



IRS SEMINAR

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17:00 -18:00, Meeting Room 402

Leibniz Institute for Research
on Society and Space

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Innovation Hubs in Africa

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.



GUEST LECTURER AT IRS

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Nicolas is a postdoctoral researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute. He studies how digital entrepreneurship works in environments that are far more challenging than Silicon Valley or London. His comparative grounded research covers African cities including Nairobi, Lagos, Accra, Kigali, and Harare. Earlier, Nicolas' dissertation at the OII focused on technology innovation hubs in Africa. He was a visitor at SCANCOR at Stanford, was a Clarendon Scholar, and grantee of the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship. Until 2014, Nicolas was consultant for the Mobile Innovation for Development program at infoDev (World Bank). He was a Fulbright scholar at Michigan State University, where he did his MA in Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media. Nicolas also holds a Diplom in Media Management from the University of Cologne. Nicolas continues to be active as a consultant: he recently contributed to an assessment of the digital entrepreneurship ecosystem in Bangladesh for the World Bank.