**Differences in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: Implications for Entrepreneurship Training in Africa.**

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Entrepreneurship training plays an important role in poverty alleviation and job creation in some of the poorest regions of Africa, where formal employment options are limited (e.g. Mensah et al., 2010). In comparison to emerging economies with fastly growing entrepreneurial ecosystems, entrepreneurship training in these low-income countries (LICs) is mainly driven by (foreign) donors and by the public sector as a way to fight high unemployment rates. Often, partnerships with local entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) are used to provide the training. In such partnerships, the collaboration between donors and ESOs is typically rather unidirectional: Th donors define the characteristics of the training, such as training duration, training topics and target audience (Dutt et al., 2016; Haugh, 2020) and the local ESOs execute them with limited room to adjust the training to local needs. This is problematic for several reasons: First, research has shown that “entrepreneurship training which is not well aligned with contextual peculiarities may not optimally yield the desired outcomes” (Olutuase et al., 2020). Additionally, it is a problem that trainings in Africa are often approached from a Western perspective (Sriram et al., 2021). Foreign donors are increasingly directing their private sector development funds towards entrepreneurship programs in LICs, without the right knowledge to adapt programs to specific contexts and needs (ILO, 2023). Second, significant inter-country differences exist between the 54 countries in Africa. Yet, most studies on entrepreneurship training are based in LMICs, such as Kenya, Ghana, or South Africa, where entrepreneurial ecosystems differ from LICs. Further, as criticized in a recent report by the ILO (2023), research often focuses on classifying ecosystem elements and identifying critical success factors for ecosystem development, which does not “create useful findings for practitioners as it does not acknowledge the dynamic and unpredictable nature of complex adaptive systems, which is unique in every context” (p. 32). This implies that even if ESOs had greater freedom to adjust trainings to local needs, they might not be able to find studies and guidance on how to do that.

We posit that understanding the entrepreneurial ecosystem is a fruitful avenue to gain insights into local training needs, and adapt ESO trainings accordingly. Literature has well established that the characteristics of and dynamics within the ecosystem shape the entrepreneur (e.g. Sta,. 2015). For instance, conditions like physical infrastructure or culture are important ecosystem elements (Stam & Van de Ven, 2021). Yet, most research currently focuses on actors and functions within the ecosystem, but not on ecosystem characteristics such as specific market demands or relational characteristics such as collaboration or leadership (ILO, 2023). Few studies have considered that the root causes leading to the challenges are context-specific (Biru et al., 2021; Egere et al., 2022). Knowledge on the context-specific root causes, however, would be critical, as different root causes imply that the ways to solve challenges are also context-specific.

In this study, we therefore explore the question: *How do entrepreneurial ecosystems in low-income regions in Africa differ and what do these differences imply for entrepreneurship training?*

To answer these questions, we draw on a comparative multi-case study. A multi-case examines patterns across multiple cases, to either confirm the robustness of these patterns across all cases or identify the factors that can explain differences between cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 2021). For our study, we sampled cases with a common characteristic (LICs in Africa) but also represent the spectrum between low income regions: Mozambique, Burundi, Ivory Coast, South Sudan, and Upper Egypt. For each of these cases, we had access to extensive entrepreneurial ecosystem mapping reports from Orange Corners, an entrepreneurial training program initiated by the Kingdom of the Netherlands active in 20 African and Middle-Eastern countries. The entrepreneurial ecosystem mappings were all conducted between 2021 and 2023 and entailed an extensive literature review and 2-3 weeks of fieldwork to conduct interviews with, usually, 50-100 ecosystem actors (e.g. ESOs, financial institutes, entrepreneurs, knowledge institutions, regulatory bodies and SMEs). All followed the same methodology and format.

We analyze the data in four steps (while writing this extended abstract we are in the middle of step 1) As a first step, we coded all challenges affecting entrepreneurs mentioned in the ecosystem reports onto the ecosystem elements suggested by Stam & Van de Ven (2021). Second, we analyzed the specific root causes leading up to that challenge, based on the ecosystem reports and additional interviews with local ESOs and the Orange Corners staff. For each of the challenges, we wrote a description of the root causes at play and in-depth examples from our case data how the dynamics affect the local entrepreneur and their training needs. Table 1 provides an example based on preliminary findings. Third, we cross-compare the single cases for differences and commonalities with regard to the challenges entrepreneurs encounter and devise what these imply for training entrepreneurs. Lastly, we validate the preliminary findings with local ESOs.



**Figrue 1: Illustration of analysis approach (data analysis is ongoing)**

The preliminary results already indicate that vastly different root causes lead to the classification of a certain ecosystem element as ‘challenging’. For instance, access to materials is challenging in South Sudan because everything needs to be imported. This is not a problem in Ivory Coast, where local supply is abundant but accessing packaging material is difficult. Access to material is thus problematic in both countries, yet triggered by fundamentally different root causes. This in turn points to different training needs: Whereas entrepreneurs in South Sudan might benefit from training in commercial statutes, entrepreneurs in Ivory Coast might benefit from training on smart product design.

At the end of our analysis, we aim to distill a set of key recommendations for ESOs on how to cater to ecosystem-specific training needs. We further discuss how donors and development agencies can design more inclusive training programs, including local ESOs in the process. We outline more collaborative ways for donors and ESOs to develop trainings that are context-specific and relevant for local practitioners. Not least, the results of our study will be relevant for ESOs that want to take more ownership over program characteristics and push donors back on their standard approach. Overall, we hope our results also contribute to a more inclusive approach to research on entrepreneurial support in Africa, which is currently focused on a select few and not LICs, and to the provision of more effective entrepreneurship training.

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