

In DR Congo, home-grown digital entrepreneurs defy odds

May 14 2018, by Louise Dewast

Being a digital entrepreneur in the Democratic Republic of Congo comes with many challenges, not least that internet access is very limited in a vast country of more than 80 million people.

Overcoming the odds, a small vibrant tech scene is emerging in the sprawling capital, backed by funding from the DRC diaspora.

Dozens of aspiring entrepreneurs and curious investors recently gathered in Kinshasa for the launch of "Ingenious City," a dual-use meeting and office space with high speed internet for Congolese start-ups.

WapiMED, an online map where users can book and pay for medical consultations, was founded by two Congolese, Jose Zefu Kimpalou and Steve Nkashama. Their startup is self-financed for now.

"As entrepreneurs, we don't think about the risks; we think about how we can initiate change and bring about a solution to a problem," said company country manager, Daddy Kabeyal.

Kabeyal, who studied in Europe before returning to Kinshasa, joined the team last year after a career in marketing.

Using their online platform, a Congolese living abroad can pay for medical treatment for relatives back home.

Fighting for funding

Access to [high speed internet](#) is not the only problem—many investors are wary of the political and security risks in DRC.

The banks can provide some funding but entrepreneurs find it difficult to convince them that they are a safe bet.

"Being an [entrepreneur](#) in Kinshasa is a bit like being thrown in the middle of a boxing ring and you have to fight against someone who is stronger than you", said Baya Ciamala, known as Narsix and founder of Baziks, a music streaming app.

"We need working capital. We need to invest in research and development for our projects, because it's really a new industry that requires flexibility and funds to be able to move forward and operate, and that is really not easy in Kinshasa", he added.

There are signs of change however.

The country's national trade union (Federation des Entreprises du Congo) recently launched a special unit to help young entrepreneurs.

"We're going to tell the banks—here are those you should give funds to," said Serge Nawej, president of the National Commission for Young Entrepreneurs (CNJE).

"We'll give our members legal advice and encourage revenue sharing," said Nawej, who hopes to reach 55,000 members by 2020.

Thomas Strouvens, a Belgian citizen with Congolese roots, moved to Kinshasa five years ago, deciding to leave his job in advertising and launch a start-up last year with his co-founder Jean-Louis Mbaka.

The pair created Youdee, a real-estate website that connects owners, renters, buyers and sellers. Since launching in 2017, they have been attracting 5,000 views per month.

Strouvens and Mbaka were able to raise funds and hire eight employees in Kinshasa.

"We are better organised and have a stronger tech community than people think. There's a real potential here," said Strouvens.

"Entrepreneurs need a bit more support from the state and from the private sector, but we really don't have anything to envy from our neighbours."

'Useful to my country'

Jonathan Kiloso, who spent several years in France, recently co-founded an incubator called Start It Congo. His aim is to support six Congolese start-ups this year.

"I want to be useful to my country," he said, "but it's also a business venture. In a market that isn't very competitive, the digital space presents an opportunity but you have to have an idea".

Kiloso backs Baziks, which aims to promote Congolese and African musicians.

"Music in the DRC is like football in Brazil", said Ciamala. "We could have started our company in France but I think it's important to start in the country of origin".

Baziks connects African musicians with listeners through a system of "followers". The application offers a pay-by-song service as well as a

premium subscription service.

Ciamala's goal is to reach two percent of the connected population in the DRC.

"It's a bit philosophical but it's also to prove that we can do things here, that we can export internationally, instead of the other way around".

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