The Product Design Process

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — The African design sprint

From Problem to Prototype: The African Design Sprint

Product design is not a single act of inspiration. It is a disciplined process of iteration — moving from a vague sense that a problem exists, through systematic investigation, to a clearly defined problem statement, to a testable solution hypothesis, to a prototype, to user testing, to refinement, to launch, to continuous improvement. The design sprint methodology below draws on the best of global product design thinking, adapted for African contexts.

Phase	What Happens — African Context Specifics
1. Problem Discovery	Go to the community where the problem exists. Observe. Interview. Listen more than you talk. Resist proposing solutions before you fully understand the problem.
2. Problem Definition	Synthesise research into a precise statement: '[User type] in [specific context] cannot [specific task] because [specific constraint], which means [specific negative consequence].'
3. Solution Ideation	Generate multiple solution hypotheses. Apply the African-first checklist to each. Narrow to the most promising solution.
4. Prototype	Build the simplest possible representation that lets you test your core hypothesis — a paper prototype, wireframe, or basic coded demo. The goal is to learn, not to impress.
5. User Testing	Return to the community where you discovered the problem. Give the prototype to real users and watch them try to use it without explanation.
6. Iteration	Use what you learned to improve the prototype. Repeat testing until users can use the product effectively without explanation.

Phase	What Happens — African Context Specifics
7. Minimum Viable Product (MVP)	Build the simplest version that can be released to real users and generate real learning — a complete product that does one thing extremely well.
8. Launch and Learn	Release the MVP to a small initial user base. Measure rigorously whether it is solving the problem, and use that data to guide the next iteration.

Notice what this process is not: it is not a single brilliant idea implemented perfectly on the first attempt. It is a disciplined cycle of humility — building the smallest possible thing, testing it against reality, and being willing to discover that your first idea was wrong. The African engineers and entrepreneurs who have built the products examined earlier in this course — M-Pesa, Twiga Foods, Zipline — all went through versions of this cycle, often multiple times, before arriving at the product that actually worked.

Key Takeaways

The design sprint — problem discovery, definition, ideation, prototyping, testing, iteration, MVP, and launch — is a disciplined, repeatable process, not a single moment of inspiration. Every successful African product examined in this course went through some version of this cycle, often multiple times. The next lesson turns from the design process itself to the business models that make a well-designed product sustainable.