

Giving Africa the power it needs

The digital revolution is upon us globally and this can either empower or disempower Africa, depending on access. There is certainly a great need and desire to bring technological advancement to Africa, but does the infrastructure exist to support this?

By [Graeme Pitt](#) 30 Jun 2016



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In an article entitled '[Next Africa revolution to be all about power](#)' in the *Sunday Times*, it states, "For the digital revolution to succeed, Africa must improve public access to electricity, delegates at the World Economic Forum on Africa said as they met in May 2016 in Kigali. Plugging households into the grid remained a major challenge on the continent where more than 600 million people had no access to power said delegates meeting in the Rwandan capital at a three-day summit known as Africa's Davos. 'Without access to affordable, reliable, sustainable energy, Africa cannot really take advantage of the fourth industrial revolution,' said former UN under-secretary-general Kandeh Kolleh Yumkella."

It goes on to say, "But the first step was addressing Africa's lack of access to power. African Development Bank president Akinwumi Adesina told a press conference: 'You must recognise that the fourth industrial revolution is just simply about providing access to electricity. Everything revolves around having access to power.' Adesina said in February that the bank was to invest \$12-billion (about R184-billion) in the energy sector over five years. In September last year, it unveiled a landmark initiative to close Africa's energy gap by 2025."

A lot of this development of the power grid infrastructure will go through government channels, but there is also scope for smaller players to provide off-the-grid, sustainable solutions to the African population. This is a huge growth area and there is finance and support systems available for those wanting to enter this market.

Off the Grid Club

According to [an article in Bizcommunity Africa](#), the UK based company [EnergyNet](#) which, "is launching its 'Off the Grid Club' with backing from the UN Foundation and the Electrification Financing Initiative, aiming to accelerate market-ready micro-grid and off-grid technologies across Africa. The Off the Grid Club is a membership programme developed to bring together credible off-grid technology providers, financiers and regional leaders to invest in and accelerate the development of reliable and scalable power solutions for Africa. Members of the club will be given a platform and branding at EnergyNet conferences to showcase their products and network with potential investors."

The article goes on to quote Simon Gosling, MD of EnergyNet, “In emerging markets where economies are growing at a rapid pace, the fact that market-ready technologies are not reaching millions of people disconnected from the grid, is a major concern.”

Entering African markets in the energy sector has multiple benefits, besides being a financial growth area, builds communities from a grassroots level, improves living standards and provides opportunities for economic growth, which in turn creates further business potential. There is also the added benefit of possibly being able to create environmentally sustainable solutions.

Community needs

It is important for this kind of initiative to be aligned with the needs of the community and local legislation. There may be the most wonderful technology available and a sustainable energy source that is a hit in the developed world, but unless all the nuances of the local environment are properly understood it would be fool hardy to invest in an unknown foreign market.

Before entering any African market it is essential to establish what will work within that particular region and country. The benefits need to be carefully weighed up in comparison to barriers of entry. Market research would be the first step in understanding what the needs are on from a grass roots level right up to the requirements of industry. This can then inform companies going to tender or smaller businesses address the needs of a community.

With experience in over 24 countries in Africa for over eight years [Freshly Ground Insights](#) (FGI) has conducted over 450 000 interviews using electronic devices and scripted over 500 questionnaires that vary from five minutes to two hours in duration. FGI has worked across the spectrum from private to public enterprises and in the NGO sector.

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