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The Good drones in African healthcare landscapes



Drone testing corridor, Kasungu District, Malawi, May 2023.
Photo: Edwin Ambani Ameso.

As African healthcare landscapes prioritise digital health technologies to leapfrog postcolonial legacies of poor infrastructures and structural bottlenecks leaving citizens with unmet health needs. Political impetus coupled with desires to actualize universal health coverage has positioned drones or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as the ideal digital health technologies to facilitate delivery of public goods such as healthcare. Historically, drone technologies have been renowned for their surveillance and warfare purposes but with techno-optimism promising healthcare delivery as a public good for citizens on the margins of healthcare. Drone technologies are now repurposed as critical digital health technologies in unstable biomedical settings to deliver timely access to life-saving healthcare. The rise of the good drones as the idealized digital health technologies are redefining access to critical care and reshaping public health. Through politics of digital health across the African continent, the often fragile and fragmented healthcare landscapes reeling from years of health disinvestments are experimenting and contractually embracing drone technologies. The Good drones are saving lives and widening access to critical health commodities as African states work towards universal health coverage and the last mile delivery of healthcare to millions of citizens excluded from care access due to decades-long poor infrastructures. Using ethnographic insights from Ghana and Malawi as African healthcare landscapes that have incorporated drones into their healthcare system, I show how these technological innovations are the idealized techno-fixes in unstable biomedical settings with pronounced improvisations and social navigation of care. Following observations, interviews and (in)formal conversations with drone operators, health workers, health managers, and citizens in seeking access to adequate clinical gazes to redress their unmet health needs.

Edwin Ambani Ameso is a postdoctoral researcher at the Research center Global Dynamics, Leipzig University. He holds a Joint-PhD in Anthropology from Aarhus University and University of Oslo in Denmark & Norway respectively. His research interests are digital health technologies, health insurance, social welfare, Universal health coverage, and infrastructures of care. Currently, he is working on his first book 'Citizen solidarities: Universal Health Coverage and Politics of care in Kenya'.

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