At TEDGlobal: Somali start-ups and a new kind of map

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Many of those living in shanty towns around the world have no address, meaning they cannot receive mail, or even have a pizza delivered—but a UK-developed, grid-based mapping system has come to the rescue

From fostering innovation in one of the world's harshest environments to novel ways to repel mosquitoes and map the world, here are some highlights from the TEDGlobal conference in Arusha, Tanzania.

Seeds of a Somali tech scene

Somali scientist Abdigani Diriye believes that at some point, his country needs to do more than devote all its resources to fighting piracy, Al-Shabaab and famine.

"We also need to plan long term," he told AFP on the sidelines of the international version of the prestigious TED conference, devoted to "ideas worth spreading".

So about six years ago, he returned from the UK, where his family fled civil war in 1989, to his home in Somaliland to create the country's first start-up incubators and accelerators.

He had already seen interesting products and ideas mushrooming out of a system broken by decades of conflict.

It was not easy, his organisation has had to work with universities and government to make start-ups "cool" and convince people it is a viable career option.

"We hand-pick the most exciting and promising innovators and start-ups and provide them with training, investment and mentoring," he said. So far they have trained more than 25 start-ups.

One of his favourites is Muraadso, a start-up which struggled to establish an online shopping system before realising that Somali customers wanted to see and feel what they were buying as in a real life market.

So they set up an online-offline business model and now have half a dozen stores employing about a dozen people.

Diriye realises tech won't solve all of Somalia's problems, "but it is a

great vehicle to address many other challenges" such as healthcare, unemployment and education.

Others have since followed in his footsteps such as the iRise innovation hub which lanched in June in Mogadishu.

Meet you at 'prices.slippery.traps'

When you look at a map of a Brazilian favela, or township in South Africa, you may see a few streets and a lot of empty space, whereas a satellite image shows an area packed with homes and shops.

Like billions around the world, these are people living without an address, meaning they cannot get post, an ambulance or even have a pizza delivered.

In 2013 Chris Sheldrick of UK-based company What3Words developed a new system of mapping the world by dividing it into a grid of 3m x 3m squares and giving each of these squares a three word address which will be the same today or in 10 years.

So instead of complex co-ordinates, you could merely find someone at "prices.slippery.traps"—a specific spot around the Eiffel Tower.

Sheldrick said postal services in Mongolia, Djibouti, Nigeria and Ivory Coast have adopted the system while the UN uses it in disaster areas.

In recent months the British embassies in Yaounde, Cameroon as well as Mongolia have adopted their own three word addresses.

And in the Caribbean, Domino's pizza is using it to finally find their customers before their dinner grows cold.

Mosquito-repellent sandals

At 'Mosquito city', as Tanzanian scientist Fredros Okumu affectionately calls his lab—the world's biggest mosquito farm—he and his team at the Ifakara health Institute are working on new ways to repel and eliminate the carriers of malaria, dengue and Zika.

Through a rare study of the mating habits of mosquitoes they discovered that male mosquitoes gather in swarms in the exact same location, at the same time, year in and year out to wait for females. They are currently working to map these breeding spots using volunteer villagers so they can identify and destroy the swarms.

While mosquitoes are the deadliest and most studied animal, the best line of defence is still bed nets and insecticides—to which resistance is growing.

Okumu and his team have developed a repellent that can be worn in trendy "mosquito-repellent sandals" or placed under chairs, that can protect several people in the immediate area and last for up to six months.

This is currently being tested in Tanzania and Brazil, he told AFP.

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