

The African era of communications

 By [Jessica Tennant](#) 29 Mar 2017

The Holmes Report's 2017 In2 Innovation Summit took place at The Maslow in Sandton on 29 March. Opening the event, Tim Sutton, chairman, EMEA and Asia-Pacific at Weber Shandwick, facilitated a panel discussion on 'The African Era'.



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Sutton set the scene by taking a look at Africa in relation to Asia-Pacific. "It looks incredibly neat and convenient when you look at a map, but it's far more difficult than that," he said. Interestingly, the map of the world is distorted. Africa looks about the same size as the US, but it's actually much bigger, and the bigger continent, the more complexity in terms of cultural nuances and political systems.

While Asia-Pacific is very different to Africa, there are some wired commonalities, such as the pluralism of society, the drive towards urbanisation, a huge amount of infrastructure spend, a growing appetite for brands, and mobile penetration.

The panel consisted of communications specialist Kholiswa Hashe-Lekalake, Moky Makura, country representative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Thabang Skwambane, founder and chairperson of Aluwani and MD of FCB.

For Skwambane, the biggest challenge is a leadership challenge. "If we don't develop the next generation leaders that put people first, we're not going to be the continent that rises." Makura's biggest challenge, on the other hand, was trying to find a single solution to do communications across Africa.

There isn't one Africa

From her experience at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, she's realised that the application of a communications campaign needs to be tailored to the country at hand. "There isn't one Africa," she said, "and although we say it a lot, we often don't actually practice it." For instance, rather than referring to Africa

as a whole, she makes a concerted effort to use the phrase: 'the countries in which we work in Africa'. It serves as a reminder, that Africa is not one place, so you can't apply the one communications campaign, to one head office-led initiative into multiple markets.

"The one thing I do realise about Africa is that it's not business as usual the way we know it. It's business unusual There were all these countries that didn't do things the way I was used to, until I sat in one of those tough countries..." In Nigeria, for example, a simple print job can take about 10 minutes. We laugh, we take so much for granted here in South Africa and should have more sympathy for less advanced African countries, she believes.

Hashe-Lekalake can relate. In Ethiopia, between five and seven or eight in the evening, you have to wait for somebody to get off a phone call to make a call. "So there's a new appreciation for getting things done and what it takes to do so."

Asked for their views on fake news, Makura posed the question, 'Isn't it what we as communications professionals do?'—influence the media to our gain.

Skwambane added that it's what 'they' don't tell you, that you should be talking about. Back to the Asia-Pacific correlation, he thinks they missed the boat in Asia. No one was saying Asia was the next big thing, when it grew, everyone had to play catch up. Applying this to Africa, he said, "When Africa 'arrives' in this developed world movement, you want to be a brand that's there, that's relevant... Those are the things they're saying and not saying at the same time."

While optimistic, the panelists don't believe 2017 is the year for Africa's big 'arrival' so to speak, and note that it's never African-based organisations that express and go so far as to announce such bold forecasts. Perhaps this is testament to being on the ground, rooted in African soil and more sympathetic with our neighbours.

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