

Digital Support for the Global Majority: A Conversation with the Engine Room

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CRISES & RESILIENCE

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Just Tech aims to highlight organizations and individuals working at the intersection of society and technology. Here, we feature a conversation with the Engine Room, a nonprofit organization that provides technological and data research and support to partners in the global majority-world, particularly in Africa and Latin America. Ever Bussey, program officer of Just Tech, speaks with Paola Mosso and Lesedi Bewlay, executive director and deputy director at the Engine Room, respectively, about the organization's work and its upcoming fifteenth year anniversary.

Ever Bussey (EB): My first question is quite broad: What does The Engine Room do?

Lesedi Bewlay (LB): We are a nonprofit. Our main goal is to strengthen the fight for social justice by supporting civil society's use of data and technology in more strategic, effective, and responsible ways, which we do in a couple of different ways. While we work globally, we do have some regional focus in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. We provide direct support to our partners. We also do research at the intersection of data, technology, and civil society fighting the fight.

Paola Mosso (PM): I would just add that we're a global majority-centered organization, as in our programs center communities from a global majority context. And we're also a global majority-centered organization, as our staff is mostly from a global majority context, including our leadership.

EB: Can you introduce yourselves and tell us specifically what you individually do day-to-day at the Engine Room?

LB: My name is Lesedi. I am currently the deputy director at the Engine Room. I work with Paola and other folks on the leadership team, firstly, on strategizing how to provide support and engage with communities in the areas and spaces where we want to be active. I'm also involved in quite a bit of our project work, which is the direct implementation of support. We do in-depth no-cost support for partners in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa through our Matchbox program, which takes six to nine months and must be applied for. Through our Light-Touch Support program, we provide rapid-response no-cost data and tech support for underresourced organizations, usually taking no longer than one day, who want to use data and tech more strategically or responsibly in the work that they're doing. I'm involved with both of these programs.

I'm one of the dinosaurs on the team. This year will be my twelfth year on the team. So, I'm trying to bring some of that knowledge and experience to hopefully empower and prepare folks when we think about moving forward in terms of how we support and engage our communities based upon our experiences and the movements that we support.

PM: You have the two longest serving members of the Engine Room in this interview, because I'm about to turn ten at the organization. My current role is executive director—I work closely with Lesedi and our Senior Leadership Team on strategy development and implementation. I lead fundraising and relationship-building for development and oversee programmatic activities.

In my day-to-day, I also either lead or contribute to projects. Everyone at the organization does. We see it, on one side, as a way to stay grounded in community needs. But also, we are a small team. There are twelve of us, and we distribute our strengths where it best fits the support we provide. By support we mean direct support and research, which we see as a tool for support. Everyone is involved in support in some way at the organization. I started at the Engine Room in a specifically community-building and support role for Latin American communities.

EB: Congratulations on your ten years and your twelve years, respectively. I'm curious, Paola, about the focus on the global majority. I hear that terminology used often, especially with Fellows at Just Tech who are also focused in that area. What is the distinction between global majority and the Global South? Is there a difference? And can you tell me what your work with the global majority looks like? What do you find that they need in relation to the global minority? How are their needs different?

PM: While we don't think either concept, global majority or Global South, is perfect, we do think that global majority reflects the majority of the world a little more, and it also does have a South perspective in the ways that I apply it. There are many communities in Latin America, for example, that use "Global South". There's a certain pride in the concept of the South. There are frameworks, epistemologies of the South that have been born in Latin America, and artists, creatives, researchers, and supporters who use that concept, as in the North Star being in the South, shifting the direction of what guides us; sort of shifting the map upside down. I still relate to that, but we've found more comfort in this concept that speaks more of the majority of the world than the minority of the world.

When it comes to needs, they vary. Lesedi has a better understanding of the current needs and how these

have evolved over the past twelve years. But we're seeing a number of needs that relate to the sociopolitical contexts that communities are facing today as well as underlying needs that come from colonization and the structures of power that have created different access opportunities for groups when it comes to technology.^[1] Both the infrastructure of the internet and of digital technologies are unfolding differently. In particular, the labor needed to build and sustain the tech we use today, such as mining for raw materials or content moderation, relies on extractive and exploitative practices. This is not exclusive to the majority world. We know that this is widespread also in the minority world, in the North.

Colonization has created a dynamic of extraction that remains to today. It's reflected in the extractivist nature through which digital technologies are being developed these days in the majority world. The Global North strongly relies on extractivist models of land, water, air, and labor use, among others for certain digital technologies, but it's also thirsty for data, and it all disproportionately affects communities in the global majority. I do want to add that we're aware that there are marginalized communities and groups across the minority world that are also facing these challenges. When I say global majority-centered, it doesn't mean that we only focus on the majority world—we relate to the struggles of social justice movements in the global minority—but as an organization, we focus on the South. But there are solidarity actions that are happening and could happen as part of a more global movement than by dividing minority and majority worlds.

LB: I'll definitely echo what Paola said. I would add that some of the needs and trends that we've seen concern access to technologies in the languages that they're comfortable operating in. A lot of technology has strong biases to certain languages, such as English, so we're strongly focused on increasing the broadness of the ways that support, information, and knowledge can be made accessible in different languages. Also, we appreciate that the communities we work with may not have much tech experience, be familiar with terminology, or using data.

With AI and other emerging technologies coming to the forefront, there's so much information out there, but at the same time, there's quite a bit of confusion about what is relevant to communities who don't have many resources. Maybe they're struggling at a base level with issues such as having good internet access, which is sometimes a requirement to access this kind of emerging tech. We've also seen that a lot of partners and communities don't want to feel like they may be missing out on opportunities, but at the same time, we want to ensure that they're aware of the risks and the repercussions around existing and emerging technology. So, I think knowledge and awareness are key components, especially within the areas that we want to be able to insert ourselves.

PM: Thinking about what Lesedi shared about knowledge, we should note that colonial dynamics center one direction of knowledge—knowledge that is developed and designed from the minority world vs. majority world, or North vs. the South, as the ones holding power. In this frame, we should explore what is considered knowledge, how knowledge is developed or accessed, and how knowledge in place is defined, considering local technical and communal approaches. In our methodologies, we try to center the perspectives of marginalized communities and global majority folks who have lived experiences with either the technologies that we are researching, or to provide support centered on their needs, on their

challenges, and in the ways that they are seeing and they experience the world. That's also part of how we are framing our perspective at the organization.



Photo source: Pexels/Michelle Guimarães.

EB: That creates a really beautiful segue to my next question. Keeping with this theme of knowledge and knowledge production, as you know, Just Tech is a research fellowship that supports and publishes research at the intersection of society and technology. The Engine Room also has a research focus, along the same intersection, but it seems like your approach focuses on consulting, if I understand that correctly. So, can you tell me the specifics of how your research process works in a consulting capacity? Do people reach out to you specifically for research, or do you work with partners and decide that there is research potential?

PM: It's a little bit of both. For example, we could work with partners, such as funders, and community members who have an interest in the intersections between environmental justice and digital rights. That's a question we and a collective of funders known as the Green Screen Climate Justice and Digital Rights Coalition were having, so they hired us to conduct that research and get a sense, from a global perspective, of what were the intersections and challenges, what were opportunities for environmental justice folks and digital rights folks to convene or think through issues from a combined perspective. That's one example that is representative of where there was an allyship with funders that funded this research to inform their own programs and to inform next steps in certain communities.

There are other examples, such as our work on information ecosystems in Latin America and the

Caribbean. That research focused on issues presented by communities in Latin America and the Caribbean about misinformation, disinformation, privacy, and safety, within the information ecosystems. Through that analysis, we found a partner funder, Open Society Foundations, who funded a program that involved support, research outputs, and community engagements, which was critical for the participatory research.

We held about six community calls with participants who were community members across movements about who influences and who is part of an information ecosystem. That evolved into a report, as well as a toolkit. The toolkit reflects on strategies being used today to restore the information ecosystems in the region, as research participants framed it, and also a set of visions for what the information ecosystems could look like if they were healthy and robust.

This particular example reflects the ways we are designing our research at the Engine Room. Our research approach is a combination of what we hear on the ground, and then we proactively search for a partner that could fund that whole program, or parts of it, where that could be realized. It was at least a two-year process from finding support to research to achieve this project.

LB: Even without support, we also incorporate rapid research. For example, when we assess the context in which a partner operates, we do research to understand the risks and the factors within the operating environment that we need to consider as part of our support. If we're looking at tools or approaches to technology, we would also incorporate some rapid research, where we have some frameworks for assessing the liability of potential technology or tools when considering their suitability for a partner's environment or context.

Aspects of our approach also allow for components to strengthen each other where support can inform some of the challenges and trends that we see through our regional support. For example, it can inform specific questions that we may want to address through some light research, to also build up our knowledge in those areas, if it's for specific trends that we may want to know more about, to understand the landscape in more detail. So, we see it as a bidirectional format for both.

PM: Lastly, through rapid research, we've also developed what we call conversational tools for community events in which we participate. For example, Lesedi applied one of these tools with a researcher from our team to identify different initiatives that we would call an African AI Pluriverse. They defined certain characteristics of technical developments that would serve as examples to say that there are other ways you can develop technology when community-centered and locally tailored, and they exist and here are some of them, and we developed some visual assets and some posters. Lesedi also facilitated a barbecue at that event. So, the rapid research was thought through as a tool for engaging with others, which was a success in this case, where there were dozens of folks who wanted a barbecue, but also talk about other ways to develop AI with existing initiatives from local partners.



Photo source: Unsplash/[Jacky Zeng](#).

EB: To close the interview, I want to give you both an opportunity to share any upcoming events or anything you want to promote that the Engine Room has coming up. What exciting things are you looking forward to?

LB: This year is looking really exciting. We will be supporting two new partners, both in Latin America; we have some exciting projects through our intensive support that we're looking forward to for the next six to nine months. We'll be supporting partners in Africa and Latin America around that. We've been working on a project with a cohort of partners on data governance in Africa, which is also wrapping up this year, and we're seeing a lot of opportunities to share what we've developed for those partners to strengthen our support for other partners with similar needs.

Lastly, this year, the Engine Room is turning fifteen, so we're planning different ways to both celebrate this milestone but also reflect on what has the evolution and direction been over the past fifteen years. We'll be thinking about different ways to bring community together to celebrate and share different moments throughout the year for that as well.

PM: We're having our quinceañera this year. We're going to celebrate the whole year, not just one day. We're planning to have a few community calls. We would like for them to reflect different partnerships that we've held through the years. So, we're going to be inviting folks that we've engaged even ten years ago.

We're building a roster of partners, as in communities we've supported, research partners, and funders that have been great allies and thought partners throughout the years. We really want to make sure that those spaces of celebration reflect the organizing goals of the groups on the ground that are facing struggles this year. We want to make sure that the space that we hold centers energy-building, that those are also moments where we can get together, and celebrate and build hope for what's coming.

The other piece that I want to mention is that we're going to be publishing soon a new project that we're going to be working on, which involves a research component. We're calling it AI for Climate Action as a concept. It's going to be a full-cycle approach to creation and adoption of locally developed climate-resilient AI models in majority world contexts. Obviously, it's also relevant across the world. We're very keen to map out what is existing today that is helpful, and what are the characteristics of those examples that are supporting communities.

We're going to be developing a responsible AI development framework for climate action, which is meant to be participatory with groups on the ground as well and generally promoting awareness of these locally developed initiatives that usually have very different characteristics of what is more well-known for AI. They are usually smaller, they are very resilient to climate, and they are also manageable, accessible more physically for groups. We want to center the attention on those developments. We at the Engine Room believe that technology can be a partner to achieve social justice, depending on how it's developed, who is designing it and how it's being accessed, opening up possibilities to those futures that we want.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Footnotes

- 1 Social justice movements face intense online and offline harm in a challenging political climate marked by shrinking civic space, rising authoritarianism, and increased threats from antirights groups. These movements, including journalists and activists, face unprecedented cyber harm, such as hate speech, data breaches, doxxing, surveillance, and gendered disinformation. In 2025, only 7 percent of the global population lived in countries with free or relatively open civic space. Digital repression tactics undermine privacy, freedom of expression, and political participation globally, particularly in the global majority world. Examples include Tanzania's nationwide internet shutdown during a noncompetitive general election and mass protests, the use of Predator spyware to target Angolan journalist and activist Teixeira Cândido, or doxxing of at least 17 journalists in Chiapas, Mexico.