Harnessing innovation: the transformative potential of social enterprises in Africa

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Social enterprises are innovative by definition

Social enterprises take very different shapes and forms, from community initiatives and non-profit organizations, to companies using innovative approaches to address the needs of underserved markets (Peredo and McLean, 2006). However, what distinctly sets social entrepreneurship apart from traditional business models is its foundational principle, namely, the solving of social problems is not just a part of business operations but the core reason for the business to exist. Social enterprises, therefore, navigate the dual objective of generating solutions to social challenges while achieving commercial success. As such, they have recently received visible recognition as a transformative force toward achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by demonstrating that it is possible for economic success to be intricately interwoven with social and environmental impact (Barran *et al.*, 2020; WEF, 2023, 2024).

Globally, consumer interest in sustainability and ethically sourced products is increasing, opening up new prospects for social entrepreneurs. Circular and solidarity economy models, which prioritize sustainability and the common good, are gaining traction. In this evolving environment, there is a mounting call for a paradigm shift, in which social entrepreneurship becomes increasingly visible (Alfonso and Muriel, 2020).

Despite a growing interest in social entrepreneurship from government bodies, practitioners and academics, the definition and theoretical frameworks surrounding this field remain ambiguous, which complicates efforts to advance both the study and practice of social entrepreneurial initiatives. The challenges in establishing a clear and universally accepted definition of social entrepreneurship are well acknowledged (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Mair and Noboa, 2006; Ran and Weller, 2021; Weerawardena and Mort, 2006).

Although there are multiple definitions of social entrepreneurship, most emphasize innovation as a central feature. Innovation in social entrepreneurship refers to the creation and implementation of new ideas, processes or products to address social issues and bring about positive change within society. This innovative dimension is highlighted in various scholarly works. For instance, Dees (1998) defines a social entrepreneur as a change agent within the social sector who adopts a mission to create and sustain social value, who engages in continuous innovation, and who exhibits higher accountability both to constituents and outcomes. Bacq and Janssen (2011) refer to an individual able to find innovative solutions to social problems within a community that are not adequately addressed by the local system. Johnson (2000, p.1) highlights that “social entrepreneurship is emerging as an innovative approach for dealing with complex social needs". Zahra *et al*. (2009, p.519) put innovation at the centre of social entrepreneurship, defining it as "activities and processes undertaken to discover, define and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner". In line with that, Chell *et al*. (2010, p.485) broadly describe social entrepreneurship as an "innovative activity with a social objective", which includes being innovative in "outlook, behaviours, strategy and operations" (Chell, 2010, p.488).

All these definitions overlap to a large extent with the concept of social innovation, typically defined as those "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need" (Mulgan, 2006, p.146). As a result, a body of literature has emerged that tries to better understand the linkages between social entrepreneurship and social innovation, often highlighting social entrepreneurship as a key source of social innovation (Wei-Skillern *et al*., 2007; Phillips *et al*., 2015).

Many social enterprises struggle to survive and succeed. This paper explores whether social entrepreneurship within developing countries – with a focus on Africa – can be harnessed as a sustainable transformative force or a short-lived fad. It pays particular attention to both the challenges and the opportunities to advance the measurement of and indicators to capture its contributions to innovation and social impact.

Africa is fertile ground for social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship can be seen as an innovative, positive response to the difficult circumstances in which troubled communities experiencing social issues find themselves. The African context provides fertile ground for social entrepreneurship, owing to its unique blend of challenges and opportunities.

On the one hand, the continent faces numerous social, economic and environmental issues, including high levels of poverty, inadequate health care and educational facilities, environmental degradation and significant youth unemployment (World Bank, 2024). These challenges also intersect with the significant presence of informal businesses and informal employment, which currently provide about 85% of all jobs in Africa (ILO, 2018). This context presents a vast array of opportunities for social entrepreneurs to innovate and implement solutions that are not only sustainable but also socially impactful.

On the other hand, Africa's young and growing population is increasingly tech-savvy, providing a ready workforce eager to engage in and support innovative ventures (Choi *et al*., 2020). This demographic is a critical driver of creativity and change, eager to harness new technologies and business models in order to transform their communities. Moreover, the growing support from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international investors into sustainable development initiatives further enriches the environment for social entrepreneurship. This makes Africa a dynamic and promising arena for addressing complex social issues through entrepreneurial action (Nwokolo *et al*., 2023).

A recent report (WEF, 2024) estimates there are over eight million social enterprises globally, generating around USD 2 trillion in revenue annually and creating nearly 200 million jobs. Africa hosts about 14 percent of the world's social enterprises, the majority of them located in Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt.

Table 1 **Social enterprises in Africa (2016–2021)**

Country (latest available year)	Number of social enterprises
Africa region	**1,021,711**
Nigeria (2021)	443,096
South Africa (2018)	141,500
Egypt (2020)	134,600
Sudan (2020)	55,090
Ethiopia (2017)	54,980
Kenya (2018)	43,933
Tunisia (2020)	33,000
Uganda (2020)	27,400
Ghana (2016)	26,000
Morocco (2018)	20,000
Senegal (2020)	16,500
Côte d'Ivoire (2020)	9,100
Algeria (2016)	7,727
Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (2020)	4,485
Rwanda (2020)	4,300
Rest of the World	7,136,205
Total	**8,157,916**

Source: WEF, 2024.

The recent adoption of the 2023 UN resolution on Promoting the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) for Sustainable Development marks a significant move toward acknowledging the contribution made by social enterprises and their role in advancing the SDGs. This growing potential is reinforced by the African Union's ambitious 10-year (2023–2032) SSE Strategy for Africa, developed with technical support from the International Labour Organization (ILO). Individual countries, such as Senegal, have also established supportive legislative environments that facilitate the operation of social enterprises through enhanced procurement, tax and financial regulations. However, despite these positive developments, it is important to note that comprehensive support for social enterprises across the board is still generally lacking from the regulatory environment.

Successful examples of social enterprises in the health sector became more noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic. One example is mPharma, a Ghanaian startup founded in 2013 with the aim of providing doctors and patients with easier access to medicines. The concept was developed to address several persistent issues: (i) people in Africa are compelled to pay higher prices for life-saving medications owing to the continent's fragmented drug supply chain; (ii) pharmacies struggle to keep life-saving and life-sustaining medicines in stock, and, as a result, patients often have to travel long distances to find a pharmacy, only then to find out that the drugs they need are out of stock; (iii) markets are flooded with counterfeit drugs (Faheem and Dutta, 2023). From an initial focus on e-prescriptions, mPharma has now expanded its portfolio to incorporate a range of innovative services, such as vendor-managed inventory services, data analytics, online pharmacies and primary care solutions for community pharmacies. mPharma currently operates in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Uganda and Zambia, and is looking to expand to cover the whole continent. In 2019, the Skoll Foundation reported that mPharma had successfully reduced drug prices by approximately 30 percent for pharmacies. Additionally, it is reported to have facilitated cost savings for patients, who have seen reductions in the price of medicines ranging from 30 to 60 percent (Jack, 2018). Another example is LifeBank, which was founded in 2012 as an NGO, whose aim was to address maternal deaths in Nigeria by increasing voluntary blood donations, before becoming a health tech company in 2015. Today, LifeBank is a supply-chain health technology company headquartered in Lagos, Nigeria, with branches in Kenya and Ethiopia. Its mission is to ensure that an improved quality of care is delivered to patients through the distribution of critical supplies to hospitals. Since its inception, it has been reported that LifeBank has delivered more than 250,000 products and saved over 65,000 lives in 13 African cities, utilizing innovative and technology-driven logistics solutions that guarantee last-mile delivery of blood, oxygen and medical consumables.[1]

Social enterprises are, moreover, thriving in many other sectors, such as agriculture, education, financial services, and energy. Solar Sister is a social enterprise that supports local women in Africa to create clean energy businesses, empowering female entrepreneurs in Kenya, Nigeria, and Tanzania. Established in 2009, the organization's work has supported more than 10,000 woman entrepreneurs in launching businesses selling solar products. Solar Sister provides a clear example of how social entrepreneurship intersects with the informal economy in Africa, as it recruits and trains women as entrepreneurs to sell solar lamps, mobile phone chargers, and fuel-efficient stoves in their communities. These women often come from informal and disadvantaged communities, where they lack formal employment opportunities (Hokoda, 2020). Solar Sister, through its partnerships with other organizations and networks, provides women with a business-in-a-bag model that includes inventory, training, and marketing support, enabling them to create sustainable businesses. It has received multiple recognitions and awards for its innovative approach to driving inclusive climate innovation.

Is the approach to innovation different in social enterprises?

Unlike conventional businesses that aim primarily for financial returns, social enterprises prioritize social or environmental impacts. This fundamental difference influences their approach to innovation, as social enterprises often develop solutions tailored to specific social challenges, which may not initially stand out as lucrative. This can also affect the way in which they approach typical innovation activities, such as conducting R&D and knowledge appropriation or intellectual property (IP).

The diversity of social enterprises and their varied missions and operational models imply there is no single approach to conducting R&D. The examples presented above of social enterprises like mPharma, LifeBank and Solar Sister exemplify how R&D can differ dramatically according to an enterprise's particular focus and the needs it seeks to address. For instance, mPharma actively engages in R&D in order to develop technological solutions like Bloom, a software platform that enhances pharmacy operations and inventory management in Africa. R&D efforts are focused on technological innovation to solve specific problems in the health care supply chain, such as improving drug availability and reducing costs. In contrast, Solar Sister focuses more on the distribution of solar energy products and does not engage in traditional R&D to develop new technologies. Other social enterprises lie somewhere in between, where their R&D efforts are not about developing cutting-edge technology but community-driven, seeking input from the populations they serve, so as to tailor solutions that are culturally appropriate and effective within the local context. This range of approaches to R&D reflects the diverse strategies that social enterprises employ to achieve their primary goal of social impact, illustrating the need for a flexible understanding of what R&D encompasses within this sector.

We are seeing an increasing trend toward adopting technology-driven solutions. Social enterprises are now leveraging artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, smart logistics and fintech, integrating these advanced technologies to enhance impact and efficiency. This surge in adopting high-tech solutions is frequently facilitated through strategic partnerships providing social enterprises with the necessary expertise and resources to innovate effectively.

The approach to IP in social enterprises can also vary significantly. This often depends on the question of how best to balance the goal of social impact with the necessity of sustaining the enterprise economically and competitively. In many cases, the strategy chosen may evolve as the enterprise grows and its operational landscape changes.

Some social enterprises opt for traditional IP protections such as patents to ensure they maintain a competitive edge and control over their technology. This approach is particularly common when the enterprise develops unique products or technologies that could be easily replicated. mPharma is an example of this approach, using IP protections to secure innovations, such as its proprietary software systems that manage pharmaceutical inventories and supply chains. By patenting these technologies, mPharma is able to maintain the exclusive rights crucial for forming partnerships and expanding its business model, while ensuring that its solutions are not copied unfairly by competitors.

Other social enterprises use open-source licenses or non-restrictive IP models in order to spread their impact widely. This approach is adopted when the goal is to maximize the adoption and adaptation of solutions, especially in underserved or low-resource settings, where collaboration and accessibility are key. An example is Ushahidi, a Kenyan social enterprise that develops open-source software designed to gather and map information to enable people and organizations to improve their communities by effectively collecting, visualizing and sharing data, especially in crisis situations and for public engagement.

Rather than relying solely on patents, some social enterprises enter into strategic partnerships in which IP rights are shared or collaboratively managed. This can help scale the impact of solutions through established channels and partners with aligned goals. For instance, LifeBank has recently partnered with an AI company to synergize LifeBank's blockchain and data science technologies with an AI and machine learning platform, to improve quality of care for patients.[2] Similarly, Lifesaver, a South African startup that has developed a unique filtration water bottle, has partnered with larger organizations and governments in order to distribute its products. Although it holds patents, it also works collaboratively with partners to reach a broader market without the constraints that might come from strict IP enforcement.

Other social enterprises may adopt hybrid models, in which they patent some aspects of their innovations while keeping others open for public use, so as to encourage wider dissemination and impact.

Overall, while there are similarities in the structure of innovation cycles between social and traditional enterprises, the strategic focus, funding mechanisms and ultimate goals often lead to distinct differences in how innovations are developed, deployed and scaled.

The fine balance between social purpose and profitability

Some social enterprises access venture capital, although it remains relatively scarce in Africa. The venture capital landscape – albeit growing – still forms a small part of the funding ecosystem in Africa compared to other regions (Jaoui *et al.*, 2022). Consequently, many social enterprises turn to alternative funding sources, such as grants, impact investments, philanthropic funds and social funding platforms. Such alternatives can offer capital that is more "patient" or comes with terms better aligned with social goals. Such funding sources provide the necessary support for social enterprises to pursue their mission without the immediate pressure of generating quick financial returns, thus allowing them to focus more on long-term impact.

However, while these funding sources might be better aligned with the long-term mission of a social enterprise, they are often insufficient and can extend the timeline required for an organization to reach profitability. mPharma's co-founder, Gregory Rockson, explained the difficulty of convincing investors to invest in sectors outside Fintech in Africa:

> Fintech is fine but ... We will not have money to spend on the payment process if we are all sick. It may not be the most financially lucrative sector right now but when I think of the impact and building a transformative journey on the continent, I think no greater work can be done than fixing our broken healthcare infrastructure (Afolayan, 2021).

That said, Rockson did finally manage to convince venture capitalists and international investors to invest in his start-up. And over time, mPharma has managed to attract the interest of the large corporate sector in expanding its operation and reaching financial stability. But it was only in 2020 (six years after its founding) that company reported a profit (Faheem and Dutta, 2023).

Temie Giwa-Tubosun, founder of LifeBank, reiterates the difficulty of raising capital for health care ventures since they are seen as being highly regulated, which could make it harder for investors to realise huge profits, claiming that "It's easier to raise for fintech" by comparison.[3] LifeBank's journey likewise provides some insights into the difficult balance to be struck between financial sustainability and scalability. To scale quickly, LifeBank enrolled on the incubator program at CcHUB, a Nigerian innovation centre and Google for Startups partner dedicated to accelerating the application of social capital and technology for economic prosperity (although other studies have shown that only a small portion of social enterprises have access to incubators[4]). During its tenure at CcHUB – which focuses on smart infrastructure, healthtech, digital security and education – LifeBank signed up over 160 hospitals, made over USD 90,000 in revenue, and delivered over 9,000 pints of blood to hospitals. Upon exit, LifeBank raised USD 200,000 from the Growth Capital fund by CcHUB, EchoVC, and Fola Laoye.[5] However, five years after its founding, LifeBank had yet to break even, at which time it needed to raise additional funding in order to achieve its ambitious aim of becoming profitable by 2022, which required raising 10 times the total amount raised since its inception.[6]

Overall, scaling up can be fraught with challenges, primarily accessing capital, but also others, such as unconducive regulatory environments, which may lead to operational challenges, including issues with tax and compliance. Some social enterprises successfully overcome these barriers through innovative strategies, adaptive business models and building strong community and investor relationships. Scalability and sustainability often hinge on a delicate balance between achieving and demonstrating social impact and achieving financial health.

Is the impact of social entrepreneurship measurable?

One of the critical challenges in social entrepreneurship is effectively measuring and demonstrating social impact (Zulkefly *et al*., 2022). Unlike conventional businesses, which often measure performance through sales, productivity and profit, social enterprises assess success according to factors that are inherently intangible and difficult to quantify. These include enhancing the quality of life for individuals or communities, shifting societal values and promoting environmental sustainability. Since social impact is the core reason for the existence of social enterprises, this is a central challenge. Sceptics argue that without a commonly accepted definition and without robust, standardized methods to measure impact, social enterprises may struggle to prove their long-term value to investors and donors. This challenge could limit the potential of social entrepreneurship to emerge as a transformative force in tackling social and environmental issues.

However, there have been notable advances in measuring the impact of social enterprises that help in addressing these challenges. Tools and frameworks such as the Social Return on Investment (SROI), Impact Reporting and Investment Standards (IRIS), and the Global Impact Investing Rating System (GIIRS) have been developed to provide more structured and quantifiable ways to assess the social and environmental effects of these organizations. Such methodologies as these enable social enterprises to translate intangible benefits into quantifiable data. These tools and technologies allow social enterprises to better articulate and validate their achievements, enhancing their credibility and attractiveness to potential investors and supporters. However, they are data intensive, come with known limitations in their scope and coverage of types of impacts, and not least, have questionable relevance in the context of developing countries and local communities. Their limitations call for deliberate participatory efforts to engage local communities and other stakeholders in the development and refinement of measurement tools to ensure they are meaningful and appropriately tailored to local realities.

Table 2 Measuring frameworks to capture the impact of social enterprises

Tool/framework	Description	Impact coverage	Limitations
SROI (Social Return on Investment)	Quantifies social, environmental and economic value created by a program or organization, expressing outcomes in monetary terms to reflect the social value of investments.	Comprehensive coverage across social, environmental and economic impacts.	Emphasis on outcomes that can be easily quantified and monetized. Less on intangibles.
IRIS (Impact Reporting and Investment Standards)	Managed by the Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN), IRIS provides a catalogue of performance metrics used by leading impact investors to measure social, environmental and financial success.	Offers a wide range of metrics, including operational, product impact and sector-specific metrics.	Limited customization and weighing of impacts.
GIIRS (Global Impact Investing Rating System)	Provides a standardized approach to measuring the social and environmental impact of companies and funds. Uses a rigorous assessment process.	Focuses on both social and environmental performance at company and fund level.	Costly and focused on larger entities. Barrier for smaller enterprises.
B Impact Assessment	Developed by B Lab, this tool measures a company's entire social and environmental performance. Used by organizations to earn B Corp Certification.	Detailed coverage of governance, workers, community, environment and customers.	Costly and focused on larger entities. Barrier for smaller enterprises.

Source: Author’s elaboration.

Opportunities and avenues for policy support

New technologies, particularly mobile and digital platforms, present significant opportunities for social enterprises to expand and enhance their impact, as illustrated by the examples above. By leveraging such technologies, such enterprises can improve the reach, efficiency and quality of the services they deliver, especially in critical sectors like health care, education and financial services. Additionally, forming partnerships with governments and large corporations can equip social enterprises with essential resources, legitimacy and access to broader distribution networks. By recognizing and strengthening the innovation system around social enterprises through strategic collaborations and robust linkages, these entities can achieve their transformative potential more effectively.

On the financial front, the growing interest in impact investing shows promise for ventures that offer both societal benefits and financial returns. Developing a strong ecosystem for impact investment in Africa could supply the necessary capital for social enterprises to thrive. Furthermore, innovative financing models, for example, social impact bonds, venture philanthropy and crowdfunding, present new avenues for funding, helping enterprises reduce their dependence on traditional grants. Together, these strategies can empower social enterprises to achieve sustainable growth and contribute effectively toward attaining societal goals.

However, to realise this potential, innovation policies need significant adjustments, starting with the creation of supportive legal frameworks. Many African countries do not have laws that specifically recognize and regulate social enterprises. By establishing government support tailored to these organizations, governments can provide them with legitimacy, ease operational processes and improve their access to funding and investment opportunities. This includes implementing supportive regulatory conditions, providing access to markets and creating a culture that favors socially responsible businesses.

Additionally, investment in education and capacity building is essential to the cultivation of a skilled workforce tailored to the needs of social enterprises. Governments and educational institutions should prioritize skills development initiatives oriented towards social innovation and business skills. Encouraging R&D within social enterprises is also vital, including fostering partnerships with universities and research institutions and providing grants and tax incentives or access to modern research facilities. Lastly, integrating social enterprises into the broader agenda of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be achieved by aligning national development plans with the stated objectives of these enterprises and including them in both the planning and execution phases of SDG-related projects. Moreover, social entrepreneurship often overlaps and plays a crucial role in the informal economy, creating innovative solutions to social problems that can provide livelihoods for many who operate outside of formal economic structures. Understanding and supporting the overlap between social entrepreneurship and the informal economy in Africa could be key to devising policies and strategies that leverage social entrepreneurship for broader economic development and social improvement.

By seizing these opportunities and making necessary adjustments to innovation policies, African countries can empower social enterprises to overcome their unique challenges and play a pivotal role in sustainable development. Such an alignment would not only foster a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem but also contribute significantly to the continent's progress toward achieving the UN SDGs.

Notes

1 https://techpoint.africa/2023/02/28/lifebank-signs-partnership-to-use-ai-to-improve-patients-outcomes-in-hospitals-across-africa

2 https://techpoint.africa/2023/02/28/lifebank-signs-partnership-to-use-ai-to-improve-patients-outcomes-in-hospitals-across-africa/#:~:text=In%20line%20with%20its%20objective,for%20patients%20across%20LifeBank's%20over

3 https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/28/tthe-nigerian-entrepreneur-who-runs-an-amazon-fo

4 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/06/3-reasons-why-social-enterprises-fail-and-what-we-can-learn-from-them

5 https://startup.google.com/alumni/stories/lifebank

6 https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=59052

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