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The Joko Experience

Whether or not there is an economic “long boom,” there is no such thing as stasis in the technology business: it is an ecosystem in which a company is either growing or dying. Technology is a force of nature, as evidenced by the ongoing, viral spread of the Internet and communication technologies across the planet.

This it is not merely the result of globalization-minded multi-national corporations trying to foist high-tech products on the developing world. There is a legitimate debate about whether computers should be ‘pushed’ on the world’s poorest people. Technology is not food or water, and cannot in itself address the basic health concerns that threaten so many lives.

The Joko experience has been one of absolute “pull.” In villages across Africa, people know of and want Internet access and training. They see it as the key to future prosperity, and as a means of participating in the greater world for those who cannot or will not expatriate. Even the most remote populations are finding out about the Internet, through their expatriate family members, the spread of cybercafes, word-of-mouth and through other media. And while it may be true that the Internet has been co-opted by commerce, this only seems to make its appeal stronger to the disenfranchised poor who hope that by mastering and participating in new technologies, they can transform their economic realities.

When Youssou N’Dour, the celebrated Senegalese musician, asked me and colleague Adama Sow to co-found the Joko project in 2000, our challenge was to find a way to channel the interest generated by his international stardom to make the opportunities of the Internet accessible and relevant to Africans. In Wolof, a widely-spoken native language in Senegal, the word *joko* means ‘connection’ or ‘union’. Joko developed a plan to foster the capability for African populations to participate in a self-generated online community where they can create their own content and applications, rather than only consuming media and applications produced elsewhere—in the belief that the best way to achieve a significant Internet development capacity is with independently sustainable enterprises that spread on a grassroots basis. In other words, the communities themselves must engage on an entrepreneurial level.

Since their inauguration, the JokoClub pilots have been generating revenues sufficient to cover their operating costs—in itself, operational sustainability was a major goal of the Joko pilot. Now, with the pilot experience demonstrating the feasibility of achieving business sustainability, Joko is developing a strategy to enable JokoClubs to cover the full capital costs of future development. This business perspective is in sync with the growing awareness of African politicians and entrepreneurs that private investment, rather than continued dependence on aid, are necessary to break Africa’s cycle of poverty.

In this spirit, Joko is a project that aims to achieve social objectives in a for-profit environment. Joko was initiated as a non-profit project under the auspices of Youssou N’Dour’s YND Foundation in October 2000. In January 2001, however, Joko restructured as a Senegalese private enterprise, applying a model of community own-



ership, to engage the entrepreneurial energy of the communities themselves toward achieving sustainability. Joko International, S.A.R.L. was formed to direct and develop Joko on an international level. Joko S.A. is the operating company within Senegal, with the mission of creating sustainable networks of community-owned computer clubs and supporting Internet services locally. HP provided resources in the pilot phase for Joko to create an infrastructure. As Joko's ongoing technology partner, HP will help to develop and test pilot applications and technology solutions specifically for the developing world as needs emerge from Joko and other HP pilot projects in South Africa, Brazil and India.

Without doubt, Youssou N'dour's star power was a factor in attracting HP support, as well as widespread media attention within Senegal and the notice of new international partners. Does this mean that similar projects worldwide should immediately seek a celebrity endorsement? Only if it comes with a true strategic commitment. In the case of Joko, it is Youssou's personal engagement in the project that matters most. Like any start-up Internet undertaking, Joko requires constant strategic evolution as it seeks to achieve its social and economic goals. Because Joko is Youssou's brainchild, he is involved in key decision-making and development on a weekly or daily basis. A mere endorsement could not keep pace with the demands of an ambitious scope of work.

In August 2001, the Joko pilot was launched: an urban JokoClub in the Medina district of Dakar, a rural JokoClub in the village of N'Goundiane (near Thiés) and a community/local content website, www.joko.sn. In the first months of 2002, two additional Joko training centers were opened in Thiaroye and Kolda, and additional centers are being prepared for launch in Ziguinchor, Tambacounda, Saint-Louis, and on a regional basis throughout Senegal. Joko is licensing existing cybercafes as JokoClubs, as well as building new JokoClubs in areas not yet served by cybercafes, with the aim of having at least 50 JokoClubs across Senegal by the end of 2002.

To date, in its limited rollout, Joko has successfully introduced more than 3,000 people to the Internet, of whom nearly 15% were illiterate. The early results are clear: these disenfranchised men and women, young and old, are finding they can better manage their personal and business affairs using basic computer applications. Many of these same people would have previously said that literacy and educational achievement were beyond their reach, but while learning to use the computers they are gaining basic literacy and math skills without even realizing

it. By the time they recognize what they are learning they are well on their way to developing new skills, and their own capabilities for learning and changing their lives have been reinforced.

Joko's expansion through licensing a network of cybercafes—whether entrepreneurial start-ups or community-owned GIEs—will offer certified training materials, management and technical advice, a central platform for email and local content, national/regional promotions and name recognition, and other applications as they are developed, at a nominal cost. Rather than attempting a classic franchising model, in which the franchises pay high fees, Joko is trying to create a network of independent and sustainable affiliates. This is essential, as the real opportunity to achieve viability and sustainable growth will come with scale. Joko's development initiatives show international partners and local government agencies alike start to become interested in offering customized applications and services when a minimum of 50–100 access points are available.

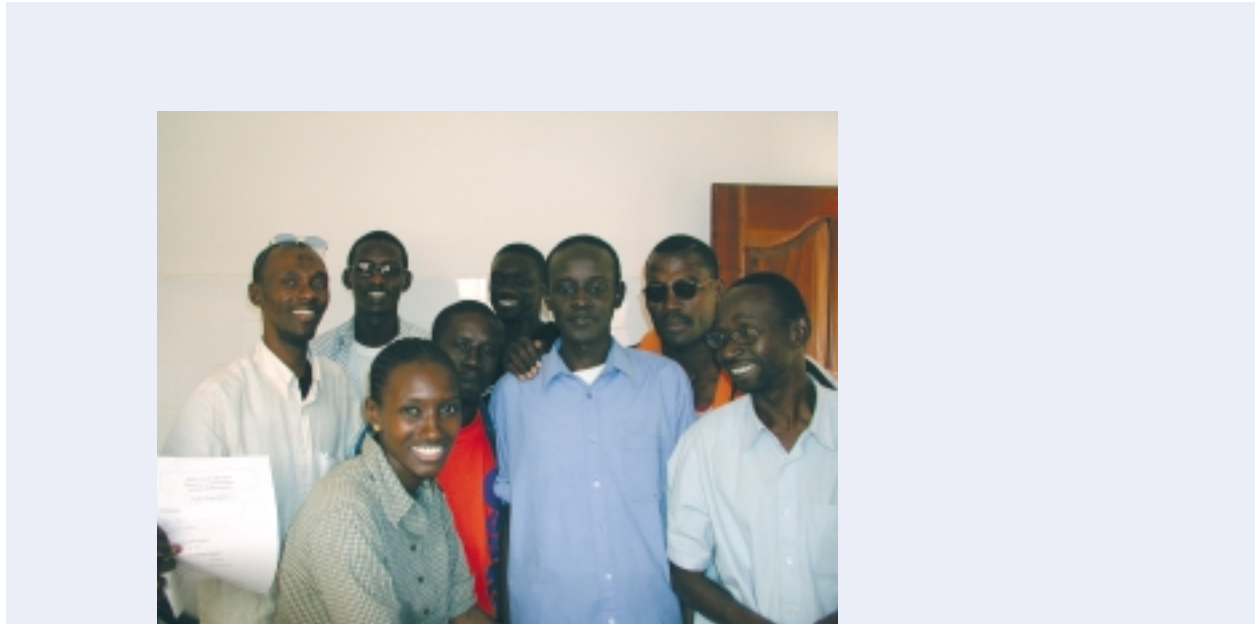
Differentiated applications—such as e-government and e-commerce platforms—could stimulate local economic transformation. With \$5 billion flowing annually to Africa from expatriates working overseas to support their families, there is a significant capital flow to spur private investment in the region if the grassroots demand and capacity can be demonstrated. Localized services will make new information and communication technologies relevant for Africans and for others in developing economies. These applications must be developed by local players who understand and can address the real needs of local communities, and who have development costs/prices that fit within the local economies.

Changing Lives

The head of the women's collective in Ngoundiane, Astou Gningue, participated in the JokoClub training. She reports that her group no longer needs to travel to Thies and pay others to create their vital business means of communications. They have developed a spreadsheet, rather than a hand-written notebook, to track their business activities. This has not only resulted in greater accuracy, but has also allowed them to send proposals for support to NGOs working in Senegal. Since the JokoClub started, Plan International opened a bank in their village to provide microloans to the women. The women manage more than 200 million FCFA (~ USD \$ 285,000) in credit, and now USAID has also brought its support to the Ngoundiane Women's Federation, adding a mutual fund of 100 million FCFA. The men of the village very proudly make it clear that the women's initiative is bringing substantial new economic opportunities to their rural community. The potential to replicate these extraordinary results in other rural zones is one of the axes of development upon which Joko is placing strong emphasis.

Dioma Mbodji is a woman analphabète clothes designer from the Medina quarter of Dakar. When the JokoClub Medina team was first canvassing the district to sign people up for training, Dioma was skeptical. She asked what good such an initiative could possibly do for her. All her life, she had studied only couture, a profession she inherited from her parents. Her business is to manage her tailoring studio and to find clients for her designs.

At age 30, Dioma will tell you that her life has been transformed with the discovery of information technologies, now that she can sit without apprehension before a computer. Conscious of the demands of the business world, she has resolved



to study French to reinforce and make better use of her new computer training. "Since the Joko computer training, I've come to understand that with a strong will, all barriers can be overcome." When Dioma first came to Joko she did not know how to read or write, but in the space of two months she learned so many new skills that she now dreams of marketing her fashions to the rest of the world using the Internet.

Dioma was among the first group of illiterates trained in the JokoClub pilot last year. When the second JokoClub opened in Ngoundiane, she became the instructor for the illiterate women there. Her personal success in learning computing made her the most convincing evangelist for her peers, and she now heads training for women's collectives throughout the emerging Joko training network.

"The rich person is the one who says: 'I am going to do it' and does it. The poor, in contrast, do not fulfill their wishes or develop their capacities." A poor woman in Brazil.

(Voices of the Poor, The World Bank)

The demystification of new technologies, the Internet in particular, is opening doors for economic development and giving disenfranchised communities new tools to live out their dreams. When developing nations have sufficient skills and access to develop Internet applications for their own use, highly localized content and programs will inevitably become available—and may well prove to alter the Internet landscape globally. Perhaps it is just this opportunity that the Internet holds out as a promise—the possibility of cultural and commercial exchange on a nearer to equal footing—that drives disenfranchised populations in Senegal to embrace new technologies despite long odds, and even to cross the literacy barrier in this pursuit. It is intriguing to consider what possibilities Internet development skills will bring to populations traditionally removed from modernity. Given the inevitable global reach of the Internet, it is frightening to reflect on the alternative—if those on the far side of the "digital divide" do not have the crucial development capabilities to reflect their values and culture online, will they fall prey to a global media landscape that obliterates them?