

Drone tech helps boost healthcare supply chains

Health workers serving remote communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) must often undertake a six-day return journey to collect vaccines, traversing dense tropical forests and often the raging Congo River and its tributaries.



Freddy Nkosi, DRC country director for VillageReach

Drone technology is offering a lifesaving solution to the challenges, including helping to ensure that cold chains are maintained, and vaccine quality is not compromised.

In a presentation at the recent Africa Supply Chain in Action virtual conference, which was hosted by SAPICS (The Professional Body for Supply Chain Management) and Smart Procurement, Freddy Nkosi, DRC country director for VillageReach, shared the “Drones for Health” success story. He noted that while this project’s focus is on getting vaccines and supplies to hard-to-reach rural communities, the applications of drones in healthcare extend to congested cities, too.

VillageReach is a non-governmental organisation that is striving to improve communities’ access to healthcare and life-saving medicines and vaccines in remote rural areas in developing countries. In the DRC, with funding from Gavi (The Vaccine Alliance), VillageReach, in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Civil Aviation Authority of the DRC, is using drones to transport vaccines and other supplies to isolated villages and communities.

Nkosi says that the Drones for Health project is being piloted in the DRC’s northwest province of Équateur. “This is a province with many geographical challenges. It has 18 health districts, more than half of which are only accessible by river. This makes the supply chain and transportation of vaccines from the provincial storage to the remote health storage facilities exceedingly difficult, especially during the rainy season when there is often flooding.” A round trip to the Équateur province, which involves taking a non-motorized boat down a river, can take up to six hours. The drones completed the one-

way journey in just 20 minutes.

Hard to reach locations

Nkosi explains that the drones are only being deployed for the hardest to reach locations in the DRC, which are inaccessible by motorcycle or 4x4 vehicle. Cost efficiency studies are underway to assess the affordability of drones versus conventional transport in other areas.

He notes that the drones being used can fly up to 80km at a speed of up to 115km per hour.

“ The technology is still developing, so we can expect fewer limitations in the future. While our drones can fly up to 80km, we are setting up ‘refilling stations’ to reach health facilities beyond 80km. For instance, if the health facility is located 400km from the distribution centre or warehouse, there will be five stations where the drone will land after 80km and the local team will change the battery to enable the drone to fly to the next station. ”

Since the drones do not include cameras, Nkosi says privacy is not an issue, and to date, there have been no safety problems. The drones are not operating within a 15km radius of an airport, he states.

Nkosi believes that it is only a matter of time before many countries and communities adopt drones for deliveries, even in urban areas. He says that in the DRC’s capital Kinshasa, the blood transfusion service is exploring the use of drones for urgent deliveries of lifesaving blood due to the city’s poor infrastructure and traffic congestion.

“The Covid-19 crisis has put the spotlight on supply chains and pushed supply chain professionals to their limits. Expertise in supply chain and procurement management, logistics and distribution has never been more important than it is today. The imperative to ensure that businesses and economies can survive and thrive beyond Covid-19 gave rise to this important event and the collaboration between co-hosts SAPICS and Smart Procurement,” says SAPICS president Keabetswe Mpane.

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