

Intelligences Magazine – May 2019 Edition

Feature Story & Interview with ALI DIALLO

White House Presidential Innovation Fellow
Entrepreneur & Co-Founder of United Ventures

A portrait of Ali Diallo, a man with a goatee, wearing a dark suit, a light blue shirt, and a striped tie. He is sitting in a blue armchair in a modern, dimly lit office setting. A white text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“Entrepreneurship is a complex thing. While it is easy to focus on success, it is equally important to mediate on failures because problems and challenges are opportunities in disguise.”

Intelligences Magazine is a leading Pan-African and French print publication that covers business news from leaders of Senegalese and Black descents. The publication is distributed in Senegal, West Africa. The magazine and its founder were [featured](#) on CNN in 2017.

Can you please tell us more about your background?

I am a US-based impact entrepreneur and author who co-founded United Ventures, an international consortium and venture builder that addresses global sustainability challenges and the future of work through data science, AI, fintech, impact-driven initiatives and network economics. We build inclusive ventures mostly in the TMT sector (Technology, Media and Telecom) and our impact strategy is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Our management team comprises of 7 co-founders and General Partners including our Chairman HRH Abbas Bin Ali who is a cousin of the King of Jordan and who studied in Boston. We are based in New York with a presence in Canada, Jordan and Africa, and some of our solutions are provided to telecom operators, fintech and media companies and financial institutions.

I am also an Advisory Partner at Qanex Investments, an industrial investment firm that is based in Dubai where I have lived for a few years. More recently, I became a founding Board Advisor of Access Robotic, Senegal's new AI and robotic training center that is powered by ESTEL Business School in partnership with a few French institutions.

Finally, I am a member of the MIT community as the former head of the [MIT Legatum Center's](#) Global Programs, an MIT startup mentor and a regional collaborator of the [MIT Inclusive Innovation Challenge](#) which is powered by MIT's [Initiative on the Digital Economy](#) and which addresses the future of work. Earlier this year, I became a White House Presidential Innovation Fellow to contribute to the technology leadership role of the American government and of its national agencies.

How did you come to the US?

I moved to the US from Senegal with my sister when I was about to turn 18. As many young immigrants, I started working as a sales associate in malls and as a door-to-door salesman while studying. After graduating from the University of Maryland, I moved to Michigan to work for Dow Chemical, one of the world's largest engineering companies. I then joined Gannett, the largest American media group and owner of USA Today, as its advertising operations manager.

After a few years working in Corporate America, I quit, relocated to the East Coast, and launched a record label and a digital media startup in Manhattan before joining a marketing group as the vice president of Operations. At that time, our digital advertising and marketing campaigns reached over 150 million customers in the US and we had offices in Miami, NY and Las Vegas where I lived for a few years. Our clients included many Fortune 500 including Walmart, Pepsi and Marriott.

In 2014, I founded a startup that combined venture capital with venture operations in Silicon Valley using a proprietary venture-building model I had invented. I then relocated the startup to Senegal where I continued working on scaling it by building customer-centric products and mobile solutions. Later on, this startup ended up becoming United Ventures after an acquisition and a strategic alliance with a well-established Canadian group that was headed by Todd Friedman and Bachir Diagne who are co-founders and General Partners of United Ventures.

After spending some time in Senegal building startups and cool tech products using my venture-building model, I moved to Dubai to join one of the world's largest fintech group which accounts for \$3 billion of the market's total \$100 billion value. I was in charge of launching the business and startup operations of the group's newest company in emerging markets (Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, etc.) in partnership with large telecom operators such as Airtel and MTN. In 2016, I then relocated to Boston to join MIT.

Can you tell us what the Presidential Innovation Fellowship is?

The [Presidential Innovation Fellowship](#) (PIF) is a highly competitive program that was originally established by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) in 2012 to identify and attract the top tech and entrepreneurial American leaders in government. Almost every year, about a dozen experienced technologists and leaders are selected out of tens of thousands of candidates after a rigorous vetting process that involves acquiring a security clearance.

The PIFs are then paired with government agencies to lead high-impact technology initiatives that will help the US maintain its leadership role in the space. I am proud and honored to be the first PIF to be born and raised in Africa. The global mindset and family values I acquired in my youth helped shape my love for entrepreneurship.

In 2017 you became Global Programs Manager of the MIT Legatum Center for Development and Entrepreneurship in Boston. What did this role entail?

The MIT Legatum Center is MIT's hub for entrepreneurship in emerging markets. I was overseeing the Center's global programs by setting up programmatic initiatives that aimed to build bridges between the Legatum Center, the broader MIT community and the developing world. Through this role and with the support of the Center's partners such as the Mastercard Foundation, the Legatum Group and the MIT Inclusive Innovation Challenge, my colleagues and I helped MIT bring close to \$2 million in funding to frontier entrepreneurs through events, startup competitions, grants and boot camps. Our flagship initiative was the [MIT Zambezi Prize for Innovation in Financial Inclusion](#). Through our initiatives, we successfully connected over 1,000 entrepreneurs to MIT.

We also brought many MIT leaders and alumni on a tour across Africa with a stop in Nigeria where we met with the Nigerian government and with [Tony Elumelu](#) thanks to a collaboration with Techpreneur; in France during the [Viva Technology](#) conference with [TRUE Africa](#); in Kenya with a partnership with Strathmore University, [Claude Grunitzky](#), Funke Michaels and GoGaGa; and in Senegal with the support of ESTEL Business School and Impact Dakar. We also produced a major conference as part of the tour called MIT Open Mic Africa Summit. Lastly, I had the opportunity to mentor several MIT entrepreneurs and EMBA students and to serve as the founding Innovation Coordinator of the MIT-Africa Initiative.

You are a co-founder of United Ventures, a global network of investors, technologists and affiliated companies that contribute to the advancement of emerging economies. Would you say that entrepreneurship is the key to solve global challenges such as youth employment?

Absolutely! I strongly believe that entrepreneurship is the key to solving the challenges that many communities face in emerging markets, and that is one of the reasons I relocated from Dubai to Boston to join MIT. However, entrepreneurship is truly effective if it is equipped with the right type of startup methodology. The model I invented and that United Ventures still uses focuses on such a methodology.

According to this model, startups need four types of capital to succeed in frontier markets: relational, technological, financial, and experiential. Relational capital (also called social capital) is about enabling a network of human resources that can assist entrepreneurs, investors, regulators, and so on. Technological capital refers to intellectual property, innovation and the ability to create lean and modern technologies. Financial capital points to investment and funding from debt and equity, venture capital, loans, investors' networks, and so on. Experiential capital focuses on knowledge, know-how and expertise that stem from strong "field" experience, startup leadership, go-to-market and executive management.

You wrote books on humor and Persian poetry. Is writing a form of leisure for you?

Yes, writing is a passion of mine because it is a concept that transcends the notion of paper and pen. As entrepreneurs of Black and African descent, we not only have to write our past but also our future. I started writing books when I was still a teenager. One of the first books I wrote was a book about African humor. Since then, I published books on poetry and entrepreneurship. I am currently working on a few new books on global innovation and Afrofuturism.

What kind of relationship do you currently entertain with Senegal?

I have kept a great and positive relationship with Senegal where part of my extended family still lives (the other part lives in France and in the US). As I mentioned before, I relocated back to Senegal a few years ago and I spent two years there building startups. United Ventures is also present in Senegal where we are launching a major financial inclusion initiative in partnership with a national microfinance institution and with Ms. Soukeyna Ndiaye Ba, an MIT collaborator and a former Minister who happens to be one of Africa's leading financial inclusion expert.

Do you have specific projects for Senegal?

Besides the financial inclusion initiative that I mentioned above, [United Labs](#), our group's data science startup studio, built a new type of AI called Amina that will reach the unbanked and non-literate communities through audio banking. Think of it as Siri or Alexa for Africa, as anybody in Africa will be able to conduct banking transactions such as money transfer and account lookup simply by speaking to Amina in their native language. Amina will be deployed later this year across Senegal and the rest of West Africa in popular dialects such as Wolof, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani.

United Ventures also supports regional venture capital ecosystems through various investment initiatives. On the healthcare side, we recently launched a new Canadian startup that uses a proprietary AI and Big Data platform to prevent diabetes, malaria and cardiovascular diseases.

When it comes to the industrial sector, United Ventures is currently testing the market appetite for a new cotton textile production plant using lean methodology. On the education and youth sides, we are supporting the launch of Access Robotic, a new AI and robotic center and Institute that will train African students and to connect them to opportunities. We are heavily investing in the future of work through this initiative and others. We are also supporting a new startup accelerator that will focus on frugal innovation and the informal sector.

If you were to give one advice to the Youth in Senegal and in Africa, what would that be?

I would tell to persevere, to stay steadfast in the face adversity, and to learn from their mistakes. Entrepreneurship is a complex thing. While it is easy to focus on success, it is equally important to mediate on failures because problems and challenges are opportunities in disguise. I was very young when I first started building companies and I stumbled many times. Many of my startups failed while some others imploded because of team conflicts. I was often too impatient and too stubborn, and because of that, I was backstabbed many times. But I kept learning from my mistakes and I worked on my shortcomings—I still do.

So, I would tell them to use every opportunity life throws at them to learn and grow. I would also tell them to surround themselves with the right type of partners and collaborators. I would be nothing without my co-founders and without all the engineers, operators, venture partners and entrepreneurs who help launch and run the United Ventures-affiliated companies. We are all a big family and the success we thrive for goes beyond the notion of business. For us, the consortium's collaborative philosophy is personal and we plan to succeed together, united as one.