culture focuses more on who is first in class (academic) to the extent that our children cannot fail; not failure per se but 'surviving failure'. They must be able to experiment and make mistakes that they can learn from and be supported to learn from e.g. one trying to make the 'Dry Bath' Lotion for example. It will not be perfect with one touch.

3. There is a need to develop more government supported incubation centres for the kind of students I have described, those who are 'surviving failures' yet there is learning from what they are trying to create or invent. There are many centres that are being set up by the private sector and even donors. These should also be encouraged but there is a need to have a balance.
4. For such incubation centres to thrive – in the same vein as many local research centres – there has to be better funding for Research and Development. Most African countries have poor allocation for R&D, in some cases none at all.
5. There has to be IP awareness drives, including in the education system. This should be done in the way there has been awareness drives about AIDS and other causes. It is important to be proactive about issues rather than reactive. This can include availability of key IP issues in various briefs even in local languages. There is nothing wrong in some civic education on IP issues especially for young people.
6. The youth requested if possible there could be a new agency or creation of a department in an existing agency where they can discuss and get support on various IP issues locally. Their request is to have something akin to Legal Aid centres in their countries.
7. The centres could also be used for training – or there could be other avenues for training – on IP issues including how to register your patent, how to scale up and so on.
8. They also requested if they could be involved in part of the policy making process especially on the issues that concern them. This could include even being part of the initial committees that discuss the draft policies.
9. They requested for mentors – and this is not a request for government alone but they can also facilitate – especially from the continent or in the Diaspora. These do not have to be confined to one's country. For example, the talented Actress from Malawi could benefit from a mentor from Nollywood.
10. This is has been a rallying cry. African governments need to have Science, Technology and Innovation policies which are implementable. In addition, they must effect the national systems of innovation beyond theory.

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