

New study: “Leapfrogging Africa. Sustainable Innovation in Health, Education and Agriculture”

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In times of the coronavirus pandemic, while future prospects for Africa might look rather grim, there is always room for optimism. A new study by the Berlin Institute reveals that there are many good approaches and projects on the continent that improve people's lives, and could be implemented on a broad scale to fast track development in the future. Africa is ready to leap forward.

Things are difficult on the African continent. The population is growing strongly but without a matching growth in the number of jobs. On top of it, the coronavirus crisis is making it even more difficult to make ends meet; therefore, it is crucial that Africa gets back on track quickly after the pandemic. The possibilities already exist, as a new study by the Berlin Institute shows: Technical and social innovations that make people's lives easier while leaving out inefficient, environmentally harmful and cost-intensive intermediate stages of development wherever possible – also known as “leapfrogging”.

The rapid introduction of mobile phone services at the turn of the millennium, where previously there were hardly any fixed-line connections, was a classic example of leapfrogging. Africans now use their mobile phones to conduct banking transactions, take out insurance policies or obtain advice from agricultural and medical information services. Consequentially, Africa is more advanced than many industrialized countries in this regard.

The study focuses on three key sectors crucial to the socio-economic development of poor countries: health, education and agriculture. After all, only a healthy, qualified and adequately nourished population can develop its own prospects and help advance the economy of its home countries. “In these areas we looked for examples where African companies, NGOs or governments have already achieved success,” says Reiner Klingholz, one of the authors of the study and former director of the Berlin Institute. “It is important that these ideas and concepts can be implemented quickly and at low cost by Africans for Africans. They should be spread as fast as possible and adopted by other countries.”

This is not only about modern technical solutions like mobile phones, but also about very simple changes and social achievements that can have great effects. For example, when in a South African slum, a school attempts to make the simple things right and, with dedicated teachers, passion and clear rules, provides the young people with such good education that they are prepared for the country's top universities after graduating from secondary school. Or when Ethiopia uses the Health Extension Program to establish basic healthcare with local health workers in rural areas where there are neither doctors nor hospitals, thereby decisively reducing maternal and child mortality.

“The results of the Ethiopian programme are impressive”, says co-author Sabine Sütterlin, who has visited some of the described projects herself. “The number of maternal and infant deaths has been reduced by half, the mortality rate among under-five-year-olds has even been

more than halved”. This is due in part to increased awareness of the importance of clean water, good nutrition and vaccinations to prevent infection.

In many areas, information and communication technology alone enables leaps in development or significantly advances such projects. Within the framework of the Tusome programme, Kenya uses tablets and a database to monitor children's learning progress and to make adjustments where necessary. Within three years, the reading skills of primary school children have improved significantly. The Siyavula programme from South Africa enables young people to take online lessons in mathematics and science and to prepare for final exams. During the coronavirus crisis, the number of Siyavula users has practically exploded.

Leapfrogging is particularly important in agriculture, not only because Africa, in its much-needed catch-up process, should not repeat the mistakes that industrialized and emerging economies have made in developing their agricultural sectors. The Nigerian social enterprise Babban Gona, which provides small farmers with access to quality seeds, fertilisers and pesticides and advises them on the use of these products, shows how they can fill their stomachs more sustainably and create income at the same time. This has enabled farmers in various regions of Nigeria to increase their yields to an average of 2.3 times of the national average.

Progress in the key development areas of health, education and agriculture is not only crucial to meeting the demographic challenges in Africa and achieving the global community's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. “Above all, it is also what Africans want”, emphasizes Catherina Hinz, Director of the Berlin Institute. “Surveys show that job creation and a good health and education infrastructure are among the most important concerns of the people on the continent. It is the responsibility of African governments to create the framework conditions to make successful leapfrogging in these areas possible.”

The study “Leapfrogging Africa. Sustainable Innovation in Health, Education and Agriculture” and other press material are available to download free of charge at:
www.berlin-institut.org/en/detail/leapfrogging-africa

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If you have any questions, we will be glad to help you.

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