

Why KOMER

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One of the clearest lessons from operating a mobility and delivery platform in Yaoundé is that distance alone tells you remarkably little about the difficulty of moving through a city.

A short trip can take far longer than expected because of congestion. A perfectly valid destination can be difficult to find because formal street addressing is inconsistent. Two routes covering roughly the same distance can have completely different economics depending on road conditions, traffic patterns, time of day, and the likelihood that a driver will find another customer nearby after completing the trip.

These are not edge cases, they are part of the operating environment; that distinction matters because many digital mobility and delivery models were originally designed around assumptions that do not consistently hold in cities like Yaoundé: standardized addresses, predictable road networks, abundant mapping data, relatively stable travel times, widespread card usage, and enough marketplace density to make driver availability almost invisible to the customer.

The problem is not that these models are badly designed, it's that they were designed for different environments. Changing the currency, adding French, integrating Mobile Money, and displaying local restaurants does not make a platform structurally adapted to an African city. Localization at the interface level is straightforward, sure, but localization at the operating-model level is much harder. That is the distinction I have become increasingly focused on through building and operating KOMER in Cameroon.

The structural mismatch is deeper than localization

Consider pricing: in many mature mobility markets, time and distance can both serve as reliable components of a fare because the underlying transportation environment is relatively predictable. In a city where severe congestion can cause a vehicle to spend considerable time covering a short distance, simply importing those economics produces outcomes that work poorly for both customers and drivers.

The customer faces a disproportionately high fare for a geographically short trip. The driver spends significant time completing a journey that generates little economic value. The platform is left trying to balance affordability and supply using assumptions inherited from another market. So, it's fair to say that this is not merely a pricing problem but a marketplace-design problem.

Driver availability presents another example. A city can theoretically have enough drivers overall while still experiencing severe supply shortages in particular zones. A driver evaluating a trip is not only thinking about the fare in front of them, but they are also considering where the trip will leave them, how difficult the return journey may be, the condition of the roads, congestion, fuel economics, and the probability of finding another customer after drop-off. A trip that looks perfectly reasonable to an algorithm can look economically irrational to the person being asked to complete it.

The same applies to delivery: a restaurant may be only a few kilometers from a customer, yet the actual journey can involve congestion, difficult access, an imprecise destination, and significant time spent locating the final drop-off point. Conventional distance calculations capture only part of the operational reality.

Then there is addressing itself. In cities with standardized addresses, entering a destination is almost an administrative step. In Yaoundé, location is contextual. People navigate using landmarks, neighborhoods, known buildings, intersections, and local reference points. A map may know where a coordinate is located without knowing how people actually describe or reach that location. The difference between knowing where something is and knowing how to get there efficiently is significant.

Payments introduce another structural layer. In North America for example, payment infrastructure is largely invisible to the customer: a card is entered once and transactions happen in the background. In Cameroon, any serious consumer platform must operate within a landscape shaped by Mobile Money, cash, varying levels of trust between participants, and different expectations around how money moves through a marketplace. Treating payments as a feature added after the core product is built misses the point. In this environment, payments are part of the operating infrastructure.

Design decisions should follow market realities

These observations shaped how I approached KOMER.

The first decision was not to treat Cameroon as a smaller version of a Western market, and not to assume that a model successful in another large African city could simply be transferred intact to Yaoundé. African cities are not interchangeable. Population density, transportation habits, road infrastructure, payment behavior, vehicle economics, and competitive conditions differ substantially from one market to another. The platform has to be designed around actual operating conditions.

For ride-hailing, we mainly chose to emphasize distance-based pricing rather than simply importing a model heavily influenced by journey time. The reasoning is practical: customers should not be excessively penalized because traffic infrastructure causes a geographically short trip to take longer than expected, while the platform must still preserve sufficient economics for drivers to participate sustainably. That tension cannot be solved once and forgotten; it requires continuous adjustment based on actual marketplace behavior.

We also made a deliberate decision to build across mobility and delivery rather than treat them as unrelated businesses. This was not driven by a desire to assemble as many services as possible inside one application. It came from observing that both services depend on much of the same underlying infrastructure: drivers, dispatch, routing, location intelligence, payments, customer identity, support systems, and local operational knowledge. A driver network that can serve different types of demand can improve utilization. A customer who uses the platform for more than one recurring need becomes more valuable without being reacquired for every transaction. Operational data generated across multiple forms of movement creates a richer understanding of how the city actually functions. ***The logic is not more features; it is greater infrastructure leverage.***

The same principle applies to payments and loyalty. Mobile Money integration was treated as core infrastructure because any platform built for Cameroon has to reflect how people actually transact. Rewards were designed not simply as promotional discounts, but as a mechanism for encouraging repeat participation across the ecosystem. Over time, the objective is for every additional transaction to contribute more than revenue alone: it should strengthen customer engagement, improve our

understanding of marketplace behavior, and generate operational data that makes the network more efficient.

The same thinking applies to our work on routing intelligence and trust. Conventional maps remain essential and useful, but they do not capture every element of operating in cities where traffic data can be incomplete, addresses inconsistent, and real-world conditions change quickly. The long-term opportunity is to learn from the marketplace itself: how drivers actually move, where recurring friction occurs, which routes perform reliably, and how real-world information can be validated before it influences platform decisions.

Direct operation changes what you understand

There is a fundamental difference between studying a market and operating in it.

A spreadsheet can estimate demand. A market report can quantify smartphone penetration. A map can calculate distance between two coordinates. None of those things tells you exactly what happens when a real customer places an order, a real merchant has to prepare it, a real driver has to accept it, and all three participants have different expectations about timing, payment, location, and communication.

That is why we chose to validate KOMER through direct operation in Yaoundé. Real merchants were onboarded. Real customers placed orders and returned to use the service again. Real drivers completed transactions. Payments were processed. Operational failures occurred and had to be addressed. Product assumptions met actual market behavior. The point of that initial operation was not to manufacture impressive scale before the company was ready. It was to understand whether the full operating chain could work under real conditions, and to identify where assumptions broke down.

That distinction matters to me as an operator. I have spent much of my career working in operations, technology-enabled businesses, transformation, and complex service environments. One recurring lesson is that strategy becomes meaningful only when it survives contact with execution. A process that works in a presentation but fails when a customer, employee, merchant, or driver actually uses it is not a successful process. The same standard applies here.

Building in Cameroon has reinforced that the most consequential product decisions are often not the most visually impressive ones. They are decisions about how a fare is calculated, whether a driver accepts a trip, how a customer describes a destination, what happens when a payment fails, how a merchant responds to an order, and whether the economics give every participant a reason to return.

Those details are the marketplace and they cannot be understood from a distance.

African cities do not need cheaper versions of Western platforms; they need platforms designed from the ground up around how these cities actually function.