

Africa: Open for Business

Somali businessman Mohammed Yassin Olad describes the airline he heads as a true cash operation.

The people who fly Daallo Airlines in Somalia pay cash for their ticket and then, like the passengers, the money also travels on the plane.

It's all part of operating a business in Somalia—a country which has had no central government for more than a decade.

For Olad, there are benefits. "Sometimes it's difficult without a government and sometimes it's a plus," he says. "Corruption is not a problem, because there is no government."

The story of Daallo Airlines which began operations in 1991, after the collapse of the government, is an example of a thriving business in Africa—a continent not often viewed as a destination for business investment.

But a new film—[*Africa: Open for Business*](#)—seeks to dispel the myths about business in Africa by showcasing ten entrepreneurs on the continent who tell in their own words their path to success.

Cash-Only Airline

Olad is one of those entrepreneurs. He's the chief executive officer of Daallo Airlines which had its humble beginnings with just one small hired Cessna making a commuter run.

"After the war started people had a real need," Olad says. "Somalia became very isolated. There was no transportation. There were no banks. People were fleeing."


He says while it's a business, the airline was also partly a humanitarian concern as for many years it was the only link for people in the troubled nation. "The last two years, you know, we expanded to Europe. We started flights to Paris and London so we invested to make Daallo a major airline in Africa, connecting Africa to the global village."

The private airline business in Somalia is now thriving with more than five carriers and price wars between the companies.

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Olad says the absence of a central government has made for a unique situation. “We build the airports and we service the airports and we only fly when we are sure it’s safe,” he says. But despite the war and the lack of a government, they’ve never had any safety problems in the 14 years they have been flying.

Made in Nigeria Clothes

The Nigerian business of Adenike Ogunlesi also had humble beginnings.

But Ogunlesi, who now owns and operates the “in” label in Nigeria in children’s clothes, Ruff ‘N’ Tumble, started in the business by accident.

“My kids ran out of pajamas. And I used to make clothing for women. So I decided that I’d just make some pajamas for my kids.”

From there, Ogunlesi made children’s clothing for a friend and took to selling children’s clothes in bazaars. An inspired idea to use her own children -dressed in her label—for an advertising promotion led to immediate success.

“It was the first time that anybody had ever been marketed children’s clothes—not a clip out of a foreign magazine—but actually using Nigerian children. The response was incredible. People actually wanted the ‘made in Nigeria’ garments,” she says.

Now Ruff ‘N’ Tumble is a thriving business with 50 employees- and even offers housing loans to its staff.

But Ogunlesi smiles as she says she’s not interested in exporting to the United States or England. She has her eye firmly on West Africa.

“We don’t export now. Export to the West African coast, yes. All along the West African coast, yes. But to say America or to England, I’m not interested in it at all.

“If 40% of the 120 million Nigerians are children, I have the potential of a huge market here,” she says.

For Ogunlesi, some of the challenges to establish her business were and remain basic, such as the provision of a reliable electricity supply. “The electricity supply doesn’t get better. It gets worse,” she says.

Breathing Life into Animation

In Dakar, Senegal, the owners of Pictoon, which makes animated films, also struggle to deal with the problems of a reliable supply of electricity.

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Aida Ndiaye, executive producer of Pictoon, says sudden drops in power and power outages means computers don't last long.

"You can put in all the surge protectors you like, but it doesn't change a thing. Every year we have to replace the entire system," she says.

But Pictoon too is a thriving business. It's Africa's only animation design studio that produces television series and feature films. It recently completed a 13 part series called Kabongo, the story of a mystical African with his monkey who travels around the world—the first series made totally in Africa.

The co-owner and creative director, Pierre Sauvalle, originally from Cameroon, learned his trade in Paris, but moved to Dakar to have an opportunity to train local people to tell African stories through animation.

But Sauvalle says people have been skeptical in believing their work originated in Africa.

"When we present something that Pictoon has done, the first reaction people have is to say it doesn't come from Africa. Behind the term, African, is the idea, hidden a bit, that a production that comes from Africa must be sort of thrown together, badly made, badly finished. And this is not the goal of Pictoon," he says.

"We are very, very proud of our first film, but now, for us, it is something accomplished. Animation has been done in Africa. It's a reality," Ndiaye says.

Animation, she says, allows Africa to express itself to the outside world.

Africa: Open for Business also showcases entrepreneurs from five other countries—all with a successful story to tell which highlights how they've used local solutions to local problems.


The film ends with the words : "Investing in Africa remains high-risk, but surprisingly Africa offers the highest return on direct investment in the world."

It's a message the film's producer, journalist Carol Pineau, hopes the world will heed.

Africa: Open for Business was produced with funding from the World Bank.

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