



Workshop Feedback Report:
Building the Innovation Pipeline
26 July 2022

Background

The Ocean Innovation Africa July Stakeholder workshop series was held in honour of African Day of Oceans and Seas. The intention of the workshops was to facilitate action on some of the challenges and solutions raised during discussions at the annual Ocean Innovation Africa summit.

The “Building the Innovation Pipeline” workshop focused on how to accelerate construction of an ocean innovation pipeline on the African continent. This report is a summary of points raised during that discussion and, as such, statements do not necessarily reflect consensus from the workshop participants, nor the viewpoint of Ocean Innovation Africa..

Participants

- Chair: Thomas Sberna, IUCN
- Co-Chair: Dalila Ibrahim, University of Cape Town
- Nicole Du Plessis, SAEON
- Saberi Marais, University of Cape Town
- Richard Labelle, African Development Bank Group
- Anne-Alice Febvret, African Development Bank Group
- Alexis Grosskopf, OceanHub Africa
- Bernice Mclean, AUDA-NEPAD
- Alexandra Fraser, Viridian
- Sara Andreotti, Sharksafe Barrier
- Rosalie Ackerman, Nets23d
- Effuah Kwaw, OceanHub Africa



Introduction

An equitable and sustainable Blue Economy (BE) has the potential to contribute substantially to progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa, particularly for coastal communities. There is considerable political momentum to drive BE development on the continent, and a lot of initiative to accelerate and upscale sustainable ocean solutions to meet this objective. As such, now is the time to establish mechanisms and processes that will have long-term positive impact, as well as to demonstrate early successes that can be replicated and scaled. Doing so requires building an effective African ocean innovation pipeline. While the need for this is clear, how to go about it, and in an effective timeframe, is less so, and formed the basis of the discussion summarised in this report.

Building a narrative to generate support for the African ocean innovation pipeline

Governments play a critical role in creating an enabling policy environment to inspire investor confidence. The concept of “Blue Economy” is relatively new and will often fall under the mandate of government representatives with little or no background in BE, usually distinct from those in charge of innovation and entrepreneurship. An integrated approach between relevant departments is needed to foster the BE pipeline. To achieve this at the pace and scale needed to meet BE goals requires it being a priority at head of state level. This in turn requires developing a compelling narrative of how the BE can contribute towards achieving political priorities.

The narrative must be able to demonstrate how BE research and development supports government priorities, both to assist in implementing strategies and to deliver impact on the ground. This will require evidence of impact, for which evaluation of how much BE entrepreneurs can contribute to GDP/SDGs, or address youth unemployment, is lacking. Ocean accounting work is a very important first step to demonstrate value of BE innovation and entrepreneurship to address government priorities.

There is a need for impact metrics and KPIs to start defining, measuring, and demonstrating impact¹. For example, credit scoring platforms, with standardised KPI's for on-call funding of projects that meet them, are one means of addressing this. Knowing which locations, sectors, demographic groups etc would benefit most from which interventions would assist to focus attention and resources.

Opportunities for action

- Science to business platform for engagement on creation of enabling policy environment
- Potential summit topic: narrative building
- MOOC focused on ocean innovation potential in Africa
- Creating roadmaps of priority areas informed by science and stakeholders

¹ The Ocean Impact Navigator launched in June 2022 at the UN Ocean Conference by the 1000 Ocean Startup coalition is an example of an initiative intended to optimise and standardise the use of an ocean impact measurement framework for innovators, aggregators, investors and other pipeline building organisations. Adaptation of such frameworks to the African context was the subject another of the Ocean Innovation Africa July 2022 stakeholder workshops. The resulting impact measurement guidelines will be piloted by several of the workshop participants and presented at the February 2023 Ocean Innovation Africa summit.

Building an inclusive pipeline

The focus must be retained on impact as well as technological and financial outcomes. Science cannot be the only avenue for the pipeline. Blue economy investments need to be inclusive drivers of sustainable ocean economy development, responsive to local needs.

Most of the people who make a living from the BE in Africa live in low-resource environments where frugal innovation is directly linked to job creation. This can be supported by building capacity/empowering communities to identify opportunities in their immediate environment without need for external intervention, though support should still be available to develop such opportunities. BE venture building studios, incubators, and accelerators need to be informed by community needs, which requires facilitation from organisations on the ground, like NGOs.

There is a need for more startups and ocean ventures to feed the pipeline, but this is held back by the risk entailed in becoming an entrepreneur, particularly for those with limited resources or opportunities. There has not been the same initial investment in pipeline building for the Blue Economy as there was for the Green Economy from which it developed. The focus has been on derisking the BE to attract more investment but it is as important to derisk the entrepreneurial environment with upstream investment.

Opportunities for action

- Building capacity for communities to capitalise on BE opportunities.
- Franchising successful startups from other regions
- Upstream investment/derisking entrepreneurial environment as a potential topic for the OIA summit

Incubators of incubators

The incubation process is a very hands on, time-intensive process, taking place at ground level, working directly with startups. The more tailored the mentoring provided the more effective it is, but also the more effort and resource-intensive.

At present there are very few oceans-focused startup incubators, particularly in Africa, and the BE does not receive the attention it merits from the ESO community. To meet BE goals in an effective timeframe will require replication of oceans-focused incubation and acceleration programmes. The most effective way to achieve this would be knowledge transfer from existing incubators, who could serve as mentors/incubators of new ocean-impact startup incubators.

Opportunities for action

- Continental hybrid-model networks to share knowledge and R&D models but also design and structure of those models in Africa based on political will, funding, etc
- Involve African tech incubators in discussions, even if not oceans focused.

Financing

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Digitising develops highly relevant digital footprint for credit scoring. Improving digital skills of entrepreneurs and intermediaries that they work with will facilitate access to funding.

Opportunities for action

- Opportunity for summit: matchmaking between investor types and business types
- Work with VC's (like SME fund in SA), providing business development services to strengthen early stage startups that don't make the initial selection to be incubated
- Credit scoring platforms allow for on-call finance based on standardised KPIs.

Blue Economy Match-Making Platform

There is a need to link support for venture building, incubation, acceleration and investment, and a need for more engagement between different stakeholder groups in the African BE, such as business to research, or policy to finance, to link those with information on priority challenges and opportunities to solution builders and funders. This could align around a matchmaking platform, designed to facilitate engagement built around a central BE narrative. This could be extended as a platform to facilitate knowledge/project import and export between Africa and international counterparts.

A platform of this nature would require resources and expertise to coordinate and run. There are a lot of platforms already in existence, it might be more practical to simply join the dots between them.

Opportunities for action

- Could consider an African Seascape Forum to create a platform for all the stakeholders . Eg see the African Innovation portal from DSI and World Bank: <https://www.innovationbridge.info/ibportal/>, or Viridian's portal for hubs: www.launchleague.co.za
- Could look at joint venture agreements with successful foreign startups for local entrepreneurs to franchise existing solutions rather than build new ones from scratch.

Thank you to our fantastic workshop participants for getting this discussion going!

