

Not another consultant is what Africa needs

 By [James Maposa](#)

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Says the career consultant. But I think of this statement as true for various reasons. Our African consulting landscape consists of both global and local consultants who position themselves as subject matter experts, innovative thinkers, corporate entrepreneurs and so much more. If they're that good the next question I ask myself is if they're that prolific at setting up and running businesses, why aren't they running their own?



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I mean they're sitting in client offices/businesses and professing that they have what it takes to turn your business around ad nauseum. Why don't they leverage their expertise to set up enterprises they can spin off and earn their respective mother ships passive income over time? This isn't to say that it hasn't happened. It has. I've heard of Deloitte's Innovation Centre which has been responsible for the development of viable businesses over the last couple of years.

To these and many other consultants, I give them their dues. But my query is that the rate of turnover of these ideas from a centre of innovative excellence is exceedingly slow. I say so because Africa's problems are nowhere near being solved. We've made some great strides, but we've only scratched the surface. I'm beginning to believe that a new type of consultant needs to exist and be given more of an opportunity to bring a new type of support to emerging market businesses.

Context is king

I've heard many consultants express their knowledge of the continent due to their many travels. Yes, many of them have hopped from country to country but I profess that their context is limited to the urban centres of the respective countries that they've been to. This suggests that their contextual understanding of the continent and its people are limited to the urban setting.

Yet most of the continent's population is rural based. This means that we're spending so much of our time understanding a smaller portion of the population and how to better serve them, yet we should be understanding the so-called "unbanked" and "bottom-of-the-pyramid" type customers a lot more. This will open new and lucrative markets for our home-grown businesses because we're supplying them with products they need, and the scale ensures that most of our business models are volume instead of margin driven.

I saw an FNB advert a few years ago where a finance consultant spent time at a farm in an effort to understand what was important for small-sized farmers from a financing perspective. Based on this "lived experience" FNB was now able to better serve its small-sized farmer type of experience.

With above in mind, Africa's consultants should stop bringing solutions to the table based on "shared experiences" but live the rural African experience to come up with products, services and solutions that make a difference and contribute to the GDP per capita doubling over the next five to ten years. No point in limiting your transport solutions to luxury sedans yet most of your market wants to get from point A to point B on a moped.

An inclusive business model

Great solutions are borne from an informed understanding of context. For instance, if Africa's per capita GDP is US\$1900 per annum, are current business models and offerings suitable for most of the continent's populace? I think not. Moreover, this is what consultants should be professing in corporate boardrooms.

To create true wealth the business model should be inclusive and not alienating to what most of the population is able to afford. This is evidenced by one of my visits to rural Namibia where a leading bank's billboard was planted but not delivering the desired result. We asked the local inhabitants why they weren't opening accounts at our client's bank and their response is that they weren't aware of our client's bank.

We then pointed them to the billboard and their response was that they didn't identify with the people and the picture painted by the billboard. Their first look at the billboard "told" them that the bank wasn't for them and because of this they paid no attention to it and our client. I guess more should have been asked about the local inhabitants and what they needed before erecting the billboard.

Show me, teach me then let me

Most consultants are going to say that I've got this the wrong way around. It should be, teach me, then show me and after that let me. That sequence won't work here. Great African consultants build prototypes. These prototypes are built through spending time in places that inspire. In the outback at a small-sized farmer's farm.

At the local bottle store which is the only shopping centre for a 200-kilometre stretch. At a clinic where one doctor must serve hundreds of patients a day. At a school where 60+ children are crammed into a classroom or sit under the shade of the tree. That is where innovation should be borne. Prototypes such as a hand-held but mechanically motored plough for the small farmer's fifteen-acre farm.

A solar-powered refrigeration and milling system for the local bottle store. A fuel-efficient transport system for the bottle store that enables deliveries to be made for a marginal cost and sustain the bottle store owner's business. A water and weatherproof tent to balance out the classroom population at the rural school. The supply of desks that use recycled material, making them affordable for the rural school.

This is the show me part that consultants should be presenting to African businesses. The teach me part is all about knowledge sharing. Consulting is all about learning and unlearning. While being tested within the marketplace, the consultant should first spell what the solution ought to do based on a lived experience. The potential customer will at first use the solution based on the knowledge shared and provide feedback.

Inclusive and scalable solutions

Part of this feedback will include how to improve the solution or perhaps adapt the solution for yet another pressing need. A result for these teachings is empowering knowledge. The business/consultant partnership return to the lab to further develop their solution.

The improved solution is then presented to the potential customers with all kinks addressed. We now leave the product to the customer expecting them to derive value from this solution in a way that they'll stay loyal, come back for more and in time advocate for others to also be a part of your empowering offering.

I end where I began. Africa doesn't need the traditional type of consultant. Their time has passed. We need consultants that support the bringing of inclusive and scalable solutions to our continent's growing list of entrepreneurs. We need consultants who share risks and are willing to back an idea to its completion because of their lived and not shared experience.

We need consultants that don't just talk about how good they are at supporting client businesses to grow but have a few tangible examples of their own to prove what they're talking about. We need consultants who embrace context and think rural before they think of urban because that's where most of the continent's customers currently reside.

We need consultants who are always thinking about the long instead of the short game. We need consultants that in the end will play a significant part in turning around our fortunes, doubling our worth and have our countries trading more and more with each other. That, in my opinion, is what a good consultant should contribute to Africa's economic revolution.

ABOUT JAMES MAPOSA

Maposa is the founder and managing director of Birguid, a research and advisory company. Maposa has 15 years work experience, mostly spent in research and strategy consulting. Maposa is passionate about socio-economic development, business growth and continuity.

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