

# Fighting digital colonialism, Q&A with Elizabeth Gould

 By [Cari Van Wyk](#)

1 Sep 2015

The V&A Waterfront recently launched Workshop17, a multi-use innovation hub in support of start-ups, companies and initiatives working towards a better future for South Africa and Africa. One of Workshop17's key residents is [codeX](#), an organisation focused on growing the next generation of African coders.



Elizabeth Gould

I spoke to Elizabeth Gould, co-founder and CEO of codeX about the role they will play at the Workshop17 hub, the role of initiatives in support of entrepreneurship, as well as the importance of skills and innovation in solving key problems and challenges facing Africa.

## ■ ***Why has codeX been chosen to be a key resident at Workshop17? What is it bringing to the table?***

**Elizabeth Gould:** codeX's mission is to find the best talent, no matter where they come from, and train them to build tech solutions to problems here in Africa and beyond. The vision of Workshop17 is to incubate solutions for Africa. In order to do that, there needs to be a cadre of people who can actually build the software that powers those solutions. So it is a perfect fit for codeX to make its home at Workshop17. We are also a startup, so we are being incubated as well. codeX epitomises the goal of an inclusive digital economy, as most of our coders come from disadvantaged backgrounds and use the tools they get in codeX to solve problems in their own communities.

## ■ ***What role will codeX play in the development and acceleration of startups?***

**Gould:** Through participation in hackathons, on their own, and of course in projects they work on at codeX. Our coders build real products designed to solve real problems. It is a huge priority of ours to give coders who want to become entrepreneurs the tools and support to do so.

That's why codeX is partnering with mLab, the mobile app accelerator backed by the Department of Science and Technology, at Workshop17. Our coders will work on mLab projects, many of which may become startups if the apps show traction. We will also work with entrepreneurs who need apps built to do low cost prototypes and MVPs (they can get in touch at [info@projectcodeX.co](mailto:info@projectcodeX.co)) as projects for coders to learn as they build.

More generally, the lack of developers in Cape Town, South Africa, and the continent is hampering entrepreneurial growth because development talent is so expensive and using outsourced coders brings a lot of problems. So the more codeX grows, the more access local entrepreneurs will have to high quality developer talent, the faster they will be able to scale.

## ■ ***We've seen a number of initiatives and spaces pop up in the industry devoted to supporting entrepreneurship.***

***What do you think will be the value of such initiatives in growing the industry, new entrepreneurs and ultimately the economy?***

**Gould:** Initiatives and spaces supporting tech and innovation are crucial to the growth of the digital economy in Africa because they form the backbone of the ecosystem of entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, advisors, suppliers, and support necessary for the digital economy to take root and grow.

First, most Africans do not have home broadband access, so without these hubs there would be no way to communicate, much less build websites and apps to solve local problems. They provide a place for young talent to be onboarded into the tech ecosystem and learn the technical and business skills they need, not to mention build the network of support and collaboration that is vital to growing startups. They provide the opportunity for serendipity, where people working on different aspects of a problem or parallel solutions can come together and make a better solution because of it.

■ ***Why does South Africa, and Africa, need developers with a strong product focus and problem-solving? To what extent are they on short supply and why?***

**Gould:** If Africa doesn't train people who have the 21st century skills needed to solve problems, which is really all that code is, then the continent is destined to become victim to digital colonialism, where Africans are only users and never creators of their own solutions. Companies from abroad will make the solutions and reap the value created by a billion African users.

Africans understand their own problems, their own markets. All they need is a modern toolkit to create their own solutions. That will build a local digital economy, integrated into the global economy.

In addition, by 2035 Africa will have the world's largest working age population. Digitally empowered, that's a knowledge workforce that will serve the whole world and create value for African communities. Without technical skills, a huge proportion of the world's young people will sit idle, with no chance at careers that enable them to reach their creative potential. Hundreds of millions of people with no jobs? That's a recipe for global disaster.

The demand for problem-solving developers is infinite and the supply is tiny. Only 10% of Africans get access to any kind of tertiary education. A tiny percentage of those study programming and computer science. Universities tend to emphasise theoretical principles, move slowly and take a long time to update curricula. But we now live in a world where entire computer languages like JavaScript change infinitely in six months. New languages come online all the time. codeX helps coders learn how to learn, so they will always be able to keep up with the pace of change, which is going at a breakneck speed.

■ ***According to your profile on the codeX site, you have travelled around Africa "telling stories of the entrepreneurs, investors, and companies building Africa's digital future". What are some of the most important lessons or tips you have learned from your travels and the people you have met with regards to entrepreneurship and technology?***

**Gould:** First, Africa is not one place. What works in Nigeria may not work in Kenya or South Africa, or even in neighbours

like Ghana or Benin. It's not one market, so people focus on the biggest markets first, which is why you see the most concentration of tech activity in huge cities like Lagos and Nairobi. However, there is innovation happening everywhere across the continent, and sometimes solutions hatched in small out-of-the-way places are scalable, especially if they have support around accessing markets and distribution. Adaptability across multiple markets in Africa is key to scaling. If you can be successful in, for example, Nigeria, Malawi, and South Africa, you can potentially be successful across the globe.

Sometimes people who don't have a lot of formal training come up with the most interesting solutions, usually out of necessity. Africa's youth is what make me the most optimistic about the future of our planet.

■ ***A lot of people find studying or a career in ICT, coding, etc. a challenging thought. It can be intimidating when you come face to face with a screen full of code the first time and for a regular Joe on the street there is a perception that acquiring skills in coding and technology fields is extremely difficult. Is this true? How can this perception be overcome?***

**Gould:** It is intimidating, even to me. But most South Africans speak multiple languages, and programming languages are really just other languages designed to communicate instructions to make the computer do what you want it to. We have people with just matric and even some without coding apps and programming robots, so we know you don't need to have studied computer science at a top university in order to have a great career in tech. You do need passion, persistence, and determination, because it isn't easy. But it is rewarding, because you have a goal in mind and a problem to solve, and it's on you to get there. That's also empowering, because you realise you don't need to wait for anyone else to solve the problem for you.

I think the notion that coding is too hard or should be reserved only for geeky boys should be overcome by introducing programming and coding concepts at a very young age, in early childhood. There are tons of toys and even free games that people can use to teach logical thinking and step-by-step flows to young children. If kids grow up tinkering with electronics, doing brain teasers designed to help them think analytically, and looking at the code of WhatsApp and Facebook instead of just using it, this whole notion that it's too hard will go away.

## ABOUT CARI VAN WYK

Cari Coetzee is a contributor to Bizcommunity Tourism, Agriculture and Lifestyle.

- #CoCreate2Accelerate: the gamification of education - 18 Aug 2016
- #CoCreate2Accelerate: Accelerating Polymorph in the IoT market - 10 Aug 2016
- Advanced analytics: the key to the customer - 12 Feb 2016
- Impacting the economy one micro job at a time - 22 Jan 2016
- [BizTrends 2016] Top five ICT trends 2016 - 18 Jan 2016

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>