

Why We All Need Africa to Make.

While many may view the Maker Movement as a hobbyists' response to a pervasive digital culture, that's not how we see it, nor is it why we started the movement across Africa. We felt a Make Philosophy (Design it Yourself. Make it Yourself. Sell it Yourself.) could help address a more fundamental issue many countries in Africa face—the need to cultivate a 'Culture of Production'—a design & manufacturing base that supplies its own innovative products in response to its own market needs.

One of the continent's most formidable challenges is an inability to process our own raw materials, (both agricultural and non-agricultural), which is critical to developing industrialized societies. The processing of materials creates jobs, builds infrastructure, and allows products to be manufactured here at home. Without this, we remain at the mercy of those in the commodity markets who tend to underpay for the real value of our raw goods (cocoa from Kenya and coltan from the Congo are just two examples).

Maker Faire Africa seeks to help individuals understand and access the entire innovation landscape: metalworks, robotics, chemicals, design et al. Our fairs champion creativity across the board and encourage cross-pollination between the various disciplines and sectors. We embraced the Maker Movement as fundamental to our fairs & our philosophy because it is based on individual contribution, which is a critical component when you are dealing with countries where over 80% of the workforce exists as its own informal economy.

Africa faces a conundrum. If it can't help its citizens become more inventive, its societies won't become more productive. It will continue to face disruption, a balance of payment deficits, and will increasingly find itself at the mercy of the big powers; Western Europe & the U.S. of old, China & India of new. The world cannot afford Africa's dependencies any longer. So, there's a strong argument for increasing our ability to process, produce and manufacture for ourselves.

We began our fairs in 2009. Our first event, in Accra, was produced on a shoe string budget and had roughly 40 makers. Since then, our growth has surprised even us. MFA Nairobi was held in 2010 and had over 70 makers exhibiting, along with a few core workshops. In 2011, we were in Cairo, with just under 100 makers and nearly a dozen DIY workshops and classes, including DIY Biology, Product Development and a Pop-Up Hackerspace with a Makerbot 3D printer. This was the first time many of these tools & technologies had ever been shared in Africa, save for maybe South Africa. These are very "future forward", and it's easy to assume these don't yet have a place here, but they are the very tools that can help informal economies become competitive by democratizing manufacturing.

This year, we'll be in Lagos, which the NYTimes just named Africa's "New Biggest City". With over 20 million people consuming, you can understand our enthusiasm to also encourage them to make.

As for the future, we will continue our bottom-up, grassroots efforts, to empower individual invention and provide a platform for communities to more effectively push for policies that will enable productive environments for Africa's people.

It's a work-in-progress, and it's still very much in its infancy, but we're seeing an increasingly enthusiastic response, especially from the youth. Across the continent, from Cairo to the Cape, we have large numbers of either unemployed or underemployed. With populations increasing, these numbers will also increase. Contemporary history tells us that when the young reach a point where they are not meaningful engaged, it leads to societal disruption, as evident in North Africa and now spreading to other parts of the continent. So from a purely economic imperative, it's absolutely essential we give our populations what they need to be more productive.