

Africa

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How Silicon Valley outsources work to African refugees

By Stephanie Hegarty BBC World Service



Somali refugee Fowsia Hashi used to be a trainer for Samasource

An innovative organisation in San Francisco is working to link the world's digital giants such as Ask.com and Facebook with the poorest and most marginalised people on the planet.

In Dadaab, northern Kenya, lies the largest refugee camp in the world. There, 300,000 displaced people battle for the resources to survive, relying for the most part on hand-outs and aid.

In the middle of the vast and dusty site is a small hut filled with computers where an industrious group of people gather to connect to the outside world.

Working with a US-based non-profit organisation, Samasource, these refugees have been trained in basic computer skills, enabling them to do digitally based work for a company thousands of miles away.

Samasource aims to help provide impoverished people by giving them one of the most basic of human rights: The right to work.

Set up by Harvard graduate Leila Chirayath Janah three years ago, it provides a bridge between the hugely profitable firms of Silicon Valley and slums and refugee camps in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.



Workers translated emergency messages during Haiti's earthquake

"We've overlooked the fact that the four billion people who live below \$3 (£1.85) a day have talent and ability," says Ms Janah. "They can be producers in the global economy."

She has modelled Samasource on the assembly lines of Henry Ford in which low-skilled workers were equipped to build complex machines.

By training workers to do basic computer-based jobs, she argues, the world's most disadvantaged people can work for digital behemoths like Google, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Paul Parach was born in South Sudan, but during the civil war, he fled his village aged nine and walked across the border to Kenya.

He spent 15 years moving around refugee camps during which he was shot in the leg and left partly paralysed.

Before Samasource came to the camp, he had barely touched a computer.

"This work is a bit hard," Mr Parach says, "It must take time, but it is just a matter of practice."

Through Samasource's training he learned to perform business verification tasks for a company in California's Silicon Valley, receiving payment through his mobile phone.

When he later discovered Google, he realised that he could search for people he had lost touch with.

Idle hands

But the challenges of operating in a refugee camp have been huge.

Since 2009 Samasource has trained 90 refugees at the camp but the project has run into "operational difficulties" and Mr Parach and his colleagues are once again out of work.

Samasource has found it increasingly difficult to recruit and maintain a programme manager and ran into problems working under the auspices of Care, the aid agency which runs the Dadaab camp.

There are difficulties to do with providing work to people who have no legal status with authorities hesitant to set up infrastructure that might encourage long-term settlement.

"All of the young men in these camps are just sitting there and they are legally prevented from doing anything," says Ms Janah. "I can only imagine how frustrating that is."

But in Kenya's capital a brother and sister team are proving just how realistic Samasource's vision is.



The arrival of fast internet to Kenya has helped outsourcing

Stephen Muthee and Diana Gitaba run the digital outsourcing companies Daproim and Adept - they operate as local partners creating digital jobs for disadvantaged people in the city.

Daproim and Adept serve some of the largest digital companies in the world.

"Without Samasource," says Ms Gitaba, "we probably would have closed some time back. That is because we don't have the money to do marketing, to travel to the US or the UK where most of our clients are from."

Before their partnership with Samasource the two companies had about seven employees. In three years that has increased to 60 and they are expecting that number to double in 2012.

Ephraim Mwangi works for the company transcribing books from images into text which is in turn printed into Braille.

"I am an orphan," he says, "so I try to find money for my upkeep for my brothers and sisters who are still at high school.

"My job is supporting me, my brother, my sister and my cousin who is in college."

'Work superhighway'

The success of Daproim and Adept hinges on the availability of fast and cheap internet connectivity in Kenya.

In 2009, a fibre optic cable stretching across East Africa brought high-speed internet to the country for the first time.

"We are able to download within minutes or hours," says Mr Muthee, "whereas before we had to download work two days before."

Though the work that Dapriom and Adept produces puts them on par with other professional outsourcing companies, their ethos sets them apart.

"We are out to empower disadvantaged people," Mr Muthee explains, "we are talking about poor people, people with disabilities, youth and women."

Rob Sheppard - a senior manager of Ask Jeeves, the UK subsidiary of Ask.com - says the relationship with Samasource is "win-win."

"We get a great of quality work and good pricing but we also get the intangible benefits of their mission and their ethical policies."

But how does an organisation like Samasource avoid the accusation that is exploiting the world's poorest for cheap labour?

"There is a big difference between paying a low salary because the region is cheaper and a low salary that is depriving a worker of the basic dignity that he deserves," says Ms Janah.

The aim is to ensure that the money stays where the poverty is and contributes to local business and local development.

"I think we have the ability now to make a huge dent on poverty," she says, "if we see the internet as a work superhighway, not just an information superhighway, and the great leveller it can be."

The documentary will be broadcast online on BBC World Service on Saturday at 13:05 and 18:05 GMT, on Sunday at 09:05 and 21:05 GMT and on Monday at 01:05 GMT. Listen to it [here](#).