



Building bridges of innovation between Europe and Africa

Engineers might disagree. However, not all bridges are built with steel, concrete and asphalt. Some are made entirely of cooperation and coordination. This is the type of bridge connecting Europe's closest neighbour, the African continent.

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Covering everything from smart health and fintech services to food tech, ed tech and sustainable energy, EU and African companies are bringing their smart solutions to be incubated, accelerated and scaled up via partnerships across the Mediterranean Sea. Together, they are tackling global health emergencies - such as the Covid-19 pandemic - and climate change, issues that hit Africa hardest, but transcend borders and countries.

Meet Hadiyyah Eleojoh Lawal. She is a disrupter dedicated to unlocking digital healthcare in Nigeria, now scaling up in Europe. Appreciating the tremendous potential of digital technologies, she is helping African hospitals throw their paper files into the dustbins of history, and through smart solutions, linking hospitals and patient data across the two continents.

Making the dream come true

‘It was always a dream to make key information available to patients in my home country,’ said Lawal, who studied information management systems at university.

As chief operating officer of Primed E-health, a leading African digital healthcare company in Nigeria’s capital city Abuja, Lawal has realised her dream. Together with co-founder and company CEO Dr Are Abdulhafiz, they developed a game-changing electronic management system to unify records and databases across hospitals, which now counts 44 hospitals in West Africa, handling data of 1.5 million patients. With Primed E-health’s award-winning SmartClinic app, patients can use their smartphones to access their doctors for consultations, download their health records, get prescriptions, book medical appointments and pay fees through the SmartWallet.

As one of the first companies in Africa to digitise hospitals, Primed E-health’s mobile and web medical app gained incredible traction in the response to Covid-19. Its mobile-web solution was recognised by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) as one of the country’s top digital solutions developed by startups.

Along with the NCC award came funding to digitise many more hospitals in Nigeria and roll out the pilot SmartClinic product. The company is now expanding to 200 hospitals in Ghana, Uganda, Côte d’Ivoire, and Kenya. ‘And the next step will be to link them with Europe,’ said Lawal.

A chance to bridge the business in Europe



Hadiyyah Eleojoh Lawal, Primed E-health’s cofounder and COO.

‘We have vast knowledge of the startup space, allowing us to develop a model that we think can be scaled across Europe,’ said Lawal. ‘We can now achieve this with the large network of startups – especially in other African countries like Uganda and Kenya, expanding our reach as we develop programmes around healthcare and technology. We are now able to hire local experts due to the collaborations we already established while in Europe.’

Plans to connect with Europe are in motion. The company is one of 10 African innovators to incubate in the “BEES” soft-landing programme launched in Paris by the [French incubator Bond’innov](#) - a key industry player in

the innovation network [ENRICH in Africa \(EiA\)](#) mentoring startups and SMEs in the cross-continental innovation system.

Lawal highlights her experience as proof that such EU-Africa initiatives are key to attracting investors and future stakeholders when launching in Europe. 'We have been able to establish partnerships around online transactional services that we can integrate with our healthcare solutions, and other mobile healthcare providers, like H24. These are allowing us to [even] integrate with other markets that are linked to Europe, such as Tunisia, Algeria and others,' she added.

Powered by the EiA programme, Bond'innov's bootcamp has helped Lawal and her company 'navigate the complex and important path of internationalisation to Europe.'

Such European and African innovation linkups to tackle global challenges are expected to get a boost as EU and AU leaders acknowledged their joint Innovation Agenda for jobs and growth with a focus on youth during the AU-EU Summit this week.

European companies scale up in Africa

EiA programmes do not just help African startups and SMEs scale up in Europe. They also cater for European innovators interested in scaling up on the opposite side of the Mediterranean and right across Africa. These programmes offer access to local markets and knowhow, and aim at boosting innovation investments, jobs and growth. They also target global challenges, as pandemics and the climate emergency do not respect borders between countries or continents.

European startups are already experiencing acceleration in Africa. They can now join accelerators such as Chapter54, which - launched by global tech investment firm Partech - is the first accelerator dedicated to European scaleups. The decision to expand to Africa is inspired by the continent's fast-growing tech ecosystem, the company says.

The timing is perfect. The African 'tech hubs' ecosystem is expanding to accommodate a next generation of innovators that range from business incubators - where early-stage companies have access to mentoring and support to help them get established - and accelerators, offering developing companies access to mentorship, investors and further support.

One platform for European companies seeking to invest in Africa is the African European Digital Innovation Bridge Network ([AEDIB|NET](#)). Aiming to create a common digital innovation ecosystem, this initiative is building bridges between EU and African ecosystems. By connecting startups, SMEs, the diaspora, and other African and European ecosystem players in trans-continental partnerships, it is facilitating intercontinental collaboration.



Rym Jarou, project manager for ICT Startups and Innovation Ecosystems Development at the Smart Africa Secretariat

Its mission includes establishing digital innovation hubs (DIHs) along the EU DIH model, and adapting them to work on shared challenges, such as climate, smart agriculture, smart cities, and digital trade. The final goal is to provide SME and intermediary support as well as investor networks by tapping into expertise from Africa and Europe, altogether creating a powerful common innovation ecosystem.

Of the 13 key consortium partners in the project is [Smart Africa](#), a pan-African institution. Its aim is ambitious: to transform Africa into a single digital market by 2030 (much like the EU) by building affordable digital infrastructure, promoting and facilitating investment in Africa, and accelerating the birth and development of a digital society. Backed by all heads of state and government of the African Union, the Smart Africa Alliance today includes 32 African countries, which represent close to a whopping 815 million people.

‘Smart Africa is ensuring that the continent develops in harmony with Europe and the rest of the world through cooperation initiatives such as the EU-Africa Digital Economy Taskforce, the AU-EU D4D Hub project, our partnership with European development partners such as Norway’s NORAD and Germany’s BMZ/GIZ,’ said Rym Jarou, project manager for ICT Start-ups and Innovation Ecosystems Development at the Smart Africa Secretariat.

According to Jarou, the project outcomes will be ‘very impactful’ for the development of African and European digital innovation hubs.

‘We need to ensure that the maximum number of possible hubs, startups and innovators benefit from this knowledge and these linkages and opportunities,’ she concluded.

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More info

European Union - African Union summit in Brussels launches Innovation Agenda

EU-AU innovation linkups are expected to accelerate after the leaders of the two continents met this week at the [European Union - African Union summit in Brussels on 17-18 February](#), jointly acknowledging the

development of an [AU-EU Innovation Agenda](#), strategically designed to support sustainable growth and jobs, in particular for the youth.

To reinforce public participation, transparency, and inclusion, the European and African Union Commissions launched a large [consultation](#) on the AU-EU Innovation Agenda, at the recent EU-Africa Business Forum.

As part of the Global Gateway Investment Package, the Innovation Agenda has four main objectives: translate innovative capacities and results into tangible outputs; strengthen innovation ecosystems; develop sustainable and mutually beneficial higher education and Research & Innovation partnerships; scale-up instruments and programmes that can take forward existing successful initiatives.

[EU-Africa cooperation in research and innovation](#)

[International cooperation in research and innovation](#)

[Video: AU-EU Innovation Agenda, February 2022](#)