The past few years have been replete with media stories of an unfolding “African digital renaissance” and the wonders of the “Silicon Savannah” and other Sub-Saharan African tech hubs, with coverage reaching a fever pitch in the wake of this month’s Global Entrepreneurship Summit in Nairobi. Yet francophone Africa has been noticeably absent from tech reporting and events in the subcontinent, with the world’s attention largely focused on anglophone countries—most prominently Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Ghana—and disproportionately so, even when accounting for their larger populations. For instance, of the 30 top startups competing in the upcoming DEMO Africa pitch competition, only three are from francophone countries: two from Cameroon (which has a combined francophone and anglophone heritage) and one from Côte d’Ivoire. Generally, there is a consensus that the tech sectors in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa have significantly lagged behind their anglophone counterparts. However, recent initiatives in the nascent tech hubs of these francophone countries suggest that times may be changing.

There is no single overarching explanation for the low levels of tech (or at least digitally-oriented) entrepreneurship in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, but there are indications that the problem is a supply-side one. Would-be francophone entrepreneurs are even more constrained by lack of funding than their anglophone
cousins, as most purveyors of financial capital in tech are English-speaking investors, who are said to be more reluctant to invest in francophone Africa—and less likely to learn about francophone African startups in the first place due to the language barrier. Indeed, francophone Africa is virtually devoid of the venture capital (or angel investors) required to truly kickstart the startup scenes, which anglophone countries have relatively greater access to. There is also a human capital issue, with the dearth of developers and designers in francophone Africa exacerbated by the fact that most resources for startups (e.g. regional incubators and accelerators, labs, conferences) are in English. More broadly, it might not just be the tech sector: the economies of English-speaking African countries are growing faster and tend to have better World Bank Doing Business indicators than their francophone equivalents.

Despite these obstacles, things are starting to change, and Senegal—the African base for many major IT companies—is leading the way. Jokkolabs, the first startup incubator in Sub-Saharan francophone Africa, first opened its doors in Dakar in 2010. They have since organized a series of hackathons, trainings (#Codecamp), and conferences (such as last month’s #Failcon #Dakar). Jokkolabs is now seeding its model across West Africa, with sites opening in Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin, soon in Morocco, and even in anglophone The Gambia. Another significant player in the market is CTIC Dakar. A public-private partnership between the government of Senegal and the World Bank’s infoDev, CTIC Dakar is the first incubator in West Africa dedicated to ICT and mobile technologies. In 2012, Senegal became the first francophone African country to host a startup weekend, and more have followed since.

Côte d’Ivoire’s tech scene is hot on the heels of Senegal’s. The country’s first tech hub, Akendewa, was launched in 2009 and stayed active throughout the 2010-2011 crisis. The country also has generated promising startups that respond to specific problems faced by Ivoirians, such as Oelasy (an educational tablet for children) and TaxiTracker (a geolocation app to address security concerns with taxis). Neighboring Togo has also has had its chance to shine in the African “Maker” movement, with its increasingly well-known “fab lab,” Woelab, and the launch earlier this year of a new fab lab in northern Togo. Graduates of the TEKXL accelerator in nearby Benin have had some traction in Europe and the US. And Niger’s first incubator, CIPMEN, was created with funding from French telecom giant Orange.

The action isn’t just in West Africa. The tech scene in the Republic of the Congo has in recent days snapped into focus thanks to a company named VMK, which had launched the first African tablet and smartphone a few years ago (sold in the Congo and in Côte d’Ivoire), and which just inaugurated its first factory to manufacture these devices on July 22 in Brazzaville. VMK’s founder and CEO, Verone Mankou, also founded BantuHub, a non-profit tech hub and startup incubator in Brazzaville. Nearby Cameroon also features the bilingual not-for-profit ActivSpaces, the country’s first startup accelerator, which just graduated its first class of startups in June.

All of these nascent tech hubs in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa are promising, but there have been no runaway success stories—yet—and these countries’ startup ecosystems are still tiny. Moreover, many of the region’s startups are being funded
by nonprofits and governments, not hard-nosed investors. (Here, too, Senegal may once again be a leader, with the recent formation of Teranga Capital, a privately-funded social venture capital firm, to provide seed funding to small growing companies). However, with the right timing, skill, and luck, a francophone African “unicorn” may yet emerge, triggering a virtuous cycle of private investment and entrepreneurship into these countries’ innovation sectors. And while tech entrepreneurship might not, as a sector, contribute significantly to francophone Africa’s economic growth or poverty reduction, it has the potential to yield indigenous innovations that could improve the quality of life of many in the subcontinent, and beyond.

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