



Focus on Echo Mobile

Jona Liebl, adelphi | „Stories about us – how to tell your business narrative“,
an initiative of Siemens Stiftung

Enabling social impact through SMS.
How an SMS service is enabling impact in
Nairobi's thriving social enterprise scene

Late one evening in 2013, Echo Mobile founder Jeremy Gordon received an email from Stanford University in California, asking whether he would be attending graduate school in the coming semester. For the third year in a row, he found himself contemplating the same question. He had already requested to defer entry into this engineering design program twice. According to him this, “was a perfect match, the only program I can imagine attending at this point in my life”.

This time, Stanford told him he could not defer any longer. “That was probably the hardest decision of all. It wasn’t about postponing something I could eventually go back to. Instead, I was finally committing to being an entrepreneur and having my own business in Nairobi.” He typed a reply, hit the send button, and withdrew his acceptance of the offer.





Echo Mobile's head office is located in a small house in the north-eastern suburbs of Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Sitting under a tree in the peaceful garden, Jeremy and CEO Zoe Cohen seem relaxed with their decision to join a growing group of tech entrepreneurs making a name for themselves in buzzing East Africa.

How it all started

Jeremy arrived in Nairobi back in 2010 as a volunteer with the Kiva Fellows Program, an organization offering individuals a rare opportunity to put their skills to work in support of global microfinance. After a stint as a consultant in San Francisco, he was thinking about making a move to international development. His attention had been drawn toward work that was a “bit more socially motivated”: a shift of focus that would ultimately lead him much deeper into social impact business than he previously thought.

An initial interest in the potential of microfinance coupled with innovations in mobile money led to a placement with an organization called Juhudi Kilimo – still with the intention of going back to grad school

after the four-month fellowship. For Jeremy, Juhudi Kilimo was a great place to land in Nairobi. The microfinance organization has created a model of asset-based financing for farmers in western Kenya, with a specific focus on assets that offer immediate and sustainable income. Jeremy’s first task at Juhudi was to look at how communication channels with farmers might be improved, given that the head office was in Nairobi and the clients were smallholders in remote locations. This involved determining how technology could best be used to enhance communication capacity and the exchange of information with farmers. As Jeremy explains, “My task was to figure out how Juhudi could enhance their relationship to their farmers using mobile technology.” After exploring SMS capabilities, the team members



decided to test some basic linear two-way conversations: “We tested on fifty farmers in our first batch, and got a tremendous response. We really weren’t sure if people would reply when they got a random message from a finance institution, but they did.” For all involved, it became clear that there was a heightened demand and desire for communication, not only within the organization, but also among its clients, who wanted to have a voice and a communication path back to the head office.

“We did some experimentation by offering free air time, because it’s common for some farmers in the western areas not to have credit, which would shut communication down immediately”

Jeremy Gordon – Echo Mobile founder, Nairobi



Through this process of development and experimentation, a short code was set up. A short code is a five-digit number that enables an organization to send large numbers of text messages in a short space of time and allows the recipients – in this case, the farmers – to respond at zero cost to them.

Capitalizing on local networks

In developing the Echo Mobile concept and setting up the service, Jeremy says he was helped significantly by the growing networks of tech engineers and business people in Nairobi. One of his most influential mentors was the CEO of Juhudi Kilimo, Nat Robinson. He started exploring opportunities for a platform in his spare time, working out of the iHub – an innovation hub and hacker space for the technology community in Nairobi that had been launched a few months before. There he spent most of his free time for the first year and a half, and networking at the iHub played a key role in the development of Echo Mobile.

“There’s a strong startup community here in Nairobi that really supports newcomers, nurtures new ideas and new people. I feel Echo Mobile has grown that way.”

Jeremy Gordon – Echo Mobile founder, Nairobi

The free flow of ideas in co-working spaces such as iHub, and the guidance offered by Nat Robinson were major factors in inducing Jeremy to stay in Kenya and build a business. With hindsight, Echo Mobile’s subsequent progress seems to follow the ideal development path for a social enterprise. The question of how best to spark social innovation is one that few people have so far had the opportunity to investigate, but Jeremy seems to have hit on the solution soon after arriving in Kenya.





The innovation he came up with was born directly from a need that he discovered on the ground, while observing local processes and conditions. He didn't leave the US with a carefully thought-out plan to enter international development and solve the problem of our time. Instead, he waited, listened and watched, and only when he saw a business case in what he had been observing, did he seize the opportunity and focus all his attention on this unique chance.

"I certainly didn't come to Kenya with the idea that I was going to build a company, and even in the early days I don't think we had any master plans for building the next big start-up."

Jeremy Gordon – Echo Mobile founder, Nairobi

Collaborative efforts

However, the development of Echo from concept to business was not a solo undertaking: co-founder and Kiva Fellow Rachel Brooks played a large part in the initial development of the platform. “Actually, I’m not a business person, I wanted someone else to help me brainstorm and think about how we should get this out there,” says Jeremy. Initially it was all fairly informal; together, they saw the value of the communication tool Jeremy had been developing for Juhudi, and started to think about how this could be turned into a business, and how a business might enable the platform to be used by other organizations.

From the outset, Echo Mobile’s growth has been slow and organic. The company has never done any real marketing or advertising or any kind of outreach. “It was definitely also Rachel’s first time building a tech company, let alone a firm based in East Africa; we were both very much experimenting,” Jeremy confesses. Initially, Rachel would guide the business development side while Jeremy spent most of the time building the product: a solitary task, which he nevertheless enjoyed. He soon had the opportunity, however, of working with other engineers. As the project expanded much of the growth and interests were driven by the thoughts of new team members and new clients. “It’s been a very windy, but fun ride.”

“Every entrepreneur we’ve talked to is on this roller coaster, I think some people are better able to manage the ups and downs.”

Jeremy Gordon – Echo Mobile founder, Nairobi





Leadership and staff retention

It hasn't all been plain sailing, though: a couple years into the business, co-founder Rachel moved back to the US, and the person that they brought on to act as the CEO did not match with the organization. This caused some friction in the company. The lead engineer working under Jeremy left the company for a while, and Jeremy had to take control of everything: "We went through a bit of a lull when I was in charge of the business side, as well as the technical operations,

which was not something I really wanted to be doing." This chapter of Echo Mobile's development clearly outlined that the realities of a start-up are not suitable for everyone. At this time Echo required a management that allowed for flexibility, a hands-on mentality and a willingness to accept some financial risk for the sake of a prosperous future – in contrast to established businesses, where success is inevitably based on clear responsibilities and structures. Echo needed someone who understood this context and who could ensure that the product found its fit in the market. Eventually, the new CEO Zoe Cohen came on board, and Jeremy, not just in retrospect, says, "The company really took a big turn for that."



With new visions comes growth

Zoe Cohen, a 31-year-old American, is not exactly how you would imagine a company CEO. She had previously worked for NGOs and a USAID contractor on projects in Peru, the Dominican Republic, Brazil and Equatorial Guinea, before landing at a large NGO in Kenya in 2012. Summarizing the zeitgeist back then, she says: "There was such a buzz in Nairobi, not only from the expat community, but also from the huge community of Kenyan entrepreneurs. There was so much cool stuff going on; it was fascinating and inspiring."



Initially, Zoe entered this buzzing Nairobi tech environment through a consulting gig for an Indian mobile tech company quite similar to Echo, where she was looking at how NGOs could use mobile for monitoring their programs. Through her consulting for that company she first learned about Echo and after having seen for herself, in her previous work, the amount of resources required to complete research in the development field, she realized that Echo could potentially offer a low-cost, rapid solution in this area too. "Expediting the process through this kind of revolution in information and communications technology was really exciting for me," says Zoe. She and Jeremy got along well from the start and soon discussed a business development role for her at Echo, which she declined at the time, for personal reasons and because

of a lack of available funding from Echo. A few months later, however, Jeremy called Zoe with a revised offer. He wanted her to run the company.

After contemplating the offer, Zoe decided to accept. She "felt totally overwhelmed, but something I sensed I had was this incredibly supportive network here." Zoe saw a great opportunity for Echo through simply talking about it with people she knew working in the development space in Nairobi: word of mouth was the principal marketing tool for the company, and she saw this as a potential trigger for growth, as the company needed an evangelist. As soon as they started showing up at conferences, happy hours and meetings, getting the Echo name out there, things really started to happen. Jeremy credits Zoe with this success: "She knows so much about the world we work in and has done some

great thinking in terms of operational efficiency and how to grow the company." And while they both have a common objective, the real advantage in their business is the ability to recognize their team's strengths and give the members a free hand. "I'm an enabler, I like to focus on what we are doing at the moment, while Jeremy is always looking at the forefront of the technology and thinking about what we can do next," says Zoe.



Tailoring the product to clients' needs

The growth and development of Echo had originally come about through Jeremy's interest in mobile money and its potential benefits for microfinance projects by improving operational efficiency and reducing transaction costs. But could it really provide impacts to the end-user?

Through a previous role at the World Bank, Jeremy had seen that one of the three main factors influencing the ability to move across the poverty line was access to microcredit. Any platform making that easier would have beneficial effects and could enable growth in an interesting way. As the number and diversity of clients has grown, the challenge now facing Jeremy, Zoe and their team is to juggle that diversity.

"I don't think we're necessarily a traditional workplace, we're working on a lot of different things at once."

Zoe Cohen – Echo Mobile CEO, Nairobi

Jeremy calls it 'hustling', shifting your mental capacity between a range of actions. Their success lies partly in their ability to do exactly that and become at least semi-experts in every sector they work in, so that they can adapt the platform accordingly, cooperating with clients and responding attentively to their needs.

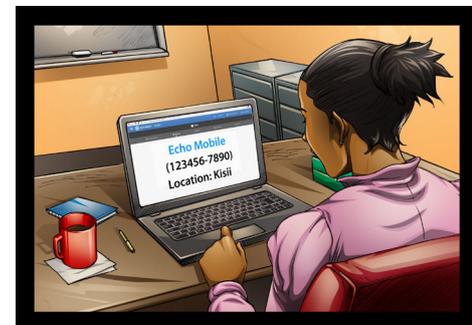




Improved understanding of rural consumers in Kenya through mobile supported cook stove production

HOW ECHO MOBILE HELPS BURN MANUFACTURING INCREASE ITS IMPACT

Much like Jeremy Gordon, Jeff Pisulik was looking for something different when he first heard about Burn Manufacturing. After working in marketing and public relations in the US, the desire to do something in another country spurred his move to Kenya. "I found Burn through a program that was focused on social impact entrepreneurship and social impact investing," said Jeff during a meeting at the Burn Manufacturing factory in the outskirts of Nairobi. Jeff undertook a period of training before finding a perfect fit with Burn: "Kenya made sense for me personally, because of my background and the wide use of English in the country." Burn Manufacturing is in the business of fuel-efficient cook stove production, aiming to revolutionize this sector in Sub-Saharan Africa. This helps to save customers' money, but the company's importance lies ultimately in its contribution to reducing the massive deforestation across Kenya



and East Africa. A by-product of this is improving the health of users by lowering the risk of respiratory disease. So far, Burn has sold over 135,000 units of its clean-burning stoves, with the hope of selling 3.7 million more within the next ten years.

During Jeff's first few months with Burn, he met Jeremy Gordon and found out about the Echo Mobile platform, which at this point was being used mainly for customer research – exploiting no more than a fraction of its potential capabilities. Even so, using an SMS mobile platform for developing and implementing surveys was already something new and unique to Jeff. Unlike in the US, where smartphones proliferate, most people in Kenya use a cell phone: “Kenyans have a high degree of comfort using SMS technology, and close to ninety percent of the population uses mobile money.”

Over time, additional capabilities have been developed around the Echo Mobile platform: managing the company's warranty database, collecting information about its customers and their location across the country, and also running a program that gives free airtime when people refer family and friends to buy a stove. “We are now at a point where we are actually using the Echo Mobile platform to manage our entire inventory,” says Jeff.

Having effective communications with customers is also a key component of the platform: Burn is able to gather feedback via text messages and ask questions relating to its products and potential future improvements.

The platform capabilities aside, the relationship between Echo Mobile and Burn Manufacturing has seen them working together to understand the variety of future possibilities, and also to assess the limitations of the system. Summarizing this collaboration, Jeff explains: “We like to challenge the limits of what the platform can achieve, and Echo Mobile has been very responsive to the types of things we are trying to do, and any problems we run into. Really, we are all here trying to make an impact in Kenya, and helping people. Relationships such as those between Burn and Echo Mobile go a long way to facilitating those impacts.”



Innovating through customer feedback

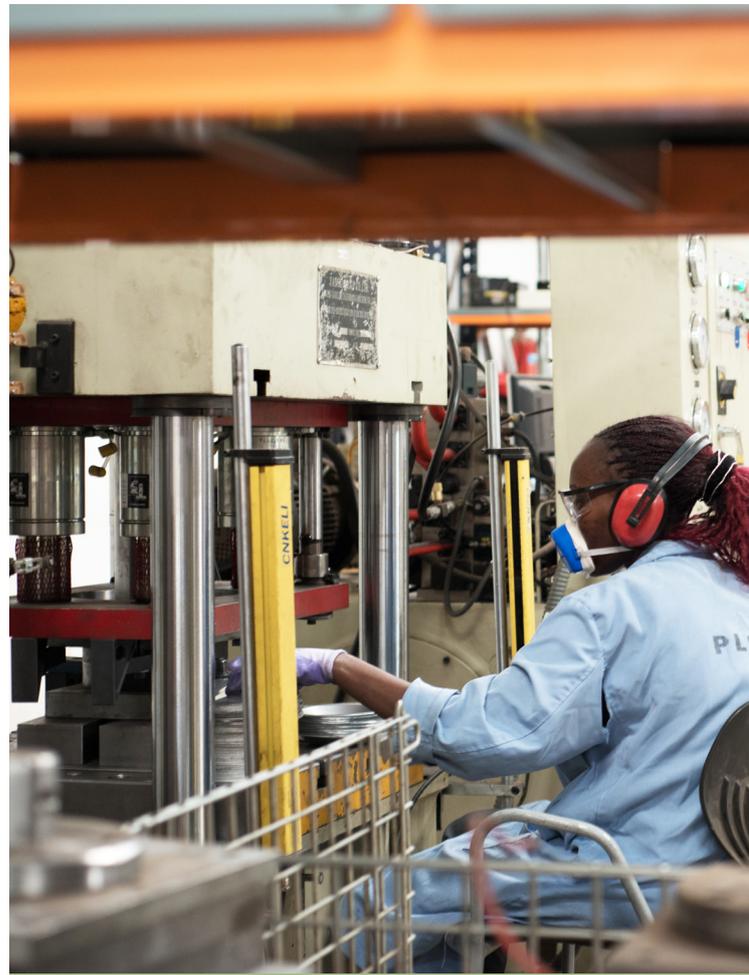
Echo organizes training and workshops, and maintains constant two-way communication channels between the company and its clients. These are essential tools for demonstrating the capabilities of the platform and for monitoring and understanding client needs. Communication of this kind also facilitates a collaborative approach to expanding the system's potential and looking at new and innovative usage scenarios for the future. Echo is able to leverage off the ideas that emerge and the requirements of specific clients.

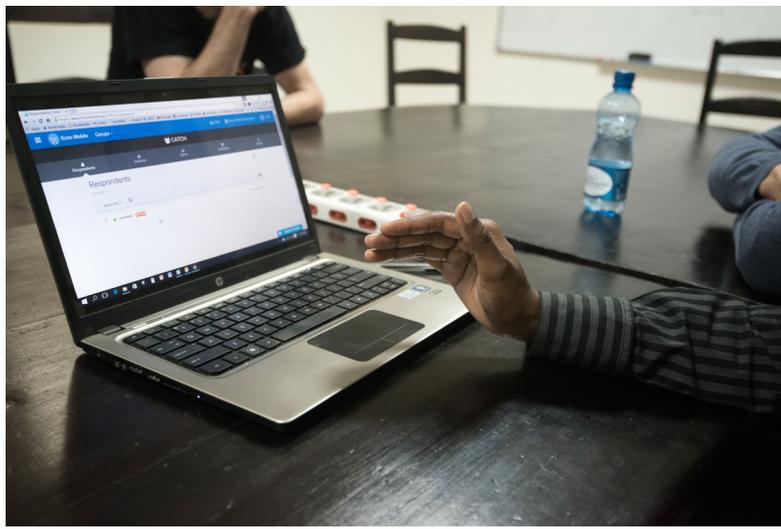
Jeremy and Echo Mobile have received high praise from clients and partners. Among those honoring them most recently is Dr. Uyi Stewart, Chief Scientist at IBM Research Africa – one of the continent's most advanced industrial research facilities. Jeremy and Dr. Stewart worked jointly on a usage scenario for Echo Mobile during the Ebola epidemic in Western Africa in 2014.

"I think Jeremy Gordon is a pioneer. I really admire what he is doing. His ideas are brilliant and that's what you have in a developing market like this, there is no precedent."

Dr. Uyi Stewart, Chief Scientist – IBM Research, Africa

This personal praise would not sit too comfortably with Jeremy, who sees the success and continued growth of Echo Mobile as the result of a number of other, equally important factors, including the team that he and Zoe have assembled.





With a non-engineering background, Zoe says she is learning more and more that “the engineers who end up being the most successful are the ones who are up at two in the morning programming their own game or something similar, not just because it’s what they do, but because it’s what they live and breathe.” This kind of commitment to product development and skills refinement – as in the early days of the company, when Jeremy would sit alone coding until three or four in the morning – is the ultimate secret of its continued success.

“Right now, we are thinking about this balance of how we continue to expand in Kenya, how we strengthen and deepen our platform, but also how we look elsewhere.” With a team of twelve, which is still growing, along with new senior staff, the company would seem to be in a strong position.

In May 2014, Echo Mobile signed an agreement to expand into Tanzania. Zoe found this move especially exciting, as it proves “that what we were doing was not only pertinent in Kenya, but that we could connect with telecoms in the region.” The platform’s replication potential – a direct result of Echo’s flexibility to design client-specific solutions – has now led to projects in more than ten countries, in varying capacities with a range of differing clients.







At the crossroads of diversification and specialization

The use of data-driven decision-making, and the implementation of collection and communication methods such as those being facilitated by Echo Mobile, will continue to expand as more companies realize the potential and capabilities of this type of system. Echo provides a method to help further understanding of the African consumer, which is vital to the African producer: “The only way you can do that is through data, so whether it’s selling cars or healthcare, you need data to help get into the market,” says Dr. Stewart. “If Echo can really show they are number one, I think they have a great business here.”



As Jeremy approaches his seventh year in Nairobi, and with no more Stanford emails popping up in his inbox, Echo has withstood a leadership crisis and is growing its operations, heading full steam towards the next stage of development. While Jeremy and his team improve their understanding of the markets they are operating in, the challenge for the company now will be to maintain its innovative approach to business and its clients, and also to decide how to manage its current flexibility. As the market catches up and becomes more competitive, should Echo continue to offer a tailored service to everyone, or should it focus on a more specialized approach and limit the scope to a specific sector or type of client?

With a positive team, continued leadership and mentoring, the next move will really decide how Echo Mobile positions itself as an impact enabler within Kenya and East Africa, and beyond.



“We try to make our initial conversation as conversational as possible. The main thing is that our fan DJ B is a real person as much as possible. He has a character. We never want

Farida Nzilani, Social Media Manager



Empowering Kenya's youth through chats with a fictional comic character

HOW ECHO HELPS WELL TOLD STORY TO ACHIEVE IMPACT

Walking into the offices of Well Told Story, the consultancy that produces the multimedia youth communications platform Shujaaz, it's immediately clear that the development of the comic character DJ B has been an immensely successful concept to communicate important social messages to Kenya's youth. Shujaaz was honored with International Emmy Awards in 2012 and 2014, which are proudly presented in its office, and, as further visible proof of its impact, the members of its team are busy coping with over 800 text messages per day – a challenge that could hardly be managed without Echo Mobile. In the month before we spoke to them at their bustling creative space in Karen, an affluent suburb of Nairobi, they had received 40,000 messages.

Well Told Story has a series of different characters that communicate issues or ideas to Kenya's youth, the most popular character being a school dropout called DJ B. Stories in the Shujaaz comics, which are distributed free of charge, touch upon anything, from business and agricultural ideas to sexual health topics, sharing ideas and empowering young readers, who by texting a specific short code to 20308 initiate a conversation via SMS with a comic figure and can continue discussions about topics they might have seen in the comic. Initially, conversations are aimed at gaining a basic understanding of the individual starting the exchange. Gathering this initial data allows the Shujaaz team to tag the communication according to age, gender, and county, and also makes it possible to customize the conversation with fans and send specific information to particular people or areas.

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The relationship between Well Told Story and Echo Mobile began in 2013, when Shuyaaz was attempting to connect to its fans via SMS, but with its service provider at the time, fans had to pay five shillings to talk back; a cost that made many shy away from engaging in conversations. Well Told Story then started looking for alternatives. Initially, the Echo Mobile platform was only being used to send out surveys, but Echo soon realized that there were other clever ways to utilize the platform, and the team was highly responsive to feedback and suggestions for new features.

“The relationship with Echo Mobile has been really easy, especially with regard to how we are using it to have conversations and receiving over 800 messages per day that we need to tag in specific ways. Echo has really helped us with that.”

Farida Nzilani, Social Media Manager at Well Told Story

In less than 12 months using the new system, the number of Shujaaz fans has risen to 170,000 and is still growing: “It’s amazing, but it’s crazy at the same time, because, as you can imagine, keeping up with those numbers is quite hectic. But we are managing.” Through the use of keywords and the creation of triggers, messages can be customized. The research component of the system is important to understanding the content being discussed and assisting with reporting to partners.

Once a month, the team members go through messages and tag them according to different topics they have discussed. Thus they get an idea of what people are talking about: relationships, job opportunities or health issues. With this constant feedback they can then shape content campaigns: “The feedback lets us understand our fans and know what they want. You get to create content that really speaks to them.”





The comics used in this story were drawn by Kenyan Illustrator [Maurice Odede](#), who regularly draws Shujaaz social impact comics for Well Told Story.

The project “Stories about us – how to tell your business narrative”

People ask for data, but believe in stories. Stories are things that people know, love, and remember, and when thinking about a business they know, facts and figures are secondary. We consider this a good thing: narratives can be a real asset for any social enterprise. And we are convinced that social entrepreneurs can use storytelling to reach out to their network of investors, customers, and other stakeholders and to gain new insights into the development of their business.

The Echo Mobile story was produced as a part of this project.

Stories about us – how to tell your business narrative.
A project of Siemens Stiftung in cooperation with
Stuttgart Media University, supported by adelphi
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The author of the ECHO Mobile story

Jona Liebl is a Project Manager at adelphi which is a consulting firm in the field of environment and development and coordinates worldwide a big group of consultant/ business development service

providers. His work focuses on fostering sustainability entrepreneurship and inclusive green business models in developing countries and emerging economies. He has profound expertise in international project management and the conceptualization and implementation of entrepreneurial capacity building programs tailored to the requirements in developing countries and emerging economies. In addition to his position at adelphi he is a Communication Specialist at SEED, a global multi-stakeholder partnership that is hosted by adelphi and that supports innovative small-scale and locally-driven enterprises around the globe which integrate social and environmental benefits into their business model from the outset.

Jona Liebl graduated from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich with a M.A. degree in Political Science, Modern History and Media Law with a specialization in international relations and the international standardization of ethical business conduct. During his studies he was a visiting fellow at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú in Lima and the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Furthermore he is a qualified IT specialist (IHK).

Siemens Stiftung

As a non-profit corporate foundation, we promote sustainable social development, which is crucially dependent on access to basic services, high-quality education, and an understanding of culture. To this effect, our project work supports people in taking the initiative to responsibly address current challenges. Together with partners, we develop and implement solutions and programs to support this effort, with technological and social innovation playing a central role. Our actions are impact-oriented and conducted in a transparent manner.

Working area: Basic services

Secure access to basic services is indispensable for people to lead independent and dignified lives. Our goal is to reduce existential deficits in basic services and strengthen necessary social structures. With our international *empowering people. Network*, we bring innovators and social entrepreneurs together and foster the combination of technical and entrepreneurial concepts. This allows us to promote the spread of suitable solutions, maintain a platform for knowledge transfer, and enable networking of development collaboration organizations. Locally-operating projects are run together with partners and implement innovative as well as proven solutions. Additionally, we impart the necessary knowledge to ensure that self-supporting structures can contribute to a permanent improvement in basic services.

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Technologies for basic needs

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