Innovate Now: Creating an Assistive Technology Innovation Ecosystem in Nairobi

ABSTRACT

Background
In Kenya there are at least 2 million people with disabilities and approximately 67% live below the poverty line. Being able to access appropriate assistive technology (ATs) is fundamental to ensuring people are able to improve their access to opportunities for education, livelihoods and life generally. Unfortunately, currently available ATs are often inadequate, too expensive and delivered through services which are unable to keep up with the demand. The Kenyan entrepreneurial spirit and technological creativity are renowned across the world. This creates a potential fertile ground for AT innovation where new technologies and disruptive service delivery systems are developed to increase access to AT, and to boost economic opportunities across the country. Although AT innovation could represent a lucrative opportunity for many tech entrepreneurs, only a few start-ups focus their efforts in the area. This is partially due to a lack of awareness, but it is also linked to the difficulty of bringing products to market in a field where ideas need to be tested with hard-to-reach populations and complex regulatory systems need to be navigated. To effectively support entrepreneurs and accelerate innovations, it is crucial to understand: 1) the needs of start-ups approaching the AT field, and; 2) the capacity and configuration of the Kenyan innovation landscape.

Method used
Interviews with stakeholders around the UK and Africa were carried out to identify needs and difficulties of start-ups developing products for the AT market in low resource settings. Interviews were conducted with entrepreneurs, experts in the field of AT, accelerator and incubator managers and venture capitalists. Two scoping visits were also conducted to Kenya to map the innovation landscape and understand the gaps within the services currently provided to entrepreneurs. Negotiation meetings were held with potential partners to better define the role of NGOs, government agencies and the private sector within the innovation ecosystem.

Key results
To accelerate Kenya AT innovation for a fairer world, the AT2030 programme, funded by the UK Department for International Development and led by the Global Disability Innovation Hub, has created the Innovate Now ecosystem which aims to support entrepreneurs throughout their journey and help their products to reach the market more quickly. The Innovate Now Ecosystem is funded through a network of partnerships involving government, private businesses, NGOs and academic institutions where each partner has a specific role and provides contextual support and expertise to new start-ups who have developed innovative ATs. The support offered by the ecosystem includes additional funding and business consultancy, but also research and clinical mentorship alongside the possibility to access live-labs for testing innovations and receiving feedback from people with disabilities.
Conclusion
The Innovate Now ecosystem represents a new model to accelerate AT innovation that could be replicated in many countries around the world. The overall aim of the ecosystem is to ensure that more people around the world gain access to the ATs they need, but also to make AT innovation a more appealing field to entrepreneurs attracting the brightest talents in the years to come.

Tweetable abstract
The #InnovateNow ecosystem is a cross-sector partnership to accelerate #AT innovation in #Kenya led by @GDIHub. We propose a new model to support #entrepreneurs in developing new #AT and bring them to market. #AT2030 #DisabilityInnovation