



**“If you're keen on impact, there's no one who is a competitor”:
David Orega of Sauti East Africa on leveraging technology and
designing solutions based on community feedback.**

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you introduce yourself and give me an overview of your work?

David Orega: My name is David Orega, and I work for Sauti East Africa. Sauti East Africa is an organization that leverages mobile technology to deliver tailored market, social, legal, and agricultural information to small-scale traders and smallholder farmers. The reason why we are in this space is because we identified a lot of information asymmetry that really affects people at the bottom of the pyramid. We realized that a lot of institutions are using the internet to disseminate information, but most of these smallholder farmers and small-scale traders do not have access to smartphones or computers to access this information. Or even if they have smartphones and the internet, they don't have the requisite educational background to enable them access this information.

This became a challenge. They needed all this information to make a lot of informed decisions for their business endeavors, for their social needs, and also to understand their legal positions. For us at Sauti, our focus is on ensuring that the people who are mostly forgotten, who do not

have the best internet access or education or economic capabilities, can also access the information by leveraging easily accessible technologies [such as] USSD [Unstructured Supplementary Service Data] and SMS [Short Message Service] and WhatsApp. Our focus is on information inaccessibility.

For example, we ensure that our farmers and traders have access to commodity prices across the region so that they can make informed decisions on where they can source and also sell their produce at maximum profits. We also have information on real-time exchange rates and on seasonal weather forecasts. We have information on children's rights and women's rights. We have information on gender-based violence as well.

Our focus is to ensure that those that may not have access to the internet can also use their simple feature phones to access this information. Because at the end of the day, decision-making is determined by how much information you're able to access. And you need to access it at the right time and also in the right format. That is what Sauti is all about, working across the East African community region.

Our focus is on women. Even as we focus on women, the information we provide cuts across all gender and age groups. But in terms of strategy, we're only focusing on women. For example, even when we're doing sensitization trainings, our focus is on women, because looking at the numbers, statistically a huge percentage of women are involved in cross-border trade, smallholder trade and small scale farming. And a big chunk of them are the ones who are disproportionately affected by technology issues. That is why our focus is on women. But of course, we are looking at technology that is accessible for all and is free for all. So despite our focus being on women, we also have a huge chunk of men and young people as well who are accessing these platforms.

Rollo Romig: Who are your collaborators in collecting the information you're disseminating? Tell me who you need to work with.

David Orega: At Sauti we provide a platform to complement other agencies in doing what they're supposed to do. We are not authorities on legal rights or health, but we have to partner with organizations that are directly involved with those issues so that now they can use our platform to make that information accessible to many other people. Sauti is collaboration-led, with a focus of providing an alternative platform that can ensure that people that are mostly forgotten are in a position to access that information, because we believe that there has to be more equality and equity in information access.

Rollo Romig: What are your strategies for cultivating and maintaining these partnerships in a way that helps your work?

David Orega: Most importantly, our partners do understand some of their weaknesses in ensuring that information is accessible by all. And they appreciate the role that we play in reaching out to those people [without access]. They realize that what we're doing is basically supporting what they are doing. We're helping them do what they have not been able to do. It's a symbiotic relationship. That has really helped us, that they know that what we're doing is a social good.

This is a social impact organization. We are not there to make profits. As a matter of fact, we are providing information for free. What we're keen on is to ensure that people are able to make informed decisions. No one is left behind as far as access to information is concerned. When we bring this argument to our partners, they realize how important this is, and it's always been really easy to bring them on board. Also, the information we're talking about is already public information. None of it is classified information, no sensitive information that anyone would be worried about. With that kind of arrangement it's always been easy to bring them on board.

I'll give you an example of how that works. For instance, we have a Ministry of Agriculture in Kenya that does an incredible job of going to different markets around the country to collect price information. This information is very, very important for farmers and traders, because through that, people are able to make decisions on where to buy and sell at maximum profits. The information ideally is intended for people in the villages and small towns. The challenge is that they're only disseminating this information via the internet. They have an incredible website with all this information, but how many of our women farmers at the village level or traders at the local level will access this website to get the information? The numbers are very, very low.

What we're doing at Sauti is taking that information from the website and making it accessible to farmers or traders at the local level on their simple feature phones without the need for the internet. They can access it without a smartphone or any advanced technology. If they have just a simple feature phone, they're able to access information. By and large, the Ministry appreciates that they have a challenge in making this information accessible to those that don't have access to the internet, so we are coming in to support them. It's a symbiotic relationship.

Rollo Romig: How do you go about identifying where the gaps are? How do you find the areas that need your service?

David Orega: We are very intense on data and research. At Sauti we carry out a lot of user-needs assessments, whereby when we have a conversation with our users, we ask them what they want. Sometimes they give us feedback themselves. I'll give you an example. There was a moment when we launched the Sauti market prices platform, and when we were trying to get feedback from them, they were very candid with us. They told us they really appreciate the prices and they want more of them. But there was another need that they saw: maybe maize is going for this amount of money in market X, but who is selling it in market X? That gave us a realization that giving the prices alone is not enough.

We asked them, how do you want us to help you? And we carried out a survey on how they feel that problem can be solved. The survey report indicated that normally they trade amongst themselves as traders and farmers, and they said if they could have a platform where they are able to connect as farmers and traders and showcase what they are selling or want to buy, then that will really, really complement the prices that we also are providing. So based on feedback, we are also able now to build more of a market linkages platform. This was driven by the feedback that we got from them. We do a lot of needs assessment and customer discovery surveys to understand what their needs are, and not just identifying what their needs are.

Rollo Romig: What have you learned about how to implement a survey to get the best feedback and the best information?

David Orega: We have developed different types of surveys, from one-on-one to USSD surveys. We have done quantitative and also qualitative surveys. We have tried a myriad of [approaches] just to make sure that we accord them privacy at the point when they're answering the questions. We've also looked at the point of convenience. [With a] USSD survey, we launch it and you can respond to it at your convenience. What we have learned is that different survey strategies would apply to different people.

For instance, maybe qualitative might not apply for all respondents. Or quantitative might apply in some cases. We have been [trying] to understand first and foremost who our audience is, the sample size that we want, and what kind of feedback we are looking for. Then we are able to make a determination on [our approach]. In some cases we have done a quantitative survey, and based on the data we get, we want to build on it using a qualitative study as well.

A USSD survey is [useful when] you want to capture some quick data on user preferences, or maybe you want to understand their level of education—those quick surveys that you want to roll out really fast. We are able to build them on the Sauti platform. So when someone dials our

code and wants to access our normal services, we prompt them that there's a survey that is available and we request them to take part in it. USSD is menu-driven, so we introduce a menu option for the survey. They will select it and they'll be able to see the questions and answer them at their convenience. Once they're done with it, it gets submitted to us automatically. This really is easy for them, because they can answer it at their convenience.

We're talking about people who are mostly busy at the market or in the farms, so you don't expect that you'll have time at 10 in the morning to talk to them. But maybe once they're done with their day to day activities, maybe at night when they're resting, that is when they have the time to respond to the survey. At this other time maybe we at Sauti are not working, but the platform is still live, and the day after we are able to see the feedback.

Rollo Romig: Could you just speak a little more on the convenience factor when it comes to implementing surveys? What do you find works best?

David Orega: For someone to respond effectively to a survey, you need to first and foremost identify the methodology that is convenient for them, and also one that makes them comfortable. I'll give you an example. You have women who will struggle to raise a dollar a day, and they are invited to a five-star hotel for a focus-group discussion—chances are very high that that environment is going to be very intimidating for them. They may not open up or want to tell you what you need to hear. But if you take them to a local place, a place that it's very convenient for them and that they're very used to, then they're able to open up.

When it comes to technology and convenience, you want to ensure that when you're administering these surveys, the technology you are using is one that they have access to all the time and they're comfortable with. With mobile phones, it's easy, because these are phones that they're using day in, day out. They send SMSs, they receive SMSs, they read SMSs, they write SMSs. Anything that involves their phone is easy for them. In comparison, if you send them an email survey to respond to, chances are very high that they might never respond to that, because they hardly access their emails. Maybe they do it once in a month, so by the time they're responding to that email, it might be [too late], only because the channel you used is not convenient for them. It's important to make those kinds of considerations. The likelihood of getting positive responses and results is higher.

Rollo Romig: On the other end of it, with your partners and collaborators who are providing some of the information that you're trying to get to these women, do you survey them about the gaps they're experiencing in disseminating that information?

David Orega: First we engage the potential users of the information and understand what their pain points are. And when we understand the pain points, then we reach out to the service providers to tailor some of that information to the specific and identified needs of the consumers. We start with the potential user and then we take it up to the information provider.

That is what we do most of the time. But then there are also moments when the information provider has specific information that they want disseminated. So for instance, during the COVID-19 period, we were working with a health information provider and they had tailored some information for COVID-19, and then they just gave us that information as it was, and then we published it on our platform. So that was coming from the provider down to the user without the user's involvement. Everything was new, so we just gave it out as it was. There are also moments when we have talked to the users to identify what their needs are and then escalated it to the information provider, and then they tailor that information to the express needs of the users.

Rollo Romig: Can you give me an example of an approach you attempted that didn't work out how you hoped that it would, but where you learned a lesson from the experience?

David Orega: We've had a lot of failures in the process. I'll give specific examples.

This is a social-impact initiative. No return on investment. So when we started, we had the idea of giving the information for free, [including] the USSD charges. Users don't pay us to access the information, but of course there are Telco [telephone company] costs. When we started, our thought was, let's pay for even those service costs, the USSD costs and everything. At that point we only had a few thousand users, so it was manageable, because the costs were not too high.

And then it got to a point where we had over 100 thousand users of the platform. And every time they dialed, of course we're taking care of the cost. The bill was so huge that we realized that it was not sustainable. So we had to revert to where they incurred the service charges. [When we started charging that fee,] we lost quite a number of users of the platform.

One of things we learned out of it was, when it comes to information provision, and especially looking at our target audience, are people willing to pay for these services? And if they're not willing to pay for these services, how are we going to be sustainable in the long term? The question of sustainability came up when we realized that we lost them because now they had to incur the Telco [fee] to access the information. It's very important to understand who your audience is, and not just their willingness to pay but also the ability to pay. Because when we

conducted surveys to understand whether or not they're willing to pay, the answer was an overwhelming yes: that the information is important for us, we're willing to pay, so we can take care of those telco charges. But then when we implemented it, the exact opposite happened. A lot of them are not willing to incur any costs whatsoever despite the fact that these costs are not coming to Sauti but are the normal SMS and USSD service costs.

Rollo Romig: That's a very difficult balance. At this point, do you feel that you've solved this problem to your satisfaction, or is that something that you're still trying to balance?

David Orega: This is still a work in progress, and it's not a unique situation for organizations that have also tried to venture into information provision. I think it might be region specific. Maybe where we are, that is where the challenge is. Maybe in some other places that may not be a challenge. Maybe in the developed world people are used to paying for some of that information. Unfortunately, here that is not the case. So it's still a work in progress. We are trying to do a lot of sensitization SMSs to create further awareness of the availability of the services and how these services are able to support business ventures.

The growth that we've experienced has been organic. What happens is, maybe we get an opportunity, when resources allow, to train a few people in certain places, and then these people, if they find information important to them, will tell other people, and the other people tell other people. That is how we've realized the growth. Maybe in that process, some of them were not effectively told about some of the other features that are there. So they only focus on just a few. For example, you'll only need certain information if you're planning to send money. If not, then you don't need that. So if that was the only information they were talking about and had interest in, if that interest ceases, then they drop off.

Those are some of the challenges that we've had. And with SMS, there is also the challenge of telcos blacklisting numbers from receiving SMSs. So that becomes a bit of a challenge in that they cannot receive some of those SMSs unless maybe they dial the USSD. The USSD code could be a bit complicated to remember. So they need regular reminders about the codes.

Rollo Romig: What are other major challenges that you face as an organization, aside from what you've already mentioned?

David Orega: When it comes to information dissemination, one of the challenges that we've seen is language, especially when you are communicating to the bottom of the pyramid. The information that we access is mostly published in English. And truth be told, not everyone that

we serve can read and write English. Some of them are pretty good in Swahili. That's their first language that they understand best. With most of this information being disseminated only in English, that cuts out a big chunk of the population that will find this information very important. When we realized that language was a big, big hindrance to people accessing information, we decided to translate this information to the local languages that people were able to access. At Sauti we have tried to work around it by providing multiple language options for the users.

Rollo Romig: I imagine that requires a lot of extra work.

David Orega: A lot. Sometimes we need to engage the services of experts. You have to do the translations and also do back translations to ensure that there's coherence in the communication. It's a lot of work, but worth it, especially knowing that at the end of it, all people are going to get the information in the language that they're most comfortable in.

All the sources that we're dealing with, the information is in English. Kenya is mostly an English-speaking country, and most government documents are in English. Uganda as well. That's the biggest challenge.

Rollo Romig: Do you feel that you've been able to meet that challenge fully, or is it something that you're still working on?

David Orega: This is always work in progress, because even with the information that [we've already translated], there are always updates that need to be done. We need to regularly check in with the organizations to see. Maybe the [phone] number that they have provided has changed. So you need to regularly check with them to be sure that the content that you have still applies. We always regularly reach out to them just to make sure that the information we have is up-to-date. And when there are changes, then of course you also need to update the translations.

We have the internal capacity to do that. That is not a luxury for many organizations. And where we don't have internal capacity for the translations, we have authorities in translations that we can always reach out to to ensure that the job is done. We created internal systems to get this done, and also we are able to absorb some of these services where need be.

Rollo Romig: Does any part of your work involve attempting to change social norms?

David Orega: Not directly, but this is how we work. For example, Sauti has a platform whereby people can report incidents of harassment and corruption at the border. If you're a victim or you

happen to have witnessed a case of corruption or maybe harassment, then through the platform you're able to report. And then once you file the report, we call you to get some clarifications on the report. At the end we put it in a database of those incidents that were reported, and then we share the reports with agencies that are involved in advocacy so that they can do evidence-based advocacy. Because in the advocacy world, data is so hard to come by. So we're providing them with the data, and then they use that data for evidence-based advocacy. Those are some of the ways that we are also trying to change social norms.

Rollo Romig: If you were talking to someone who was trying to start similar work with information dissemination, what kind of insights might you share with them they could learn from?

David Orega: Don't get into it if your focus is to get return on investment. Other than that, you need to ensure that you build your internal capacity to handle some of these things. Make sure of your organizational human resource needs, and then fill those positions with the right people so that you can minimize outside resource expenditure. If you have that internal capacity, that makes it easy, and then there's also consistency in the manner in which the job is being done. And then three, it's also important for you to understand that information needs vary and change day in and day out. So you must develop a system whereby you are able to interact with and solicit feedback from your users, so that in case of changes in their needs, you are able to implement that ASAP.

It's also important for collaboration. Information comes from different sources, and unless you know who can provide what, then it becomes a challenge. And of course, you need to get the best technology team that has an internal capacity to build those technologies. Don't sit in the boardroom and decide what is good for them: engage them. For instance, if I was to make a personal decision on what would be best in terms of technology, I would probably say that building a mobile application would be a good thing to do. Or maybe building a robust web platform would be a good thing to do. Because that is what everyone else is doing. But if you're looking at who your users are, you realize that you might end up building it only for yourself, maybe to make presentations during board events. But the people for which it is intended might not be able to use it, because that technology doesn't work for them. There has to be a system of engaging your users on a regular basis. And then even as you're talking about engaging your users, you also need to be very careful not to spam them their inboxes, because if you do that, they're blocking you, and you're not able to communicate with them again.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything you'd like to add that you haven't said already?

David Orega: Just to make clear that when we are communicating to the bottom of the pyramid, we need to think of technologies and strategies that work for them. It is not enough to come up with information if the information is not accessible to the people for which it's intended. And if you're keen on impact, there's no one who is a competitor. All of them should be your collaborators. When you are all able to collaborate, then the work is easy. And then you will not be duplicating the job because another platform is doing the same thing that you're doing, when maybe you can then put resources together and make that platform have maximum impact. When there are many isolated systems that claim to address the same problem, chances are high that you are going to fail. Maybe you can put resources together or support the system that's already in place, that is working, and make it work even better, and focus on another thing instead of duplicating.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much for talking with me today, David.

Rollo Romig: (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*