African User Research: Knowing Your User

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Designing with, not for

The Discipline of African User Research

User research — the systematic study of the people you are designing for — is the foundation of good product design anywhere. In Africa, it is even more critical than in Western markets, because the gap between the assumptions designers bring to their work — often shaped by their own experience as educated, urban, smartphone-owning individuals — and the reality of their target users is frequently enormous.

Effective African user research requires going to where your users are. If you are designing for rural smallholder farmers in northern Nigeria, you need to spend time in rural northern Nigeria — not conducting surveys from a Lagos office, not reading reports about northern Nigerian farmers, not interviewing your friends who grew up in the north. You need to sit with farmers in their fields, understand their daily rhythms, learn what decisions they make and what information they need, understand what devices they use and how they use them, and discover what problems they consider urgent enough to pay to solve.

This is not merely methodological good practice. It is a political and cultural stance: a commitment to letting African users define their own problems rather than having problems defined for them by designers who assume they know better. The history of Africa — of missionaries who came to solve problems Africans had not asked them to solve, of colonial administrators who redesigned African societies according to European theories, of development organisations that imposed solutions on communities who had not been consulted — should make any African product designer acutely sensitive to the danger of designing for communities rather than with them.

> *"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*
>
> **— Attributed to Lilla Watson and Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s — a principle African product designers should take as their own**

User Research Methods for African Contexts

Several specific user research methods are particularly valuable in African product design contexts. Contextual inquiry — observing users in their actual environments while they perform real tasks — reveals insights that no survey or focus group can provide. If you are designing a mobile agricultural advisory service, watching a farmer in their field trying to diagnose a crop disease on a slow internet connection will teach you more in an hour than weeks of desk research.

Community co-design — bringing future users into the design process as active participants rather than as passive research subjects — not only produces better products but builds the community ownership that is essential for adoption. When a community has been involved in designing a product for their own use, they advocate for it, support new users, and provide the feedback that enables ongoing improvement.

Pilot testing in the most challenging conditions — not in the best-equipped urban setting but in the rural village with poor connectivity, old devices, and low-literacy users — is essential for identifying the failure modes that urban lab testing will never reveal. A product that works perfectly in a Nairobi coffee shop and fails in a Kisii market stall has not been properly tested.

Key Takeaways

African user research requires going to the actual community where a problem is experienced, treating future users as co-designers rather than research subjects, and testing in the hardest conditions a product will face — not the easiest. This is not merely good methodology; it is a deliberate rejection of the pattern of external actors designing solutions for African communities without consulting them. The next lesson turns these research insights into concrete engineering and design principles.