

INNOVATION HUBS IN AFRICA: ASSEMBLERS OF TECHNOLOGY ENTREPRENEURS

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ABSTRACT

Innovation hub organizations—or ‘hubs’—have become a prevalent form of support for technology entrepreneurship in Africa. About 170 African hubs have been established, most since 2010. Practitioners have argued either that hubs are transformative network infrastructures for Africa’s fledgling digital economy or that they are ineffective business incubators. This thesis steps back from this debate about whether hubs work. Instead, it asks *how African hubs work*, specifically how they shape relationships of technology entrepreneurs. Literature on intermediation and incubation is reviewed to establish a theoretical framework. The thesis then tests and extends the framework based on an extensive, grounded empirical inquiry. In-depth case study data (including 119 interviews with 133 participants) on six hubs were collected during field studies in Kigali, Harare, and Accra from September-December 2014. The thesis finds that the analyzed hub organizations were defined by nested, fluidly bounded entrepreneurial communities. Communities varied by their level of activation: members of active communities had concern for each other and recognized communities as social entities, while inactive community members only shared a loose purpose. The six hubs followed two distinct organizational patterns: the technology hub (depending on active core communities) and the entrepreneurship hub (relying on active peripheral communities). Based on these results, the thesis theorizes hubs as *assemblers of technology entrepreneurs*: hubs assemble previously distant and different actors into entrepreneurial communities. Assembly is unique to hubs: it is related to but different from incubation and most forms of intermediation. Assembly theory addresses important meso-level analytical gaps in prior research on the coordination and organization of entrepreneurship. The thesis underscores limitations in African technology entrepreneurship environments, advising hub practitioners to acknowledge that ‘only what is there can be assembled.’ Ultimately, it highlights that hubs have been critically misunderstood, and clarifies what hubs can and cannot do for technology entrepreneurs.

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