

Drones are the future for better pan-African healthcare

Drones are being successfully deployed to support medical and humanitarian projects across Africa, but for greater, more sustainable impact, they will need to be fully integrated into supply chains within an enabling regulatory environment.



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This emerged during a webinar on drones for improving healthcare supply chains hosted by Logistics Update Africa in partnership with STAT Times, a strategic partner to Messe Muenchen South Africa, organisers of air cargo Africa 2021.

Experts from drone companies, humanitarian organisations and regulators noted that drone development had been significant in recent years, with UAVs proving their value in numerous projects across the continent. However, regulatory bodies had been slower to develop regulations flexible enough to keep pace with this fast-changing technology.

Questions also remained about ways to assess the supply chain to determine where and how drones should be deployed, and the need to weigh up the profitability and sustainability of drone services against the need to support remote communities with life-saving medicines.

STAT Times moderator Reji John said: “Drones have been an important topic of discussion for some time among regulators, NGOs and industry stakeholders working in last-mile logistics for African healthcare. We see a significant acceleration of drones and UAVs being used for healthcare and humanitarian support, including the potential for vaccine distribution if and when a Covid-19 vaccine becomes available. While there is a need to make every business profitable, at

the same time we are cognisant of the fact that reaching the most disadvantaged is a priority.”



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Challenges ahead

Tautvdas Juskauskas, a drone specialist at UNICEF, noted: “It is not a simple and easy process to integrate drones into the supply chain – it is a complex process and requires the involvement and collaboration of many stakeholders, and regulations have to catch up.” He also emphasized that while drones could play an important role in last-mile logistics, it was important to carefully analyse the supply chain to determine where supply chain bottlenecks occurred.

“Delays are not always due to the transport network. We advocate that before investing in drone delivery, you have comprehensive needs and demands assessment to see which part of the supply chain has bottlenecks,” he said. Juskauskas added that drone technologies were relatively new and that there was a lack of evidence for their transformational impact, which could hinder health department moves to embark on large scale drone projects.

Lawrence K Amukono, Chief, National Continuous Monitoring Coordinator at the Kenya Civil Aviation Authority, said Kenya had recently accepted its Unmanned Aircraft Systems regulations after lengthy assessment and consultation. He noted that because drone technologies and applications were still evolving, the Kenyan regulators had sought to be flexible enough to allow progress, while still mitigating risk to other air space users and third parties on the ground. The new regulations require safety management systems (especially in the case of large drones), insurance, security and assurance that the privacy of persons and property will not be compromised, he said.

“We now have a solid set of regulations that are implementable in Kenya. We realised drone operations aren’t like manned aviation operations, which have mature systems known to everyone, so you can be more prescriptive. We have come up with regulations that are fairly flexible, but we do require sufficient demonstration of measures in place to mitigate risk, the integrity of the technology and systems, and the procedures and processes in place.”

Not just healthcare

While countries such as Rwanda, DRC, Tanzania and Kenya were now expanding projects using drones for medical and humanitarian aid, many other regions had been slow to create an enabling environment for drone use.

Amukono said: “Organisations in Africa are now looking to use drones to address a number of issues while minimising human to human contact. We also see interest in using drones to patrol and enforce movement restrictions in some countries. Countries that don’t have fully-fledged drone regulations may be allowing these projects on an exceptional basis while air traffic is currently reduced. This could be beneficial as many bans on drones may have been based on lack of knowledge and this gives them an opportunity to discover the application of drones.”



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Geoffrey Nyaga, COO Astral Aerial Solutions based in Nairobi highlighted several important projects the company had been involved with, and announced a new collaboration with Wingcopter to develop delivery networks and solutions across Africa. He noted that regional systems would depend on an enabling environment across borders. “In future, we are likely to lobby for cross border licences and approvals across east Africa,” he said.

Patrick Meier, co-founder of NGO WeRobotics, highlighted the role of skills development and local expertise in developing sustainable drone delivery programmes. He also noted that using drones supported government efforts to deliver healthcare to all citizens, and should not be seen as just a business: “There are typically few people in remote villages, and we must find ways to serve these communities. This is why the humanitarian organisations exist, we have a duty of care to support these people. It’s not because the flights are sustainable and profitable, it’s because they are necessary,” he said.

Suzette Scheepers, CEO of air cargo Africa 2021 organisers Messe Muenchen South Africa, said: “The innovation now taking place on the UAV front is significant, holding promise for timely aid to reach remote communities and those isolated by natural disasters. However, collaboration will be needed by all stakeholders if we are to see drones effectively integrated into healthcare supply chains to serve communities across the continent.”

Drone technologies will be on the agenda at air cargo Africa 2021, to be presented by Messe Muenchen South Africa at the Sandton Convention Centre from 9–11 February 2021.

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