



Towards Building a Future Literate Society: Re-Imagining Innovation

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Summary

This briefing note is based on a three-day online training and dialogue work workshop organized by Kenya National Commission for UNESCO (KNATCOM) in collaboration with Dedan Kimathi University of Technology (DeKUT), African Network for Economics of Learning, Innovation, and Competence Building Systems (AfricaLics) and UNESCO, Paris office from 28th to 30th of July 2020, under the theme “Re-Imagining Innovation.” The workshop discussed the importance of Futures Literacy Laboratories (FLLs) which seek to build people’s capacity to discern and make sense of complex emergence. This would help to overcome fear and antipathy towards the uncertainty that is inherent in a non-deterministic universe. It also makes it easier for humanity’s conscious efforts to both understand the world and act in accordance with their values taking into account the richness of experimentation, innovation and creativity that surrounds humanity. The workshop exposed participants to futures thinking as a complementary tool to researching and thinking about innovation systems and transformative innovation as well as increasing research and policy agenda for driving inclusive and transformative innovation in Kenya.

Key Messages

- Developments in technologies are heralding a new economic paradigm, the so-called 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) unleashing new opportunities (and challenges). These transformations demonstrate the urge for innovative solutions conducive to universal values of peace, human dignity, gender equality, non-violence and non-discrimination
- Policy and social innovations (more than any other innovations) will be key in helping shape the emerging trends towards desirable ends
- Africa, in its diversity and potential, offers vast potential for innovation across many different domains and by many different constituencies.

Introduction

Innovation has become a buzzword that is commonly heard in all industrial settings. Moreover, the word innovation has become dominant within the academia, policymakers and in research. Innovation occurs when people face horrifying encounters and inspirational opportunities. There is no debate that we are living at a time of considerable innovation. In so many areas, human creativity is breaking old barriers to invent new cures for disease, new means of communicating, new ways of organizing business and life. Conversely, the global emergence of developments in technologies are signaling a new economic paradigm, the so-called 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) unleashing new opportunities (and challenges) (Pouru et al., 2018). The current global challenges such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the biodiversity crisis due to mass extinctions and the unravelling climate change have posed devastating consequences to the world. In cognizant that these opportunities and threats realized from these transformations demonstrate the urge for innovative solutions conducive to universal values of peace, human dignity, gender equality and non-violence and non-discrimination.

As the society starts to imagine what the future holds, it starts to generate images that revolve around new relations between humans and technology, new intergenerational relationships, new forms of knowledge and understanding of what democracy entails as well as the intensification of radical economic and social inequalities (Poli, 2014; Slaughter, et al., 2008). With transformations already taking place in the functioning of the economy, technology and the environment, the changes have led to emergence of new demands in terms of structures and systems requiring new skills and knowledge have come up in response to evolving nature of social and economic processes. These transformations are at

once the source and outcome of innovative solutions invented with the aspiration of realizing the universal values of peace, human dignity, gender equality and non-violence and non-discrimination. Researchers and academics have also helped to drive and inspire innovation in firms and governments, seeking to underpin economic and social development.

Africa's diversity offers vast potential for development of new inventions and innovations across different domains. That is why the future of innovation in Africa is such a rich topic, giving rise to a range of questions, such as: what kinds of innovation? For whom, by whom? How can Africa tap into the sources of innovation? In what ways might Africans link up their efforts to innovate as part of a continental agenda, as part of a global sharing? Many more questions have been suggested by taking into consideration on the relationship between technological innovation and climate change or new sources of energy or new business models that harness new tools to create whole new industries. As such, new inventions relating to policy and social practices will also be part of the innovation context for all of Africa and the world.

Why innovation?

At the research and academic front, the study of innovation with respect to how innovation can be promoted in firms and by governments and why it is important for economic and social development has not been articulated adequately in many African countries. Innovation will play a key role in shaping the trajectories being unleashed by the unfolding events. For instance, innovations in technologies can stem climate change by providing new sources of energy and business model innovations can harness the power of 4IR tools to create whole new industries. Policy and social innovations more than any other innovations will be key in helping shape the emerging trends towards

desirable ends. The emergence of novel opportunities, suggesting the potential to organize human activity differently are manifold. The objective of the workshop was to help key stakeholders to re-imagine innovation so that they harness the power to shape the development trajectory.

Why Futures Literacy or futuristic approach to innovation?

The impetus behind futures literacy or futuristic approach to innovation is premised on the fact that literacy has been responsible for much of the human development. There is a high correlation between Literacy and standards of living with more literate societies enjoying much higher standards of living. Although in some circumstances development can happen without literacy, experiences show that as the economy becomes more complex and basic services improve, literacy skills as a means to build diverse and context relevant competencies becomes crucial. It is well noted that any development trajectory that seeks to create and use science technology and innovation (STI) requires high levels of general literacy and a broad range of diverse and in-depth competencies.

Futures Literacy matters because it makes it easier to detect and invent novelty in the present and also change our relationship to the only certainty: uncertainty. By reducing the pressure to eliminate uncertainty, Futures Literacy opens up new options and new choices. Evidence from the FLLs run by UNESCO since 2012 shows that people can change how and why they think about the future.

Workshop Deliberations – Key highlights

Probable Futures and Collective Imagining

From the workshop discussions, a list of probable futures as envisioned by the various groups were provided. However, it was noted from the plenary

discussion that there was a contrast among the groups. Some groups foresaw a year 2050 where fears have been conquered, while other groups foresaw fear as a driver of innovation. Moreover, innovation was viewed as an image of evolution with people learning from each other and with different functions and roles.

Collective imagining

Whilst innovations should by and large create jobs thus improving standards of living, literature indicates a large proportion of the global community live below a dollar. Participants expressed fears regarding job losses as a result of innovation. However, it was agreed that innovation should inspire more technology which then should require people to drive it thus create jobs. As such, people should invent new ways of doing things without jeopardizing what they already know. Despite fears that technology will replace human, people should move away from model of elitism to mindset where they think on how to can accommodate ideas as a complex movement with more emphasis on practical innovations.

What Next?

It was noted that this training workshop is useful for upcoming innovators. It would be prudent for learners to exchange ideas, build on existing knowledge, design and reframe program on individual level and keep learning and relearning. It is important that they define ways how our imagination works and being comfortable with ambiguity while encouraging research.

Conclusion

Resistance to innovation can be innovation in itself. Innovation will play a key role in shaping the trajectories being unleashed by the unfolding events. In addressing the key issues confronting communities across the globe, policy makers need the benefit of social science research that is relevant and trans disciplinary. The methodology

should be capable of capturing global and local trends, swift in responding to the fundamental research questions and offering findings which are clearly articulated effectively disseminated and oriented to outcomes. It is important that people learn about the future, break political and social barriers with innovation, make collaborations with various stakeholders, and stay in a state of continuous learning to embrace innovation in all forms.

References

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