

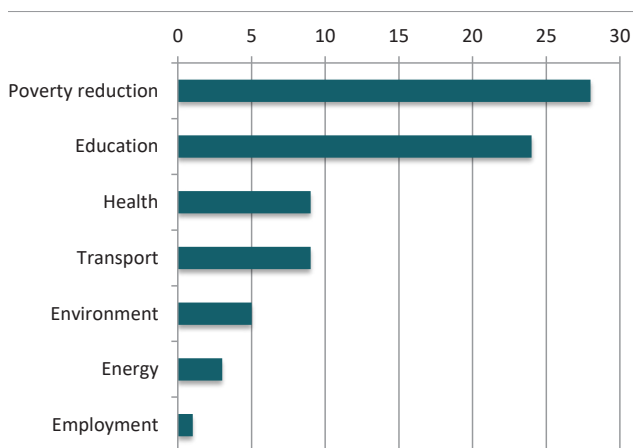
SOCIAL INNOVATION IN AFRICA: HUGE DIVERSITY BUT COMMON THEMES

HOW SOCIAL INNOVATION SUPPORTS AFRICAN COUNTRIES BUT COULD BE BETTER FOCUSED

Social innovation in Africa is making significant contributions to alleviating poverty and supporting sustainable development, but is doing so in a lopsided manner. Although it is a difficult balancing act, there is generally too little focus on the economy and employment as well as on the need to engage with and influence institutional and political structures that are key to long-term success.

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The main social innovation focus in Africa is on alleviating poverty, marginalisation and exclusion, whilst also ensuring that progress is sustainable in both environmental and socio-economic terms. All aspects of development are in prime focus except employment and jobs, both of which are essential for medium- to long-term prosperity and thus also for societal stability, tackling migration, and providing resources for welfare.



Policy fields addressed by social innovations in Africa (n=79)

The figure also shows that many social innovations in Africa are supporting education as an important element of a thriving economy, as are health and transport, whilst some environmental and energy issues are also being tackled. Poverty reduction, education and healthcare are very common social innovations in other global regions as well, but employment is equally important elsewhere and the environment similarly receives more support from

social innovators than in Africa. It is clear that tackling the most immediate issues facing Africa is indeed being supported by social innovation, but that longer-term issues are receiving less attention. [1]

CIVIL ACTORS PREDOMINATE BUT FIND IT DIFFICULT TO WORK WITH OTHERS, ESPECIALLY THE PUBLIC SECTOR

As in other global regions, social innovations in Africa see important contributions from actors from across the public, private and civil sectors. However in Africa, the public sector is less active than elsewhere (29% compared to 33%), and civil society actors much more (40% compared to 35%). In North Africa, this imbalance is more acute with even less involvement of public actors (19%) and more civil organisations (44%). In contrast, the involvement of private companies is much greater in North Africa (37%) than in Sub-Saharan Africa (27%) as well as in other global regions (32%).

The qualitative evidence from SI-DRIVE also demonstrates that the key role of civil actors in Africa is even more pronounced than elsewhere, as well as showing that they tend to act more on their own, and especially without strong support and involvement from public actors. This evidence also corroborates the contrasts within the continent, with both civil and private sector actors tending to dominate social innovations in North Africa with relatively weak public involvement. Clearly, the underlying cultural, social and political characteristics of these two large sub-regions within Africa are directly reflected in their approaches to development and, in particular, to social innovation.

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It can be concluded that most social innovations in Africa are bottom-up and focus on empowering the target group, especially women and disadvantaged groups, as well as developing human resources and knowledge. The evidence also shows that networks and relationships to individuals and groups are by far the most important drivers of social innovation in Africa, and also underlines the generally unsympathetic or unaware public sector, although as noted there are very large variations.

RECENT TRENDS POINT TO IMPROVEMENTS IN CONFIGURING SOCIAL INNOVATION

Although it is difficult to generalise, social innovations in Africa often start informally and some remain so. However, there is an increasing tendency for closer cooperation between civil society and both the private and public sectors through more formalised arrangements. This is shown by international donors and investors who increasingly look to civil society to undertake development work through social innovation, but also typically insist that such partnerships are active. As in many global regions, funding is often the biggest barrier to social innovation in Africa, but also the lack of political support and understanding, as well as the lack of appropriate personnel and knowledge.

Other sources further show that social innovation actors in Africa are starting to look more long term and focus increasingly on the economy, infrastructure, energy and the environment, as challenges that are often even more challenging in Africa than elsewhere. For example, the lack of access to reliable electricity for tackling poverty and economic growth is spurring solutions requiring a multi-pronged approach [2]. This includes the need for Africa, on the one hand, to focus on technological innovation and technology leapfrogging, for example by taking advantage of the rapidly declining price of solar energy, increased battery capacity and the proliferation of mobile phones. On the other hand, it is also imperative to understand that solutions are mainly not

technological but more related to institutional capacity and local politics, especially the control of energy infrastructures.

Thus, it is important to focus not just on technological innovations but also on financial leap-frogging and empowerment at the lowest economic rung of a country. This also implies that the regulatory and political climate must simultaneously constitute an ecosystem of empowerment of opportunity, income and wealth, for example through innovative consumer finance techniques, and creative for-profit business models.

LOOKING EVEN FURTHER FORWARD

The backdrop to the future of social innovation in Africa is rapid population growth that, although is now reducing quite significantly, remains a challenge. Linked to this is the rapid urbanisation as Africans move increasingly from villages to towns and cities where the population is rising even faster due to better medical and other facilities in these areas. Another significant ongoing trend, which social innovation needs to address, is increasing inequality in all African countries, despite the overall significant reduction in absolute poverty over the past twenty years. This is a global phenomenon but is particularly acute in Africa, and although significant development gains have been made that reduce demographic growth, continuing sustainable development is not yet assured and might easily be set back.

It is clear that Africa can benefit more than perhaps any other global region from the purpose, sense of direction and targets specified in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2016 to 2030 (see article 'How Social Innovation Underpins Sustainable Development'). The SDGs cover all aspects of development, as well as having the huge advantage, unlike earlier development frameworks, of attracting support from all types of actors, and prioritising mutual support and learning between countries, South-South, North-South as well as North-North. They also have the advantage for the first time of focusing on institutional capacity and development as a key enabler of delivering the targets, as well as recognising that all actors, especially civil society and the private sector, alongside governments and public administrations, have a very important and increasing role to play. Social and inclusive innovations are a critical part of this recognition.

REFERENCES

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