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In 2018, only 60 Singaporean companies operated in Africa. Now, more than 155 companies are doing business on the continent, writes **Will McBain**.

Singapore's Africa push begins to bear fruit

As the pieces rearrange themselves on the chessboard of geopolitics and economics, Africa and Singapore find themselves playing in adjacent squares. In a sign of this deepening connection, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong embarked on a symbolic journey to Africa in May this year. His visit, marked by substantial agreements and tangible demonstrations of commitment, testified to the burgeoning ties between the city-state he governs and Africa. This growing liaison, with Singapore standing as a top-ten investor in Africa, has sparked a charm offensive that seeks to demystify perceived risks associated with Africa's markets.

Africa, a continent marked by its youthful dynamism and promise, has captivated the strategic interest of Singapore. Prime Minister Lee has called for businesses to venture into uncharted territories and explore new markets against a backdrop of a challenging global environment. Yet Singapore is no stranger to transforming challenges into opportunities. In the 1970s, Singapore was a city with a solitary skyscraper and scarce infrastructure. Today, it boasts one of the world's most recognisable skylines, a testament to its remarkable journey from a struggling former British colony to a global leader in various industries.

'World's most powerful passport'

This success story resonates powerfully in Africa, a continent with vast untapped potential and a common desire for transformative growth. Singapore's claim to issue the "world's most powerful passport" is a manifestation of possibilities when risk is decoded and opportunities seized.

In the face of Africa's promising markets, G. Jayakrishnan, executive director for South Asia, Middle East and Africa at Enterprise Singapore (ESG), advocates for a westward shift in focus for city-state firms: "Singapore is a small place. We're just 715 square kilometres and 6m people in size. So, for the companies in Singapore to grow to any kind of significant scale, they have to grow outside of Singapore, they have to go out and they have to internationalise," Jayakrishnan says.

"The allure of Africa lies in its demographic dividend, rich natural resources, and vibrant private sector. Its robust entrepreneurial base makes it an attractive market. With developmental needs in infrastructure, education, and manufacturing come challenges. However, these challenges signify opportunities and business prospects," says Jayakrishnan.

Trade relations between Africa and Singapore have seen a steady increase, with the exchange amounting to $14.38bn in 2022, and Singapore's foreign direct investments into Africa totalling an estimated $21bn by the end of 2020, according to ESG data.

Strategic agreements

The seeds of robust economic ties have begun to bear fruit as evinced by Prime Minister Lee's recent six-day visit to South Africa and Kenya, where strategic agreements in information and communications technology, sustainability, and skills development were inked. This solid foundation is bolstered by more than 100 Singapore-based entities that have already invested in Africa.

However, the surface has only been scratched. The space to grow in Africa's frontier markets present an opportune space for Asian investors to step forward.

The growth is striking; in 2018, only 60 Singaporean companies operated in Africa. Now, more than 155 companies are doing business on the continent.

Ranveer Chauhan, chairman of the NTU-SBF Centre for African Studies at Singapore's National Technical University, characterises the city-state's engagement with Africa over the past decade as productive and steadily growing. Despite the contrasting business approaches – Singapore's structured modus operandi versus Africa's agility – the shared language of business and common sense unites both. The region, home to at least 1.2bn people and rich in natural resources, holds an immense potential for entrepreneurship and remains a largely untapped market, ripe for exploration and exploitation.

"Africa is a massive opportunity, and the best way to realise it into your profit and loss statement, without discouraging your investors, is to approach it sensibly, bit by bit," says Chauhan.

While numerous firms are intrigued by the prospects, several Singaporean entities have successfully navigated the choppy waters of economic volatility, political tumult, and complex regulatory landscapes, illustrating the potential rewards for those willing to take the plunge investing in Africa.

Some trailblazers

Among the Singaporean trailblazers, several firms have stood out over recent decades. Singtel, a leading telecommunications company, has expanded its African presence through strategic partnerships. Sembcorp Industries, a utilities and marine group, has made significant strides in Africa's energy sector. Tolaram, starting as a textile trader, boldly ventured into Nigeria about 30 years ago, introducing and popularising instant noodles under the brand name Indomie, and has since diversified into various sectors. Olam, a multinational agribusiness company, has significantly impacted Africa's agricultural sector.

Yet these major firms are only part of the story. Smaller entities and startups also have a critical role to play in Singapore's engagement with Africa, says Chauhan.

The transformative impact of digitalisation on Africa's economy is undeniable. Rapid technology adoption in various sectors, including fintech, cybersecurity, and logistics, is facilitated by the lack of legacy systems. Companies such as Gozem and Thunes are capitalising on this potential, utilising technology to improve efficiencies and expand their consumer base. Furthermore, digital solutions have enabled quick, low-cost cross-border remittances, significantly bolstering Africa's economy.

As the continent continues to shift away from its traditional reliance on commodities, this digital rise presents a burgeoning market that, as Jayakrishnan suggests, Singaporean businesses are likely to engage with more in the coming decade.

While Africa's vast diversity and scale offer expansive opportunities, they also present formidable challenges for Singaporean firms. It's easy to be daunted by the continent's size and development disparities. Furthermore, less-than-encouraging macro indicators, hidden costs due to regulatory hurdles, and currency depreciation issues can be significant obstacles. Firms have to create robust business models that factor in these costs and accommodate a sometimes turgid pace of change.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, the political landscape is experiencing a potentially crucial shift, with the People's Action Party, which accounts for 79 of 103 seats in Parliament, rocked by recent scandals. Therefore, as Singaporean businesses expand into Africa, they not only navigate a complex foreign terrain but also a potentially evolving home front.

'The allure of Africa lies in its demographic dividend, rich natural resources, and vibrant private sector. Its robust entrepreneurial base makes it an attractive market'

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa (R) with Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong at the South African Parliament.

Seizing opportunities

As new markets emerge, Singaporean companies are seizing opportunities to leverage their expertise and diversify their global reach. Carbon trading, a relatively new domain, is one such sector that Singapore is tapping into. A key development is the nearly finalised carbon credits cooperation agreement between Singapore and Ghana. This partnership aligns with Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which sets out rules to make international carbon markets work. The partnership places both countries at the forefront of innovative solutions for emissions reduction.

The promise of free trade

Furthermore, with the advent of the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement, there are significant manufacturing opportunities. Singapore's manufacturing prowess positions it well to support ventures in this region, further diversifying its global footprint.

With Africa encompassing 60% of the world's arable land, the continent offers abundant opportunities in sustainable agriculture. As the call for greener practices echoes louder across the globe, Singaporean firms are positioned to drive impactful contributions to this crucial sector.

In a world where multilateralism is increasingly under assault, Singaporean firms are embracing a vigorous approach to expansion in Africa. This reflects the city-state's broader commitment to fortifying global partnerships and underscores the recognition of Africa's untapped potential.

"Singapore is a country held in high regard in Africa – and that is an advantage. We should go there and we should go quickly," Jayakrishnan concludes. ■

Having carved out successful niches at home, Singaporean firms are trying for new markets in Africa, writes **Will McBain**.

Singaporean tech firms set their sights on Africa

In the commercial heart of Serekunda, The Gambia's largest city, 25-year-old fashion designer Patience Browne is on a mission to create a unique swimwear range. Fusing tradition with modernity, she opens her Afrimoney mobile wallet and orders 40 metres of vibrant Ghanaian Kente cloth, reimagined on stretch nylon spandex, from a manufacturer in Accra, Ghana – 2500 km away by road.

Browne sends 12,000 dalasi (approximately $200) via the MoneyGram app with a mere tap on her smartphone, and the manufacturer instantly receives a notification on their MTN mobile wallet. They set to work, slicing through the rich, colour-laden cloth, before DHL whisks it off to Browne – boosting African commerce one stitch at a time. Behind this seamless transaction, bridging two distinct west African markets, is Thunes. Originating within Singapore's bustling fintech scene, Thunes now integrates over 30 African financial ecosystems, working in concert with key partners like M-Pesa, Orange Money, and MTN Mobile Money.

Operating in 132 countries globally, Thunes serves as a financial nexus, linking 3bn mobile wallet accounts with 4bn bank accounts. Since its inception in 2016, it has facilitated transactions exceeding $50bn, earning revenues by charging up to 5% per transaction.

"We're a business-to-business company focusing on building bridges between different financial institutions," explains Sandra Yao, SVP Africa at Thunes. "And our aim is to provide efficient, transparent and affordable payment solutions for our partners, allowing them to serve their customers more effectively."

Through its collaborations with central banks and regulators, Thunes has built an expansive network that provides innovative solutions for markets that are typically overlooked by conventional banking systems.

Addressing thorny issues of unpredictable fees, volatile exchange

rates and transaction uncertainties, Thunes uses technology to streamline international business operations. Its platform deploys application programming interfaces (APIs) – sets of rules that facilitate communication between diverse software applications – to integrate with existing banking and payment systems.

Furthermore, by accommodating a range of local payment methods, Thunes extends financial services to regions with limited access to traditional banking. Such areas in Africa are now experiencing enhanced financial inclusion.

Yao acknowledges the ongoing challenges. "The absence of interoperability between different payment systems and currencies, coupled with the lack of harmonisation among regulators, can escalate the cost of doing business in Sub-Saharan Africa."

"Our challenge isn't only about disparate systems not communicating: it also hinges on regulatory convergence. Thunes has stepped in to bridge these gaps, but this is no easy task – it requires time, engagement with regulators, and compliance with local rules. Despite this, we've managed to establish about 200 active African corridors," Yao says.

A vast market beckons

Projected to reach $40bn by 2025, Africa's e-payment market presents a lucrative challenge. With a mere 5% to 7% of transactions currently electronic or digital – compared to over 50% in countries such as Turkey – the potential for growth is palpable.

Data released by the mobile network operators' group GSMA paints a promising picture for Africa's digital future. GSMA predicts nearly 100m new mobile subscribers in Africa by 2025, taking the total number of subscribers to 613m – reflecting the tech-driven attitude of Africa's predominantly young population of 1.4bn.

This youthful demographic shows a readiness to leapfrog traditional stages of development, particularly in areas such as mobile banking. As internet connectivity continues to improve across the continent, the stage is set for a digital revolution. With the predicted rise in mobile adoption and the continuous enhancement of internet connectivity, Singaporean firms are strategically positioned, says Amit Jain, director at the NTU-SBF Centre for African Studies in Singapore.

Singapore-based CrimsonLogic has ventured into Africa's digital landscape, partnering with governments to streamline public operations through e-government services. It focuses on trade and the legal and healthcare sectors. In 2015, CrimsonLogic launched Irembo, an eCitizen portal that enabled Rwandans to access over 89 government services online. The goal of this initiative was to transition Rwanda into a paperless, knowledge-driven economy.

Singapore's Gozem started in Togo and Benin, but has expanded its reach. The venture has broadened from being a transport solution to delivery and logistics, aspiring to become a comprehensive superapp for West and Central Africa.

Another innovative player from the city-state, Crayon Data, is leveraging artificial intelligence to reshape Africa's digital customer experience. Its proprietary "Maya" engine analyses extensive datasets to understand individual customer preferences, empowering companies to personalise their offerings and enhance customer engagement.

"The nature of digital technology; it knows no boundaries, so it's built into the DNA of these firms. If you're a CEO of a Singaporean digital tech company, your business model doesn't focus on geographical constraints," says Jain. "Instead, you look at the problem you're solving and market demand, regardless of where it might be. You might even be the first one to venture into that place and gain first-mover advantage."

'Our challenge isn't only about disparate systems not communicating: it also hinges on regulatory convergence... this is no easy task'

This approach also holds great potential for venture capitalists and Singaporean private funds deploying seed and startup capital. "The scale of the investment doesn't necessarily have to be substantial, but the potential upside is enormous, because of the borderless nature of digital technology," Jain concludes.

Myriad challenges

Though Singaporean tech businesses have made considerable strides in Africa, smaller entities continue to grapple with a myriad of challenges. Primary among these hurdles is securing trade and project financing within an intricate and often poorly-understood landscape. There was a political risk insurance scheme to safeguard Singapore-based companies from political uncertainties; but it ceased due to insufficient take-up – emphasising the complexities of getting into Africa's market. Further complicating matters is the absence of established banking relationships between Singaporean and African banks, coupled with a labyrinth of regulatory climates across African markets.

To fully tap into Africa's digital potential, harmonisation of technology, intellectual property, and data privacy laws is crucial, says Jain. Acknowledging the disparities in digital transformation across Africa and investing thoughtfully in infrastructure and talent is essential in successfully navigating this intricate terrain.

Bilateral trade agreements, such as that announced in May between Singapore and South Africa to expand cooperation in the information and communications technology (ICT) sphere and human capital development, are a step in the right direction.

The focus on human capital development points to a concerted investment in sustainable futures, solidifying the bilateral ties through leadership and capacity-building courses under the Singapore Cooperation Programme. This initiative has already empowered over 1,000 South African officials, reflecting the commitment to nurturing talent for a digital future.

Yet uncertainty persists about how these initiatives will aid Singaporean small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that aspire to break into South Africa's tech landscape. According to analysts, there needs to be renewed effort to ensure that the benefits of these agreements reach smaller companies. Despite trade between Singapore and South Africa soaring 60% since 2018 and hitting over $2.7bn in 2022, the power of these partnerships to boost Singaporean tech SMEs remains largely untapped.

As these companies mature, their ambitions naturally extend towards regions pulsating with untapped potential, such as Africa.

Vast mobile potential

The vast potential of mobile technologies alone, contributing $154bn to Africa's economy and generating 1.7m jobs according to Brookings, an American think tank, underscores the magnitude of the continent's nascent digital revolution.

In July Thunes raised an additional $72m in its latest funding round, boosting its valuation to over $900m. The injected funds will be channelled towards expanding its network and customer base, further solidifying its market position, and deepening its ties in Africa.

"This is where the future is – 65% of the continent's population are below the age of 25 and it's where the world's youngest workforce will be. The opportunities are enormous," says Yao. ■

Artificial intelligence tools enable agricultural companies to assess farm conditions like rainfall and soil health in order to provide personalised advice to farmers. **Will McBain** reports.

Monitoring a farm in Africa from an office in Singapore

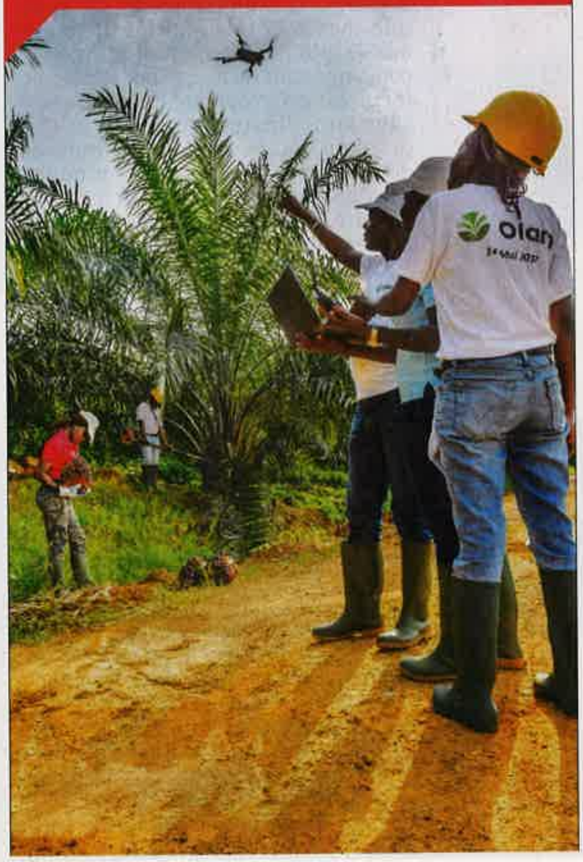
Singapore, a modern urban metropolis brimming with towering skyscrapers, has metamorphosed to host some of Asia and Africa's major food and agri-businesses, including Olam. A venture that began modestly in Africa's agricultural markets in 1989, trading raw cashew nuts from Nigeria to India, has now expanded into a global enterprise operating in over 60 countries with revenues exceeding $50bn.

Venkataramani Srivathsan, Olam's managing director for Africa & Middle East, maintains a hopeful vision for the company's future. He recognises the rapid digitalisation of the sector and the strategic use of artificial intelligence (AI) as vital keys to unlocking new realms of productivity and maintaining the company's competitive edge.

"There is a lot of catch-up going on, not only in Olam but across the world. Despite technology's transformative impact on many industries, its application in agriculture has mainly been to refine data collection, management, and accuracy. With the intervention of AI-based agri-tech tools, yields are boosted and buying models can dramatically improve," says Srivathsan.

The practicality of these AI-powered tools is far-reaching. From his office in Singapore, Srivathsan can use his smartphone to monitor farms in distant corners of Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire. It's a form of digital omnipresence that transcends geographical boundaries. These AI tools offer more than just observation; they enable Olam to assess specific farm conditions like rainfall and soil health in order to provide personalised advice to farmers based on real-time data.

> 'If we detect unseasonal rain, we can anticipate a pest infestation and alert farmers to implement preventative measures'



Pest forecasting

"For instance, if we detect unseasonal rain, we can anticipate a potential pest infestation and alert farmers to implement appropriate preventative measures," Srivathsan explains, highlighting the actionable insights this technology can provide.

Srivathsan underscores how these AI tools can revolutionise the field of agriculture with their game-changing impact. "With AI's help, applying the right inputs, pesticides, or treatments at the right time can determine the success or failure of a harvest," Srivathsan says. This innovation can lead to more reliable crop production, safeguarding the livelihoods of farmers and ensuring food security.

At the core of Olam's AI initiative are strategic partnerships. Partnering with Toronto-based Canvass Analytics, Olam harnesses its AI platform to sift through copious amounts of data, enhancing efficiency and yields while reducing waste and improving transparency. This alliance bolsters AtSource, Olam's digital platform, granting unprecedented traceability and sustainability in food production.

The productivity challenge

However, despite World Bank data showing that the African agricultural sector accounts for 35% of the continent's GDP and over half of its jobs, productivity still lags behind global standards. Therein lies the potential for AI to make a significant impact. "This technology can transform not just individual farms, but also the sector on a previously unimaginable scale," Srivathsan says.

While technological advancements are essential, they don't eclipse the urgent challenges that lie ahead. Srivathsan says that climate change and its impact on food security are "the biggest challenges we're facing".

Olam employs digital tools such as the AtSource sustainability management system and Terrascope. These aid the company in measuring its own carbon footprint, investing in energy efficiency, promoting a circular economy, and equipping farmers with climate-smart farming techniques.

Looking ahead, Srivathsan sees promise in the Singaporean model of rapid growth. "The Singaporean model: forward-looking policies – such as those concerning carbon, climate, AI and fintech – could serve as a blueprint for African countries," says Srivathsan. ■

Voracious demand for home appliances from Africa's rising middle class is attracting Singaporean exporters such as Newmatic, writes **Will McBain.**

Singaporean firm applies itself to Africa's home market

After a promotion, Grace Mutai, a 32-year-old marketing professional in Nairobi, planned a kitchen revamp. She chose a modern, modular design from Newmatic, featuring a fan-vented cooker to dispel food odours. Her selection is emblematic of Kenya's growing appetite for high-end home appliances – a trend that the Singaporean firm, Newmatic, has been quick to capitalise on.

Newmatic broke into East Africa's vibrant market in 2018, partnering with a financially distressed Kenyan company. The firm orchestrated supply chains with a Chinese manufacturer, transporting an array of kitchen appliances, from hoods to hobs, to the port in Mombasa. These were soon installed in showrooms dotted around East Africa before the onset of Covid led to country-wide restrictions.

"We were extremely lucky during Covid, as we went from two showrooms in East Africa to nine," says Dave Choy, director at Newmatic. "Most of our competitors couldn't get stock when there was huge post-Covid demand in 2021, whereas we had strong relations in Asia and maintained our supply lines.

"We were able to mop up whatever businesses the competition left behind, so much so that in Kenya we have roughly 90% market share," Choy told *African Business.*

Now extending operations into Uganda and Tanzania, Newmatic is capitalising on the surging demand for home kitchen appliances across key East African markets.

According to market research firm Statista, revenue in Kenya's household appliances market is projected to hit \$124m in 2023. Furthermore, an anticipated annual growth rate of 14.28% from 2023 to 2027 anticipates a market volume of \$212m by 2027.

Bolstered by steadily growing disposable incomes and a wave of advanced appliances, the Kenyan home appliances market is thriving. A robust middle class and an increased number of working women are driving this growth, say Statista, fuelling demand for efficient, time-saving appliances like cookers, washing machines and refrigerators. Newmatic delivers and installs orders across Kenya, from the shores of the Indian ocean to the port city of Mwanza near the Serengeti.

Construction growing

Kenya's construction market, estimated at \$17.3bn in 2022, is set for an annual average growth rate of 5% from 2024 to 2027. This projected growth, underpinned by the government's embrace of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and a drive to entice private investment, is expected to be carried by the commercial construction sector. A rebound in tourism activities spurring investments in retail buildings and hospitality projects is projected to fuel the sector's expansion, despite slight downward growth revision due to rising debt, inflation, food insecurity, and an ongoing drought. From 2023 to 2026 the industry is expected to register an average growth rate of 5.7%, supported by investments in transport, electricity, housing, and manufacturing projects. These projects mirror the election promises of President William Ruto, which include a diverse range of initiatives, from constructing new affordable housing and hospitals to establishing extensive fibre optic connectivity, land settlement funds, and significant road infrastructure development. Despite potential austerity measures and budget cuts, the sector remains poised for steady growth, leveraging both public and private investments.

"With this current construction cycle, land is getting scarcer, and people are building upwards. So, to maximise space, modular kitchens go in," says Choy. "Your kitchen no longer looks like Grandma's kitchen, and with many urban Africans becoming increasingly houseproud the kitchen is a place to not only enjoy cooking but also to entertain in," says Choy.

As Africa experiences an accelerated urbanisation rate of 4.4% annually, the fastest globally, at least 40% of its populace now resides in urban areas – a figure projected to double by 2050. This swift urban shift, underpinned by a booming housing market, is causing a significant demographic shift. Rapid urbanisation and a burgeoning middle class are increasing the demand for housing, stimulating the real estate sector.

Amid this housing boom, Knight Frank's 2023 Wealth Report highlights a shift in Kenyan investment trends. In 2022, affluent Kenyans funnelled 40% of their portfolios into commercial real estate, eclipsing the meagre 18% dedicated to stocks. This year, over 60% of Kenyans with a net worth exceeding \$1m intend to invest in private rental properties, a trend that could boost demand for kitchen appliances.

Despite growing disillusionment with the volatile domestic stock market and attractive yields of government bonds, the real estate market remains resilient. It serves as a hedge against economic uncertainties like inflation and currency depreciation.

Last year the wealth of high-net-worth individuals in the region shrunk by just 5%, significantly less than the global average fall of 10%. This disparity is testament to the robustness of real estate investments, a fact that's becoming increasingly apparent to African investors, prompting their shift away from the stock market.

Despite initial scepticism from peers about the perceived challenges of doing business in Africa, Newmatic found itself seizing lucrative opportunities on the continent that surpassed those in the more crowded Southeast Asian markets.

The appliance industry, known for its intense competition in Asia, found an inviting business landscape in Africa, less contested and ripe with potential.

"Fellow Singaporeans or my Chinese colleagues can have the notion that Africa is unsafe. It can be challenging to a certain extent, but that way of thinking actually prevents people from exploring the business opportunities in Africa," says Choy.

The company says it has a strong record in training and empowering local staff, proving a significant driver in its rapid expansion across three African markets, as has its drive for high service standards.

This approach, coupled with support from agencies like Enterprise Singapore, has made Newmatic compete against major international brands, demonstrating the power of local empowerment, high service standards, and governmental support in achieving business success in Africa.

Challenges and free trade opportunity

Yet Newmatic hasn't had it all its own way. Facing challenges such as bureaucracy, safety, and political instability, Newmatic underscores the importance of agile business strategies. By leveraging its supply chain to tackle issues like high interest rates and currency depreciation, the company ensures timely delivery of the right products. Newmatic is set to expand its footprint to new African markets, including Somalia, Ghana, Morocco, and Nigeria, through strategic joint venture models.

'For Singaporean firms there are great opportunities in unsaturated African markets... And they have to plan ahead'

Through these partnerships, Newmatic effectively engages and equips its partners, allowing them to tackle each unique market in a targeted manner.

Moreover, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) presents a significant opportunity, potentially transforming the business landscape. There is future potential for the establishment of manufacturing facilities in a free trade zone in Kenya, which could leverage the benefits of the AfCFTA, offering import duty advantages and easing cross-border trade. "For Singaporean firms there are great opportunities in unsaturated African markets, but they have to exercise caution in an environment they can't take for granted. And they have to plan ahead," says Choy. ■

TymeBank's decision to establish headquarters in Singapore in 2021 could indicate a shift in future economic relations between Singaporean and African entities, writes **Will McBain.**

The South African bank using Singapore to expand in Asia

As the markets of South Africa and the Philippines rapidly evolve, a compelling narrative of financial inclusion is being etched. Customers in South African supermarkets are enticed to TymeBank and GoTyme kiosks, where ambassadors on standby eagerly guide them through a digital account-opening journey in a few minutes.

This progression from high-tech kiosk to checkout underscores a growing wave of financial empowerment, transforming the often-tedious banking process into an engaging, real-time service.

"Regardless of whether you find yourself in South Africa or the Philippines, the essence of human behaviour is strikingly similar," says Rachel Freeman, executive director and chief growth officer of Tyme Global. "For instance, no one wakes up in the morning with the express idea to open a bank account. So we've kept that in mind while designing our business model."

Market observers suggest that the South African-founded firm's strategic decision to establish headquarters in Singapore in 2021 after beginning operations in 2019 could indicate a shift in future economic relations between Singaporean and African entities.

An empowering financial tool

TymeBank, through its strategic alliances with corporations such as Pick n Pay – a South African consumer goods store brand – has positioned itself as a pioneer in providing digital and cost-effective banking solutions. It boasts a vast network of 15,000 retail touchpoints, 1,450 kiosks in partner stores, and 1,135 retail ambassadors. With a customer base of 7.2m in South Africa, it continues to expand its digital banking operations to the Philippines.

TymeBank's ambassadors, predominantly women embarking on their careers, simplify the account-opening process, ensuring that shoppers walk away not just with groceries, but with a new financial tool – a bank card.

Singapore's strategic positioning has allowed TymeBank to tap into the expansive Asian market. This move has attracted substantial investments from global entities such as China's Tencent and British International Investment, opening doors for beneficial collaborations.

"We realised that Singapore, being the centre of fintech and digital financial services in the region, was a better base for our operations. Also, Singapore hosts many key players we want to work with so Singapore seemed like the logical step forward," says Freeman.

In nations with large populations and high banking costs, Tyme's business model finds a natural home. Underserved communities are a major target for the company, which launched South Africa's first bank account with no monthly fees.

A strategic move to Singapore

Making a strategic move to Singapore has allowed Tyme to secure a digital banking licence in the Philippines, aided in part by its partnership with that country's influential Gokongwei family, have been the cornerstones of the Asian strategy. The company is also striving to secure a similar licence in a third market. It has established a technology hub in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, a base for over 200 of its engineering and product staff.

"Being in Singapore provides comfort in terms of good governance and solid infrastructure. It demonstrates that we operate within a well-managed city-state with sound regulations. While we're not directly regulated in Singapore, being part of its community brings a lot of comfort when we consider expansions into other countries. This indirect validation strengthens our standing globally," says Freeman.

TymeBank's recognition of the strategic advantages of a Singapore base is shared by other African businesses. WapiPay, a Kenyan fintech startup, maintains a base in Singapore while being headquartered in Kenya.

The startup recently secured \$2.2m in pre-seed funding for a vision to streamline global payments and remittances between Africa and Asia. With offices in Nairobi, Singapore, and Tianjin in China, WapiPay aims to become a pan-African payment and transfer service, using the fresh capital injection to engage with regulators across the continent for licensing.

A recent report by Amit Jain and Rufus Mwanyasi of the NTU-SBF Centre for African Studies at Singapore's National Technical University highlights that the appeal of the city-state is not limited to African businesses. Increasingly, African high-net-worth individuals (HNWIs) are drawn to the city-state's financial services sector.

In a global environment fraught with uncertainty, Singapore offers

African HNWIs numerous opportunities for wealth preservation. Features such as the new variable capital company (VCC) corporate framework for investment funds and the Global Investor Programme serve as key attractions, offering risk mitigation, diversification, operational flexibility, and the prospect of permanent residency.

Connectivity yet to come

The budding Africa-Singapore relationship is not without its hurdles. A key hindrance is the paucity of direct air connections between Singapore and Africa, with only a single route currently in operation.

Today, this solitary direct air route is between South Africa and Singapore. Industry experts predict, however, the likely establishment of a new route between Kenya and Singapore in the future. This dearth of direct connectivity can throttle the pace of business and dampen the partnership's potential, particularly when contrasted with locations like Dubai, which boasts extensive air links with numerous African capitals. Tackling these logistical impediments remains a top priority as Singapore cements its position as an indispensable partner for Africa.

TymeBank is already looking to that future of increased connectivity. After successfully establishing a solid presence in the Philippines, the bank is now preparing to expand its operations into another Asian country, leveraging the experience it has garnered. "Our business is a classic example of South-South investment in action," added Freeman. "We're taking something we do in Africa and bringing it to Asia." ■

'Being in Singapore provides comfort in terms of good governance and solid infrastructure'

Tauriq Keraan, the CEO of TymeBank