

# Africa must step up to support its innovators

By [Robyn Curnow](#)

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I've lost count of the number of times I've heard business leaders from outside Africa refer to the continent's enormous potential. It's a cliché, as well as a source of frustration for many Africans. Put simply, we've heard it for too long. We know Africa is a continent rich in resources, we understand the possibilities of untapped markets, we can see the enormous progress made in certain cities. But overall, it is difficult to escape the notion that opportunities are being squandered.



Robyn Curnow, CNN

Africa is also a continent that demands inventiveness. There are challenges there that demand unconventional thinking and bright new ideas. Necessity is the mother of invention, and Africa has both in abundance. I've been meeting some inspiring innovators for a new CNN series, *Innovate Africa*, and I am already re-evaluating my own thoughts on the topic.

Among those I have interviewed is designer Patience Torlowei, whose work forms part of a new exhibition at Washington's Smithsonian Museum of African Art. Innovation, she said, was not necessarily about doing things differently, but doing things better. She worries about environmental destruction in Africa, something reflected in her work, and she says she wants to give back, and leave a legacy.

## New skills

To this end, she has focused the efforts of her highly successful garment business on manufacturing in her home country, Nigeria. She believes that by training staff, instilling in them the value of patience, and nurturing them to adopt new skills themselves, she can help create pioneers of her own, who can drive the manufacturing industry forward in Nigeria and the rest of Africa.

In Cape Town, inventor Thinus Booyson found inspiration during the severe drought of 2017, when the city's water system was on the brink of collapse. The university professor had been working with his students on a device to manage electricity used for water heating, but stripped it down to become a simple water meter. Dubbed 'Count Dropula', and installed in schools, it has revolutionised the attitude to water care among pupils, who now fully understand the value of water, and are inspired to conserve every drop.

I met Ravi Naidoo, founder of the creative incubator, Design Indaba. He talked to me of the need to inspire the next generation of Africans, and the various different challenges that design can tackle. "Clean water is a design challenge. Better housing is a design challenge," he said. His mission is to convert inspiration into products and platforms and projects, from museums to modalities for low cost housing, and has seen commissions from the likes of Ikea.

## Impactful goals

Using the power of ideas for socio-economic impact, creating technology that can aid civil society, training and investing in people, inspiring the next generation. These are all wonderfully worthwhile and genuinely impactful goals. Working on this series has confirmed what I knew already: there are some incredible Africans creating remarkable things that are making a tangible difference to people's lives and to their communities.

So, what is missing? Well, you only need to look at the investment African countries are making in R&D. The likes of Israel are forging ahead in the innovation stakes thanks to the highest gross expenditure on R&D of any nation in the world, around 4.1% of its GDP. The average among the OECD is around 2%. Most African nations are nowhere near this. Africa's people are serious about innovation. So are many of its businesses. If that commitment was shared by governments, then perhaps we would finally be able to stop talking about the continent's potential.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robyn Curnow is a CNN Anchor and a host of Innovate Africa, which airs on CNN International See more from the series on [CNN.com/Business](https://www.cnn.com/Business).

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